

Stanford Report, December 1, 2004



Panel doles out tips for cultivating a long career on the Farm

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Of the 60 or so staffers who attended a Nov. 17 panel discussion on navigating a career path at Stanford, one worker in the front row was especially riveted. Her seven years in one of the departments in the School of Medicine likely will end on Dec. 31 because of restructuring by new managers.

She told her colleagues on the panel that job descriptions posted by other departments with openings were intimidating and gave her little hope, and that she was discouraged from contacting human resource officers directly.

But no sooner had she expressed her fears than longtime employees, including the speakers, encouraged her not to give up. Among other suggestions, they told her to create inroads by calling the officers' assistants or networking with others.

"Don't take no for an answer," said panelist Ann Mischissin, director of finance and administration for the Department of Developmental Biology. "As a hiring manager, I'd want you to have an even shot at the job."

In addition to Mischissin, the panel included Beth Elliott, department manager for the Department of Psychology; Olivia Torbett, director of operations and systems at the Haas Center for Public Service; Tim Gadus, space and assets manager in the Medical School's Office of Facilities Planning and Management; Yolanda Williams, financial analyst for the Petroleum Engineering Department; and Sharon Allyn, financial services manager in the Controller's Office.

The discussion, hosted by the Team to Improve Productivity at Stanford (TIPS) and the Career Management Program for Stanford Staff (COMPASS), was held in honor of National Career Development Month. Training and Organizational Development specialist Kathleen Sexton moderated the talk.

Torbett, who has worked on campus for almost 28 years, said she started as a part-time employee in Tresidder Union's business office—a position she found through a newspaper. She has since had seven other positions and 13 supervisors throughout campus.

"In some cases, I did the moving. In some cases, the bosses did the moving," she said. "The networking for me has definitely been an important strategy."

Elliott, whose path to the Psychology Department began in an office next to the Pathology Department's autopsy room, has moved around during her time on campus. She said that, throughout her career, a mentor was an invaluable source of guidance and support.

"Mentors are so important," she said, adding that the camaraderie she now enjoys with her mentor did not occur overnight. "It's a relationship that develops."

The advice of other panelists also took the long view. Williams said she stayed in her first job at Stanford for 10 years before testing the waters by interviewing for a position that required more human resources experience than she had at the time.

"I didn't get the job, but I learned a lot from the interview," Williams said. "It doesn't always have to be about a promotion."

But in addition to taking your lumps, panelists said, tout the occasional back patting. Allyn said she keeps a running file of compliments for when she has been asked about her accomplishments in past interviews.

She added that an anonymous stroll through a new office before applying for a position there could prove valuable. Dropping by incognito might also give the job seeker a better feel for whether he or she will be comfortable in that office.

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The panel also discussed if and when to share that itch to change jobs. The first step, several panelists said, is understanding the current supervisor's temperament. Elliott recalled former bosses becoming bitter, or being outright discouraging, when she brought up the prospect of interviewing in another office.

"I think it's really important to be as honest as possible," she said in regard to communicating with supervisors. "You need to let them know before you walk in that door and tell them I got another job, because you never know."

But job seekers aren't the only ones who can benefit from putting out the feelers, panelists said.

"I always check the job listings, whether I'm looking for a job or not," Gadus said. "I get a feel for the various parts of the university by checking out what's out there."

Gadus, who started at Stanford in 1969 as caretaker for lab animals in the Department of Genetics, said volunteering is a great way to gain new skills and knowledge—even if only to shake things up and stave off job burnout.

Other panelists stressed that knowing the unique work environment at Stanford, with all its independent departments and departments intertwined, can give internal candidates an edge over outsiders. Executives may be up on all the latest PeopleSoft programs, but they may not have all the right people skills, a speaker said.

Several said they had left Stanford for a few years, either for family reasons or to pursue other interests. Mischissin swam in an office with corporate sharks for a spell, but some of the businesspeople around her lacked the skill to communicate with colleagues across the hall.

"I knew diplomacy like no one else," she recalled from her private-sector days. "Here, you deal with people at all levels."

Lastly, staffers were told to make time for events like the one they were attending, because they present an opportunity to network. The occasional e-mail is fine, but Williams said keeping in touch the old-fashioned way works just as well.

"Have lunch once in a while," Williams said. "Let people know about what you're doing."

