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Staff members share career advice, success stories

BY BARBARA PALMER

It's a question that Kathleen Sexton, a training and organizational development specialist in the Human Resources department and a certified career counselor, hears again and again: "How does one advance in a large, decentralized place like Stanford?"



Olivia Torbett, right, director of administration at the Haas Center for Public Service, encouraged staff members to cultivate relationships and take on duties beyond the level of the job description. Photo: L.A. Cicero

So last week, Sexton put the question to the experts. At a presentation at the Medical School Office Building on July 31, four employees shared tips and strategies gleaned from Stanford careers ranging in length from six years to three decades. The panel was the last of three held around the campus.

For Hillary Russak, a former administrative associate at a biotechnology firm and now a technical writing team coordinator for Environmental Health and Safety at the Stanford Linear Accelerator (SLAC), one key to advancement

Training specialist offers tips on job advancement

Training and Organizational Specialist Kathleen Sexton is compiling a list of tips from employees about navigating a successful career path at Stanford. Among the most repeated tips:

- **Network.** Many panelists reported they learned about job openings while talking informally to colleagues. If you can't seem to make time to network, put it on your weekly schedule.
- **Take advantage of training opportunities** offered through the Office of Training and Development.
- **Volunteer to serve on campuswide task forces and pilot programs** to learn new skills and find out what's coming up on campus.
- **Use a cover letter and tailor your resume to specific job duties** when applying for internal positions. Don't add experience that's not relevant to the job.
- **Don't burn bridges** when you leave a job to take a new one --

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was recognizing the skills she was already using. At her former job, she volunteered to begin writing protocols for an emergency medical procedure. She was good at it, she said, and other departments began to "borrow" her. When she realized that what she had been doing had a name -- technical writing -- that's how she started to think of herself. "I went to an interview and said, 'Hi, I'm Hillary and I'm a technical writer.'"

Tim Gadus, who started working at Stanford as a lab assistant in 1969 and is now the assets and space manager for Facilities and Capital Planning Management at the School of Medicine, said he, too, made an internal leap before he began to apply for and get management positions. Gadus said he realized that he had developed management and administrative skills when he took stock of his work training graduate students and keeping track of research results in the lab. "There are skills that you have -- you may not even see them," he said. He was terrified when he first made the move from a laboratory setting to an office, Gadus admitted. "But once I got there, boy, did I have plans."

"I don't understand it when administrative associates say, 'That's not in my job description,'" said Susan Parker, who began at Stanford as an administrative associate and is now associate director of finance and administration in the Biochemistry Department. Extra job tasks often offer opportunities to learn new skills, she said.

Olivia Torbett, who has made a steady climb through a wide range of departments and positions to her current post as director of administration for the Haas Center for Public Service, said she always took on duties that were at a level beyond her job description. Her bosses knew she was in a growth mode and didn't expect her to stay forever, she said.

Don't be afraid to make a lateral move into a new department, advised Parker, although she advised employees to stay in a job for at least two years. Parker moved from an assistant's job in a clinical department that she described as "overloaded" to the same post in a research department. Her new boss, who worked in an uncommonly collaborative way, made her aware of skills she'd mastered above

you could find yourself working with a colleague or supervisor again. "Leave a job gracefully, even if you have to bend over backward to do it," suggested one panelist.

- Analyze what you're good at, what you like to do and where the two intersect.

A full list of suggestions will be posted on the [Human Resources website](#).

her current job level, Parker said. Parker said she also realized that, as draining as her former job had been, she had gained expertise "by fire." Those experiences -- and luck -- led to her current job, she said.

All four panelists stressed the importance of networking as a good way to learn about job openings and to increase the chances of landing new jobs.

"One of the things I learned is that Stanford is like a very large town. If you don't like one neighborhood, you can test out another one," Torbett said. "Talk to people. Ask questions. Don't stay in your little cubicle or office. You are part of a larger university. Take a walk across this beautiful campus. You'll meet all kinds of interesting people -- some of whom you might have a chance to work with."

Sexton has scheduled three more workshops in August designed to help employees find information about job opportunities. The schedule of presentations, titled "Charting and Navigating Your Career Path at Stanford" and part of the Compass Training Program, follows:

Aug. 13: noon to 1:30 p.m., Medical School Office Building, Room 303

Aug. 15: noon to 1:30 p.m., Arrillaga Alumni Center, Lane/Lyons Conference Room

Aug. 22: noon to 1:30 p.m., SLAC, Redwood Room, Building 48

