

The science of promotions: A Tulane researcher gives expert insight

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Are you promotable? Jasmijn Bol, professor and Francis Martin Chair in Business at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, examined the traits that make employees promotable. (Photo by Shutterstock)

The “great resignation” may not be over yet, but plenty of workers still want to get ahead. [Jasmijn Bol](#), professor and Francis Martin Chair in Business at the A. B. Freeman School of Business, examined the traits that make employees promotable. Her research was recently published in a co-authored article in [Strategic Finance](#) magazine. Tulane Today talked with Bol about her research and professional

insights.

Tulane Today: According to your research, an employee's chance of promotion is not based on just their current performance evaluation. In fact, a manager may evaluate an employee's actions in varying ways based on different scenarios, performance in current role vs. prospect for promotion. Could you talk a bit about this?

Jasmijn Bol: Correct. We show that evaluators have different schemas (i.e., mental models) when it comes to evaluating performance versus evaluating promotability. Schemas are cognitive frameworks that help individuals with the interpretation of information. We all use schemas in our daily lives when we have to make complex assessments. Schemas allow us to take shortcuts in digesting the large amounts of information needed for certain decisions.

We asked managers to tell us about the most important qualities of employees when it comes to performance and promotion. Although there was definitely overlap in the schemas, they were significantly different. For evaluation of current performance, the top three qualities mentioned were communication skills, work ethic and desire/ability to learn. For evaluation of promotion prospects, the top three were work ethic followed by teamwork and technical skills. This finding was confirmed by our comparison of the managers' performance and promotion decisions.

TT: Can you give a concrete example of behavior that is interpreted differently depending on whether your performance or promotability is assessed?

JB: We found that consultative decision-making has a different impact on how managers assess performance versus promotability. Consultative decision-making is a decision-making style where you solicit input from others (like peers and managers) but make the final decision yourself. Unlike, for example, an autocratic decision-making style, where you do not gather any input from others but entirely rely on your own opinion.

Your decision-making style does not only influence how you make your decision, it also creates an impression on others. That impression can be simultaneously positive and negative. A consultative professional is likely to be seen as someone interested in learning, which is positive, but at the same time, it also creates the impression that someone lacks confidence and possibly depends too much on others. In contrast, a more autocratic decision-maker will be seen as someone with

greater self-sufficiency and more confidence. The negative impact of an autocratic style, however, is that the professional doesn't learn as much from the process.

Whether the positive impression created by consultative decision-making outweighs the negative impression depends on what is being evaluated and where you are career-wise. When you start your career, consultative decision-making is seen as crucial. Most professionals progress from *unconscious incompetence*, meaning they don't know what they don't know, through *conscious incompetence*, meaning they know what they don't know, to *competence*. This progression requires time and experience. Thus, managers tend to evaluate consultation favorably for performance at these lower levels.

The situation changes when the employee has enough job tenure to be considered for promotion. At this point, the employee needs to signal confidence and self-sufficiency in their decisions in order to indicate that they are ready for the challenges at the next level. Learning is not as crucial at this stage, and consequently, it is best not to consult but instead apply a more autocratic decision-making style. The confidence in your own decisions will have a very favorable impact on your assessed promotability, while it will not hurt (but also not help) your performance evaluation at this stage.

TT: Your research findings were based on finance professionals — do these principles hold true for other industries?

JB: Yes, for any professional job where there are different hierarchies and the skills and knowledge necessary at each level are not exactly the same. An example is consultants who, once they move up the hierarchy, are expected to do more project management and acquisition.

TT: In what other ways can an employee communicate to their manager that they are ready for promotion?

JB: Take on projects and tasks that display that you have mastered higher-level skills. But be careful that you do not burn yourself out. A career is like a marathon, not a sprint. The goal is to have a successful and fulfilling career; trying to race through it is not a successful strategy.

TT: Any other helpful advice for those hoping to advance in their careers?

JB: Be deliberate about the extra tasks that you take on. There are lots of tasks that are useful for the organization but that do not help you grow as an individual, and that also do not help you signal that you are ready for promotion. Limit the amount of these tasks you undertake and volunteer for those tasks that do make you more promotable.



Jasmijn Bol, professor and Francis Martin Chair in Business at the A. B. Freeman School of Business. (Photo by Paula Burch- Celentano)