

# Internal vs. external promotion, part two: seven advantages of internal promotion, plus some general tips for both



*In the second and final part of a series considering the relative merits of pursuing internal or external promotions, **Anne-Wil Harzing** sets out why seeking advancement internally might be a more attractive option, again highlighting seven specific reasons. The series concludes with some more general tips for promotion applications, including how to harness your experience submitting to academic journals.*

The [previous post](#) might well have given the impression that external promotion is by far the preferred option. However, I don't think that is necessarily true. Here, I also provide several reasons why internal promotion might have considerable advantages too. In the spirit of balance, I have come up with seven points here too. You are unlikely to agree with all of my arguments, but I think you will find that at least a couple of them are likely to be relevant to your case.

## 1. Rewards a balanced academic record

I argued that [external promotion might be easier](#) as it typically focuses on a limited number of criteria. In the case of a research-oriented position, this might be mainly publications and research funding. As such it might reward academics who excel in these particular aspects of an academic job, whilst not necessarily being terribly strong in other aspects such as teaching, leadership, and external engagement.

However, as a direct corollary, this means internal promotion might well be an "easier" route if you have a more evenly balanced academic record. If you are a very good, but not stellar, researcher, combined with a profile that includes a significant, but not stellar, contribution to teaching or university leadership you might find the internal route easier than applying externally.

## 2. Improves persuasion skills

In my view, internal promotion teaches you to make a persuasive case about your academic record much better than external promotions do. This is especially true for academic systems where internal promotion consists of a substantive argued case about your leadership in the discipline, teaching, and university management. For my promotion applications in Australia I had to submit a densely argued 20-page case which evidenced – amongst many other things – that my research programmes were coherent and of major international significance, that I had an international reputation, and that I had played a significant role in leading research projects and mentoring junior colleagues.

The preparation of the application took up nearly two months of my research time and at the time I hated the fact that I had to go through it. However, I have been able to draw on the materials that I was forced to prepare for my promotion application ever since. For me it also led directly to a major change in how I represented my research programmes and argued my contribution to my discipline. Now, there might well be other and less painful ways to improve your persuasion skills, but being "forced" to do this for an internal promotion is not all bad. For me, the newly acquired skills came in very handy in making my case for grant applications, applications for fellowships, as well as other types of awards.

## 3. Strengths and weaknesses

In the [previous instalment on external promotion](#), I argued that weaknesses in your academic record might be less apparent in external promotions. But remember that just like individuals, institutions have strengths and weaknesses too. If you apply for external promotion, your new institution is going to present only their strengths, not their weaknesses. So the grass might well *appear* greener at another institution as you will only discover your new institution's weaknesses when actually working there. "Better the devil you know" and "out of the frying pan into the fire" are other proverbs that come to mind here.

Unless you have friends inside the new institution, nobody will tell you about weaknesses such as the department bully that – for one reason or another – is protected or tolerated, or the long history of employment disputes or sexual harassment. You may also find that promises made during the job interview evaporate in the daily realities of the job, even if they were written into your contract. Or you may find that this "guaranteed" high level of conference funding – a key thing that attracted you to the new job – is axed only two years later, leaving you with less than you had at your current institution.

#### **4. More productivity, less stress**

Internal promotion avoids the "transaction cost" of moving to another institution. The level of these transaction costs depends on whether the move also involves moving home or even countries. It also makes a difference whether you are a young academic unencumbered by family obligations or whether you are part of a dual-career couple, have children at school age, or aging parents who need care. However, any move will mean a reduced level of productivity and an increased level of stress for a certain period.

#### **5. Avoids being dumped upon**

New external recruits sometimes end up with the worst classes or the worst administrative jobs. Your head of department or new colleagues will reason that you need to take on new classes/jobs anyway so they might as well give you the classes/jobs they don't want. Although it is not at all uncommon to be asked to do "unpopular" jobs after being promoted internally, you are often in a better position to avoid them. For one thing, knowing the institution better you can more easily recognise them!

#### **6. Avoids resentment**

In an external promotion you are appointed at a certain level by the selection panel. However, unless it is abundantly obvious that you are, in fact, fully qualified for this level, you might face a backlash. You may find that your appointment has left quite a number of your new colleagues – especially those who haven't been involved in the decision-making – resentful. They might well have applied for the same level internally with a better record than you had and have been rejected. This is not a particularly pleasant work climate to be in and it will hinder any collaborative relationships with your new colleagues. Now you might well be a person who doesn't particularly care about any of this, or who prefers to work with outside colleagues anyway. That said, there are few people who wouldn't prefer friendly colleagues to colleagues who resent and avoid you.

#### **7. Maintains good relationships**

In situations where, when taking up an external job, you have left your old institution unexpectedly, with very short notice, or after working there for only a short time, your old colleagues might not be too happy about this. As in any other workplace, relationships matter in academia. But unlike in workplaces outside academia, these old colleagues might actually be the ones evaluating your grant application, fellowship application, or be an acting editor on one of your papers when you submit to a journal. In contrast, if you have finally "battled your way" through internal promotion, your colleagues will generally be very happy for you and appreciate you even more.



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## Tips for promotion applications

If you do go for promotion, whether it is internal or external, the following tips and reflections might be useful to help you navigate the process.

### The past is another country...

Please note that promotion requirements differ by university, country, rank, and over time. Some countries may not even have an internal promotion route to full professor. Take time to get familiar with what is valued at your university and learn to distinguish which academic achievements are universal and which are country-specific. Also accept that *“the past is another country: they do things differently there”*. Yes I know that there are (associate) professors at your institution or the external institution you are applying to that don’t have the record you now need to get promoted or appointed. Some might not even have a PhD. How do I know? Because they are at every institution; they were certainly at each of the six universities I have worked for. Performance criteria change over time, but so does access to resources: try doing a PhD without access to the internet or even email (yes I am that old!).

Please also realise that you can rarely compare yourself directly to other academics as so many of us do when our applications are rejected. *“But ... I am so much better than so-and-so, I have more ...”* What you don’t know (or what you conveniently ignore) is that you might well have *much* less of something else. Having seen dozens of internal promotion applications I have *always* been surprised and often humbled by what my colleagues had done. There is more to an academic record than can be judged by a one-minute glance through their list of publications. Moreover, we typically only compare ourselves to those in higher ranks who we *think* have done less, ignoring those at the same level or lower who have done much more.

### Don’t let university politics ruin your sanity

Of course, in some cases there might well be “political” reasons for why someone wasn’t promoted or appointed at an external institution. I certainly feel I have suffered from university politics at several junctures in my career and it has kept me awake at night more than once. However, this happens to most academics at some stage in their career, it seems to be inevitable wherever human beings work together. Life can be very unfair. What I am saying is not to focus on this too much, as it only makes the effects of it worse. (See also: [“How to prevent burn-out? About staying sane in academia”](#).)

For what it's worth, my experience is that those rejected for internal promotion whilst having a good case are generally promoted in the next round. Although when you are young it might seem it is taking forever to get to then next academic level, many good academics will spend by far the largest chunk of their career at an (associate or full) professorial level. Please see a one or two year delay in that perspective. Don't let it eat you up.

### Apply early rather than late

Unless you think you are unable to cope with being rejected (either for internal or external promotion), apply as soon as you think you stand any chance of being accepted. Women in particular often wait far too long to apply for promotion. As promotion applications are often considered in the context of what you have done since your last promotion, consistently being promoted one to three years "too late" can add up over a whole career. You cannot easily catch up after one late promotion.

Moreover, by applying for promotion you ensure that you get a clear-cut signal about what your chances are. And rather than guessing, in the case of an internal promotion you are often given feedback about what you need to do to be successful next time. If your university doesn't offer this feedback automatically, ask for it and refer back to it very specifically when you apply again!

### Use your experience in journal submissions

The process of a promotion application shares many similarities with the process of [submitting an article for publication](#), so why not use the experience you have gained in that context:

1. Gather as much information as possible, not just information about the formal rules (journal guidelines vs. promotion guidelines), but also about the informal rules. For the latter, talking to other academics is essential. Realise, though, that three anecdotes don't make data. Also understand that academics are more likely to share horror stories (whether about journals or promotions) than positive experiences. And these horror stories somehow have the tendency to get embellished every time they are retold (ever heard of Chinese whispers?)
2. Get a friendly reader before you submit. You would do this for a journal article, wouldn't you? So why not for a promotion application? Be prepared to return the favour, though. For my promotion to associate professor, I asked at least half a dozen colleagues and they all said yes. Was that because they were such nice people? Well, they might have been, but more likely it was because I had helped them in the past or at least bought them lunch.
3. Treat an unsuccessful application as a Revise & Resubmit, not a Rejection. Yes you can go to another journal outlet (university), but unless you take the reviewer comments into account, this is unlikely to be as easy as you think it is.
4. Realise that there are always things beyond your control. When submitting to journals you are dependent on who the acting editor is and the "roll of the dice" in terms of which academics accept the invitation to review. The same is true for promotion applications, promotion or selection panels. Those in positions of authority are not the same from one year to another. You can also not control which other articles/applications are submitted at the same time; competition might be stronger in particular years or for particular positions than for others.
5. Realise that just because one article at – what *you think* is – a similar level as yours has been published in a specific journal this doesn't mean that your article should be. The same is true for promotions. First, standards tend to increase over time. Have a look at what was published in the top journals in your field 20 years ago; you might be shocked. Second, understand that these articles/individuals might simply have had a "lucky break" or a good "roll of the dice"; you might not be equally lucky on your first try.

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### About the author

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