

Planning your career

This advice has been pulled together from discussions with senior civil servants with a science and engineering background about their career paths. It is either advice they have directly received or given, or been derived from their personal experiences.

BE PROACTIVE

Take control of your career.

The opportunities are there for people with the initiative to pursue them, but you have to drive things personally

“You are responsible for your own development. If you take a proposition to them, then managers understand how to support you.”

My scientific background allowed me to take a logical approach to solving problems: I'm not afraid of a challenge or seeking out new evidence

Build on your strengths.

Consider what skills you have and put them to good use. As a scientist or engineer, you have valuable analytical skills you can bring to your job. As well as these skills consider what other strengths you have and look at how you can put these to use.

LOOK FORWARD

Step back and assess your potential and where you're going.

If you think you've got more to give, you need to a) work out what your goal is b) focus on what skills and experience are going to help you achieve this goal. Also consider that you may not be successful immediately and what the alternatives are. A discussion with your line manager or a mentor can be helpful to give an outside perspective.

Try to have a goal in mind, but not a fixed plan on how to achieve it and be flexible on the route you take to pursue your goal.

Consider the skills, knowledge and experience you will need.

“I've encouraged quite a lot of scientists to move across [to policy]... Even if people say it's not possible... actually it is.”

It is extremely valuable to have credible experience of the operations and policy environment. Communication skills are also important, particularly the ability to speak persuasively and write clearly and inspire others. If you are moving into a new sphere

of work, consider what is going to persuade someone to hire you over another candidate with years of experience in that environment.

Greater competition for senior roles requires a different mindset. As you progress, there will be a decreasing number of posts available. Do your research, get an idea of which opportunities you would be suited to and focus on what will make you a competitive candidate.

“It doesn’t matter if someone is an eminent expert in their discipline if they don’t understand the context for their role and the organisation’s processes then they will be ineffective.”

“Be authentic and don’t try to be someone else for the sake of career development.”

Gain broader experience. The civil service is an incredibly diverse organisation, with an unparalleled wealth of roles and experiences on offer. With so many different ways of doing things it’s important to learn how the system works and develop a good

knowledge of your home organisation or a department you may be looking to move to.

BE FLEXIBLE

“I’ve not spent longer than about 3 years in any job, frequently moving on to a new challenge”

Be prepared to move – geographically, between departments and into new roles and functions.

It’s often necessary to move regularly to gain promotions; careers are not as laid out as they are in industry.

Be open to new challenges. You should be flexible in how you achieve your career goals, instead of trying to follow a rigid career plan. This makes it easier to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

“I’ve always gone for interesting looking jobs; the only mistakes I made were posts I chose simply for career development.”

“There’s no such thing as a bad promotion”

“My career has been shaped by taking on roles where things needed sorting out”

Try to seek out posts that you will find enjoyable and challenging. Do not take a post just for the sake of career development. If the job is not enjoyable, your performance suffers. A bad report could hinder you more than the extra experience is a benefit.

SPEAK UP

It’s important to have a view: be proactive and confident in putting views forward.

As a scientist or engineer you can bring a different perspective to a discussion and by airing this can stimulate new thoughts and explore new areas. Even if your views are not always agreed with, constructive challenge is a valuable skill and can help make you stand out if you can communicate with confidence and clarity.

“Scientists and engineers have got to develop confidence in communicating what they know and what it means for policy development.”

KEEP LEARNING

Learn from the people around you and above you.

Look to the people working in the kind of jobs you aspire to and find out what experience they have. Look to people in senior positions who you admire and study their behaviour.

“Networking and meeting peers is important, in order to learn from the people around you who are considering similar careers.”

Make an effort to remain current with scientific knowledge (even if you are working in a role that's light on science). It's easier to keep current by putting in small amounts of time and effort regularly than one concerted effort at the time you realise you need it. Join a professional body or other

“The ability to get on with people and to learn from others is important”

professional community and make time to attend relevant events.

INSPIRE AND DEVELOP OTHERS

Almost all the people we spoke to highlighted how important one particular person had been to encouraging them to develop and pursue their aspirations. Could you be that person for someone?

“One of the most important things for me was someone senior, who took an interest in my development, was prepared to help and who I could ask for guidance.”

“I wish I'd known earlier how I came across in meetings. I had no opportunity to try a different approach.”

Give constructive feedback. Line managers need to be prepared to give both positive and negative feedback as early as possible so that individuals can understand when they need to change their approach.

Foster an inspiring team culture. Create a culture in your team where others feel empowered to take decisions, people who are brave and challenge the received wisdom are rewarded, and where mistakes are dealt with constructively.

“The most effective leaders not only make effective decisions themselves but also create a culture in their team where they empower others to take decisions”

“Having people believe in me was one of the most powerful motivators.”

Support and believe in your colleagues. Knowing that people believe in you and your ability can instil the confidence needed to pursue a new job and be successful.

RESOURCES

Be proactive

Assess yourself against the Civil Service competency framework:

<https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/learning-resources/new-civil-service-competency-framework-competency>

Get feedback on your performance from those you work with:

<https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/360%20Best%20Practice%20and%20user%20guides%20-%20final.pdf>

Look forward

Civil Service Learning offer tools to help assess and develop your potential:

<https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/node/236950>

Sign up for the GSE mentoring scheme: tinyurl.com/gsementee

Research jobs and careers for scientists and engineers in the Civil Service:

<https://jobsstatic.civilservice.gov.uk/csjobs.html>

Careers Profiles of Senior Civil Servants and the routes they took:

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/go-science/publications#profiles>

Speak up

Civil Service Learning offer resources on communication and influencing skills:

<https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/learning-opportunities/elearning/influencing-skills-persuasive-communication>

Keep learning

Join GSE for networking and learning from science and engineering colleagues:

<http://tinyurl.com/joinGSE>

Members can network online through the Government Science & Engineering linked-in group:

<http://tinyurl.com/linkedingse>

Inspire and develop others

Become a mentor for other scientists and engineers – tinyurl.com/gsementor

Civil Service Learning offers resources on leadership and management :

<https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/leadership-and-management>

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