

TO BE SEEN OR NOT TO BE SEEN: YOUR VISIBILITY AT WORK

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Increasing your visibility or "getting noticed by people who count" is well-known as an effective way to advance your career. Being visible at work can certainly help you be selected for choice projects, promoted, sought out for advice, and so on. Being visible in your industry or profession builds career mobility, a major concern since most employees can no longer count on long-term employer commitment. So, everybody should try to be more visible, right?

To some degree, yes, but the matter of *degree* is important. Becoming more visible can pay off, but it takes time and effort and has its downside. In this article, we suggest several ways to increase your visibility, but first it's worthwhile to think further about whether gaining visibility is the right strategy for you.

We recommend starting with four basic questions: Why do I want to be more visible? To whom do I want to be more visible? What about me do I want to make more visible? Do I accept the risks of increased visibility?

Why do I want to be more visible?

Recognition may help you do any or all of the following:

- Feel more satisfied by having your accomplishments known.
- Do your job better by having more prestige to use in negotiating or obtaining help or information.
- Earn key assignments, promotions, or raises.
- Develop prestige and contacts to help you in the job market.

To whom do I want to be more visible?

Your answer may include your manager, senior managers who can affect your career, peers, departments you work with, experts inside and outside the organization, industry and community contacts, and others.

What about me do I want to make more visible?

For example, can you cite individual achievements and participation on significant projects? If you get a high-visibility assignment, are your skills up to it? Your contacts are also important. You'll become visible more easily if you can count on a network of people for information and advice.

Do I accept the risks of higher visibility?

Visibility, however tactful and generous, may come at a price. For example, your coworkers may resent your efforts to stand out. Some workers see any sort of self-promotion as threatening to them. Others may appreciate your ambition but see no reason to help you. Friends may feel hurt if you appear to be distancing yourself or taking advantage of them. Becoming more visible will also take time, usually adding to your stress level.

So is increased visibility for you? Your answers should help you decide. You may feel that the cost is simply not worth it, or that you need to improve your achievements, skills, or contacts. But if you feel ready, consider the alternatives listed below.

VISIBILITY STRATEGIES

These strategies can all be effective, but I don't recommend that you try them all at once! Start by asking "Which activity will show me at my best to those who matter in my career?"

Visibility by performance

Improving your performance and satisfying your manager is important in itself and can be the basis for other types of visibility. A grateful manager is likely to reward you and recommend you to other managers. To convince your manager that you understand what needs to be done, focus on excellence, and balance individuality and teamwork, try these suggestions:

- Meet or exceed quotas, deadlines, and standards. The point here is not simply to work harder, although you may end up doing so, but to produce measurable, documented, high-profile results that catch your manager's attention.
- Get key assignments. Projects that would benefit you and your department are good bets. For example, if the department must present its budget to senior management and you are confident of your presentation skills, offer to help coordinate the project or to coach the presenters.
- Help with key functions. Such areas often include working with customers, senior managers, or other departments. As you help out in these areas, it's smart to keep your manager apprised of problems so that he or she can be part of solving them. You can also benefit from volunteering for tasks your manager would rather not do, such as writing reports.
- Share news of innovations and improvements. Being a source of current information on what's hot and what really works is

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a great form of visibility. Sharing your own ideas with your manager before going public with them establishes you as a player who has something to contribute and understands the need to look before leaping.

- Share your career goals with your manager. Doing so lets your manager know how to reward you for your hard work and also tells her that you are not a rival with a hidden agenda.

Visibility by Participation

Take advantage of opportunities to represent your manager at meetings. Even if you simply hold down a chair, you can use the time to meet people as well as to take thorough notes about the proceedings. If you are scheduled to speak in your manager's place, the challenge is to show that you understand his or her positions as well as if they were your own.

Identify organization-wide study groups and task forces that fit your skills. These groups can be opportunities to work with individuals who can help you. Examples include cross-functional teams, social committees, or community outreach programs.

Visibility by Information

Know "what's going on in the organization." This covers everything from acquisitions and terminations to pure gossip. Your goals are to never be surprised by a major event and to have people feel that they can come to you for accurate information.

Handle information responsibly and respect confidentiality. This is one of the trickiest parts of networking; establishing yourself as a reliable source who has good sense about what to share with the network.

Visibility by Collaboration

Build relationships with the departments you depend on. The starting point is understanding each department's role and its special challenges. Once you do, you can contribute to solving interdepartmental problems and exchanging information, which are the keys to working with other departments. Equally important is respecting that they are under pressure, too.

Visibility by Communication

Take advantage of everyday opportunities, as well as your company's media, to publicize achievements. For example:

- Prepare "commercials." Imagine that you're in the elevator or at lunch with people whom you would like to become more aware of you. Could you cogently describe your job, current project, or your department's mission in about 20 seconds? If not, it's worthwhile to prepare yourself for these opportunities.
- Collect anecdotes revealing your staff at their best. Crediting your staff for taking independent action, helping each other, and serving customers also makes you more visible. Casual meetings and meals, not to mention your formal presentations, are good opportunities for sharing these stories.
- Contribute interviews and articles. Functioning in an organization or industry publication as an expert or spokesperson for your department or an important project is a sure way to increase visibility.
- Contribute to your department's intranet site. Pages that feature relevant information get the most hits. Keeping your site up-to-date while contributing a personal letter or column about the department is an effective way to reach out.
- Make presentations. The key is choosing topics that are useful to the audience and that you can present well.

Visibility by Involvement

Be active in industry or professional organizations. In some professions, this can be as valuable as being known at your current job. Remember that while building relationships with individuals who can help you is important, the best way to begin is by supplying them with what they need, rather than solely by asking for help. For example, if you have financial skills or speak well, serving on a fundraiser for the organization may benefit both you and the group. Once you've started your campaign, stay with it. Work your way through the strategies described here, and don't be afraid to move on if one of them doesn't work for you. Remember that visibility is not an end in itself, it's part of managing your own career. And as you know from experience, managing anything takes preparation, effort-and a healthy attitude over the long run.

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