

Eligibility and Barriers to Promotion: A Perspective

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Abstract

Promotion represents an important factor for the employee regardless of his/her position, especially the academic. It is noticeable in our daily life that there are obstacles that limit promotion, and these obstacles are established and organized for in at least some cases by those who are related and have something to do with it. These obstacles are placed in order to avoid many things, including financial burdens and/or social positions that the person in question may obtain. In some cases, the reason may be personal, caused by competition, gender, status, etc. Indeed, the procedure of promotion happens according to protocol frameworks that make the helpless employee accept the *fait accompli*. When an employee signs and agrees to work, s/he should consent to and accept all frameworks and regulations enacted by employers, whether they are individuals or institutions. There may be unfairness in these regulations that the employee must accept for the sake of having a job. During my search for articles discussing the subject of promotion, especially academic ones, I found very few, and all of them are about promotion in North America, and they depend on accurate information and statistics that I have nothing alike. Due to the lack of references and statistics, I will rely on my experience and background in most of the presentation of this topic. The goal is to attract the attention of those interested individuals and to share my experience with readers.

Keywords: promotion, barriers, eligibility, academic, obstacles

1. Introduction

Promotion means the act of moving an individual to a higher or more important position or rank in a company or an organization. Indeed, what matters here is not the definition, but when it is due and whether there are clear-cut laws to withhold it. Usually there are lists of requirements that an employee finds in the system to which s/he is affiliated, but there is no obligation for the official to implement a promotion. On the contrary, such procedures of implementation do not exist, and only certain individuals have the right to interpret the regulations (Schimanski and Alperin 2018 discussed such a similar topic, as well as Morales 2021). Take, for example: One of the conditions for the academic promotion in Saudi Arabia is that a publication should be in a "peer-reviewed journal", and whoever is in charge will intervene and define such a term. Imagine adding something like "the editor-in-chief should be a faculty member" to the requirements. There are other things, including that a journal should have an ISSN, and one has no right to wonder if s/he finds that some journals that belong to the university in question that requires this condition do not have ISSN. Thus, such lists of requirements are loose (Morales 2021 wrote about something similar); interpretation of laws and requirements is allowed and limited for officials in charge. The strange thing is that the director, the rector, and the academic council are changed by virtue of time, and their alternatives start a new interpretation due to the fact they have different opinions regarding the discipline and laws. Also, evaluators who are chosen by the academic council to have a look at the published articles are unknown to the applicant. Towards the rank of professor, the discipline requires unanimity of evaluators' approval of promotion. The issue of promotion is finally subject to those evaluators' discretion. Incidentally, a system that requires consensus may be based primarily on personal knowledge; an applicant may contact and coordinate with evaluators of his/her choice and exclude certain persons from examining his/her research, and this is what I did not do, but I knew it later. Here I say: Why does an applicant go through and dive into such complex and undeclared relationships? The specified and competent department and the academic council should defend and represent their applicant in all stages that require intervention.

The reason for broaching this topic is that it is rarely addressed as a separate, problematic topic. The employee who initially accepts to work within a certain framework is not expected to criticize or complain about what is

asked of him/her. Of course, those who have the upper hand take the advantage of the systems and frameworks and interpret them according to their understanding and visions of the work (Dawson 2022 and Niehaus 2015 wrote on this topic), which deprives some employees of the benefits they need for the continuity of work, the avoidance of monotony and the competition with others in any company or institution, and as part of rewarding those distinguished employees in the field.

2. Drawbacks

There are many drawbacks when it comes to discussing the topic of promotion; such drawbacks include, but not limited to:

At the beginning, regulations are loose and usually give those in authority the right to interpret them; at school there is a principal, in a university, a rector chairs, an academic council runs a promotion department, at the college level, there is a dean, and of course a director takes care of the department in question. An academic applicant should gain the approval of all these officials. With the change of these powers, interpretation becomes the right of the person who occupies the position, each in his/her place. Likewise, committees entrusted with specific tasks find that appreciation, apprehension, guessing, and appraisal, and in some cases, acquaintance and favoritism are elements that are evident in any work, and this is a human nature that no one denies (something like this has been discussed by Moore 2017, Kim 2018, and Hatch 2019). For example, the term “peer-reviewed” and its interpretation involve the articulation of some opinions and personal backgrounds. The question here is whether people who had previously held the position did not realize what a newly appointed official is claiming. Such changing interpretation of the discipline may exclude papers and research articles, which a reader finds many specialists quote from and praise.

Once again, I go back and say: Why have not those people who have preceded in this position noticed such gaps? The gaps may be intended to be in the discipline, so why do they petrify what is intended to be flexible? The worst thing is to find an official who has been promoted according to old procedures and regulations, and s/he knows with certainty that if newly adopted regulations have been applied to his/her research, s/he would not have deserved promotion. It is noticeable how someone who holds a position and takes the advantage of the loopholes that s/he has found in the system by virtue of his/her work. For example, one finds a department head who has promoted in weeks after application, while other colleagues need months, if not years for their application to be processed. (I read Morales’s 2021 article in which the influence of bias is referred to). Why is this taking place? It may be said: This difference depends on the response of the evaluator, but this response is not acceptable; who has chosen the evaluator? And the evaluator who does not respond could be replaced unless the matter is intended. Also how long does it take a department to send an application? One wonders when a special session is held to address and speed up the process of a particular topic. Even if an applicant submits a list of mostly random evaluators’ names for the purpose of completing the required form, the role of the person in charge here is important. Where are the knowledge and experience of those in charge? -it is a legitimate question.

When a particular university establishes and amends regulations in the same country, other universities may not apply such regulations (one can trace universities’ sites for more details). If these universities set procedures, to what degree are they compatible with each other? Many questions and few answers may exist. Moreover, evaluators of presented work are secretly chosen, and one does not know what to say about them. Their opinions are final, and crucial decisions are based on what they report. Of course, no one can deny the personal and subjective factor (this is what Kimberly discussed in 2011). Here, I ask: How does an external evaluator view the university in question? How does s/he look at its graduates and employees? The status of the university one belongs to, in general, is also important. More than this is the evaluator’s personal knowledge of the applicant. Regarding evaluators, people are different, and whoever has a relationship with and knows the applicant in question is not like someone who does not (from what I read in this regard what Niehaus wrote in 2015). These are human aspects among many factors that have a big and influential role, whether one likes it or not.

Difference of opinions and tendencies should not lead to injustice. In the same department, a difference may take place among faculty members, let alone those who do not have a bond. When I started writing my thesis, I thought I could choose the discussion panel. I was fortunate when a colleague at the department advised me to leave it to the supervisor to choose and decide; my advisor chose a committee that I did not think of, and things went well with that committee.

It is also self-evident that any reviewer or evaluator should work within the system; not everything said is accepted. Here, I am telling from experience. Sometimes one finds the differences terrifying; a person praises the research and another attacks and criticizes it. And let me give an example. I have submitted a translation for a

respected journal to be published. The paper has been evaluated by two reviewers: the first approves it as it is without any modification, while the other refuses the article to be published altogether. The gap between the two reviewers is vast, and juxtaposition of the two opposite reports is not possible. The journal let me have a look at the two reports. I was asked to work on the paper until it “lived up” to the level requested by the rejection reviewer. And because bringing the two reports together- in my view - is not possible, I wrote a letter of eight hundred and forty-four words where I refuted considering the rejection report at all. After several days, the editor responded, asking me to reconsider and revise the paper regardless of the reviewer’s negative report. I revised and reconsidered some points. Then, I sent the paper back to the editor. It was accepted and published. Do all editors act like this one? No. The same procedure applies to councils, reviewers, etc. An applicant may have a justification and logic to refute any objection and/or rejection.

While evaluating an article, some evaluators make a reader suspect that the research has originally been published. When all the evaluation report is negative and includes rejection, questioning, and exceptions; all phrases and expressions indicate denial, a reader has the right to ask how the research has been published in a journal that has an editorial board and website and is indexed in specialized academic databases. Also, the approval of the relevant department, college committees and academic council is considered a credit for the research, unless there are secrets that researchers do not know, and this is possible in our world. Imagine an evaluator who discovers that “the research does not present research” or that the research “does not conform to scientific standards” - these statements I have found in two reports referring to two articles I used for promotion. I think the journal in question can file a case against the university whose academic council approves such a report. Of course, there are things that cannot be announced under the pretext of being classified “secret” - the problem here is if the report includes a waste of a right, a violation of a system or an expression of an opinion; the least to be said about it is that it is wrong. Also, the approval of the academic council for reports that include phrases such as “doesn’t comply with scientific standards” implies that the council does not do what is required, otherwise how does it accept and pass -and the specialized department accepts- a research with these specifications? What I want to say is that an evaluator may criticize the institution in question and its sectors by inserting such phrases and expressions. Whenever those individuals in charge do not recognize or ignore such phrases, they are not doing their job properly. How do they let articles with these so-clear catastrophic gaps pass and send them to evaluators?

More than this, schools differ from one region to another, from one country to another, and from one continent to another, and there must be space for discussion and different opinions. For example, in literature, there are schools and teaching methods that differ from one place to another. There are those who adopt the traditional method of teaching, and there are those who tend to the side of theory and modernity. Whenever a detailed method is applied, the most important thing for the researcher is to be articulate about the point that s/he argues for or against. In addition, evaluators' experiences and backgrounds of academic journals may vary. Had it not been for the difference of opinions and the renewal of research and reviews, there would have been no progress and prosperity for the nations. Any evaluator cannot under any circumstances overthrow and belittle a journal’s reviewers, the work of the researcher, and other evaluators’ points of view.

When the system of promotion to the professorship, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, requires the consensus of evaluators and in a specialization that is fundamentally based on opinions and their diversity, then such a condition may be a double-edged sword where results cannot be predicted (apparently, this is a problem that transcends countries, as Kimberly presents in 2011), and it can be used and exploited for specious and viscous ends. As soon as one of the three chosen evaluators does not approve promotion, chaos begins, and the academic council is to choose a fourth evaluator. Some think that the fourth is a casting vote; indeed, they call him/her so. This does not necessarily have to be the case; we have already two against one evaluator. Anyhow, the creator of these laws and frameworks has his/her intentions. The problem is when the opinions are contradictory, and yet the opinion of the rejecter is considered, even if it is alone. Despite the decision of the department, the college, the academic council, and other evaluators' views – a rejecter’s opinion becomes the focus; it is accredited and rectified though it is a drop in the sea. There might be something hidden; it is classified a “top secret” - and this is a peg to stop anyone at a certain point and a boundary that an ordinary individual might find difficult to understand. Of course, no one including the applicant has the right to know what is classified.

There is no doubt that any subject could be addressed from different perspectives, and it is possible to discuss the researcher, as s/he might have justification for what s/he has gone to. Before considering any report, it should be logical and justified; imagine an evaluator writing a phrase like, “not in line with academic standards” - this blows up the entire topic; such an opinion should not be approved so easily, but rather it must be discussed and sieved. An academic rank does not entitle the person in question to ridicule, prejudice against others, and write

what s/he wants. Such a description is unsuccessful. As a person may not agree with others, but his/her disapproval does not give him/her the right to assert and deny academic knowledge of an indexed journal that has its editors and reputation. By the way, some journals impose their own styles to be distinguished from others. For example, some Arab journals require Arabic abstracts for the articles written in English. There are journals that require linking references to their places in the text, and some require the sequence of references according to the sequence of their presence in the text. Also, the journal's content and ideological orientation may bring other dimensions - all of these factors and other similar components should be considered while judging a research paper.

Moreover, workers in one department may differ in their views and visions regarding a particular topic. In the end, personal opinions should go through discussion and consideration (such a matter has been addressed by Gardner 2013). I remember when I was a student; I used to answer differently for two professors in the same department because I knew what each of them wanted. One teacher wants a student to be a parrot who repeats what s/he says and does not ask, and the other wants his/her student's point of view accompanied by his/her justification of an issue. By the way, members of the same family may differ. The problem is that some people miss these facts or do not want to know them. Everyone knows that an experienced lawyer can "tweak" the system in order to defend his/her client. The concerned academic council and/or department should play the role of a lawyer at a university.

Also, an evaluator should avoid vague phrases and statements; either s/he has a clear-cut reason to disapprove promotion, or s/he should let it go. There is no need to belittle the work of others. Vague phrases are like: "it was possible," "if it were," "it is not hidden from the researcher," "great addition was not made," and "it does not add anything," "there is no clear . . .," and "a broken language," especially if the research paper was published in a country whose people speak English and the original language of this evaluator is not English. S/He should also not mix things and try to "deconstruct" everything s/he reads; theories intersect, and opinions may get farther or closer to each other, so s/he should not write: "If the researcher used such-and-such," "it would have been such-and-such," or "if this theory had been used, it would have been better," and the like of these random, destructive, and general phrases. Hence, s/he has a published article to evaluate, and not a project or a thesis to give advice and/or recommend a way! Likewise, a person may see or like something that others do not like. I have seen reports with redundancy, vague phrases, not to mention structural mistakes. Any academic council should not easily pass reports with such phrases.

What about evaluators who belong to different focuses and fields? An applicant should not be deceived by the general name of the specialization and should not say that whoever has studied English literature in the United States has had the same curriculum and instructions like graduates who have studied in Britain. This is not to mention people who have studied this specialization in a country whose official language is not English. The educational background is important anyway. Even from prior knowledge, when two people teach the same course and are asked to teach the same book, the understanding and presentation of the course components will definitely differ according to the understanding, interpretation and presentation of those components by each teacher.

What I said here applies to every job or work: the background of the official or evaluator, his/her goal and view of the applicant, not to mention personal and social relations. And a manager or an employer may refuse an employee's request for a reason s/he has not considered (Kimberly 2011 discusses this topic). Indeed, there are many things that overlap when there is a relationship between two people, and in general, one of them has the upper hand in the matter under discussion. These factors may determine the person's position and promotion at work.

Not surprisingly, an employer can authorize a promotion or an allowance regardless of the rules, evaluators, and recommendations. This act is considered to fall under the so-called "public interest" which is glorified by any system, discipline, and law. All these factors indicate the need for explicit expectations and logical, not challenging requirements within the academy where an applicant can get his rights; s/he should know what should be done to have them.

3. Conclusion

Promotion is an important matter for every employee, especially for academicians. Obstacles should not be part of the rules, conditions, and procedures. When every institution comes and works on defining each term in the discipline and redefining it in order to use it periodically, such actions should come to an end in order to prevent infringement. It is for competition to take place properly. Similar definitions and regulations should prevail so that there is no injustice. Indeed, the issue is subject to debate and opinions. Common things like selecting

evaluators, and applying procedures should be transparent, flexible, and standardized in a way that serves the educational environment and does not cause injustice. Surprisingly, applying conditions, adopting new procedures, and changing interpretations of the discipline articles from time to time are added to exclude some refereed, well-known, and indexed journals; it is a way to hinder some applicants from obtaining what they look for and deserve.

By the way, it is difficult to agree on opinions among members of the same department who share the same specialization, so how if it goes beyond that to multiple departments and universities? Different faculties may have different standpoints, and they may represent various tendencies and views. I have heard an official saying that an evaluator has asked him whether his university really intends to promote an applicant. These are really evaluators on demand, and implicitly, procedures cannot go so far and be rejected at the last moment unless there is a secret or a recommendation; both might be oral as well as written. Of course, there is a possibility that an evaluator has a latent intention because of a standpoint from a particular applicant, for example. Lack of knowledge might be a factor; if an evaluator is a specialist in Drama and is asked to evaluate another genre; this action may lead to some unpredictable results. Universities usually compete when it comes to cadres and academic ranks; this fact may influence evaluators' decision, as well. Yet when a university is keen to promote an individual, its academic council could exclude a particular evaluator and/or change him/her. And whenever the obstacle is found, the difficulties are overcome, and the cause of the problem can be eliminated.

Overall, I see the need for clarity and flexibility in the issue of promotion, respect for others, and not mocking and/or contempt to take place. This way ensures continuity and productivity in the environment under discussion. There must be cooperation, which ensures a successful environment. The subjective aspect and favoritism should not intervene, particularly when the subject is academic. The right individual should be given his/her right regardless of other aspects, especially personal ones.

In brief, promotion is a basic requirement for the continuity of work. It is needed to encourage workers of diligence and perseverance and push others to compete for the benefit of any institution, whether academic or otherwise. Therefore, promotion should not be subject to personal calculations, selective opinions and narrow interests that may harm the organization in question and the work as a whole. Insisting on the issue of consensus may open the way for speculation and narrow calculations that are unnecessary. Usually such a condition leads to negative effects and unexpected results because convincing everybody is an impossible mission to achieve. Also, applicable rights and instructions must be set, and there should be no abuse. An applicant should get his/her right in terms of time, access to reports and refutations in a way that guarantees people their rights. There is a need for transparent laws and procedures that guarantee an applicant his/her right and obligate the official in charge for implementation. Such a procedure requires transparency and clarity in the criteria that researchers in all parts of the world complain about.

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