

Of Hygiene and Motivator Factors: Views from “Down Under”

Comments on “Qualification Profile of University Professors in Business and Information Systems Engineering (BISE)”

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I have been at an Australian university for close to ten years now; however, my first spurs in information systems research I earned as a research assistant at the University of Muenster. And even though I have been almost as distant as physically possible from the German university system (geographically speaking), I have maintained links as well as an interest in the progression of the “Wirtschaftsinformatik” discipline in my home country.

Of course, in Australia things are different – albeit not necessarily “upside down”. Also in Australia are young academics under imminent publication pressure to secure one increasingly few faculty positions, there are quarrels over journal rankings and publications (Lamp 2009), and rigor versus relevance is as fervently debated as elsewhere (Recker et al. 2009).

Still, there are also a few differences that have relevance to the professorial qualification debate (Loos et al. 2013). One of the most notable differences in the process of becoming a Professor in Information Systems is that Australia follows the tenure track system and organizes schools and departments not in Chairs (although these may exist – with a different connotation) but in groups of academics of various ranks that comprise the faculty. In this system, a group of scholars in a school may theoretically all be professors – if they meet the requirements – or may never become professors but remain on a Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, or Associate Professor level, depending on achievements – but also motivation and life plans. Our school features several Full Professors, one of which is assigned to the role of Head of School (which in most cases follows some sort of round-robin scheme). Other IS schools in Australia have an Associate Professor as Head of School. And indeed, many colleagues I know actually never aspire to become Full Professor, largely because the senior rank comes with additional expectations about leadership and strategy development – well beyond duties of teaching, research and service – that are not everyone’s kettle of fish.

Another key difference lies in the distinction between achieving the rank of Full Professor and achieving tenure; that is, an academic’s contractual right not to have his or her position terminated without just cause. A common view is that tenure and promotion go hand in hand; for example, that a young Senior Lecturer, after years of hard work post-PhD will be promoted to Associate Professor *and* achieve tenure. The reality, in my experience, is quite different. Tenure tends to be the foremost concern of academics – securing a position for life; and very often the promotion versus tenure decisions are not only decoupled, but are different processes with different criteria.

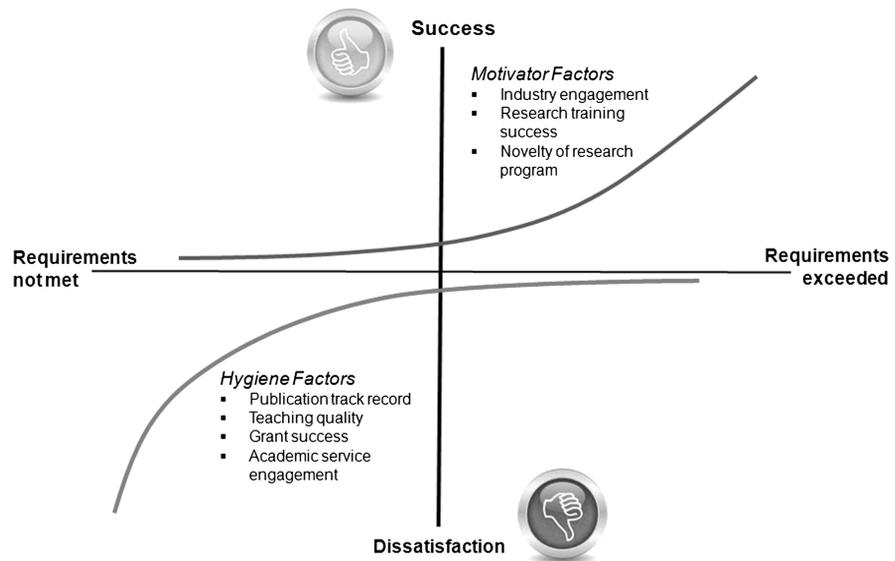
Becoming a Full Professor is the highest level of a research career that spans several levels each of which comes with its own qualification thresholds.

Focusing on what it takes to become a (Full) Professor, I found the discussion of existing or desired qualification criteria discussed by Loos et al. (2013) vastly helpful to bring some structure into an arguably ill-structured problem. In my view, most of the debated criteria (e.g., research track record, funding acquisition, teaching portfolio, industry engagement) matter in all such decisions. So which ones should young academics focus on?

I have always found it helpful to distinguish between hygiene and motivator factors (Herzberg 1966) – for instance, when understanding how to write a paper that will be accepted for presentation or publication (Rosemann et al. 2010). They are a powerful tool, I think, not only to differentiate between the “must-dos” and the “can-dos” but also to understand the level of effort that should be placed on each criteria *after* a particular level has been reached. Using this distinction, my view of some relevant hygiene and motivator factors is as follows (Fig. 1).

- A strong research track record including a portfolio of significant journal publications has become an essential (but not sufficient) requirement. Given the overpopulation of young academics in comparison to available positions, and given the increasing emphasis on research excellence, it is likely to assume that some form of research output (Dean et al. 2011) or impact measurement (Harzing 2013) will persist and continue to be used to assess individuals as well as institutions. At the same time, will it matter how many papers you have published beyond whatever number is desirable (10 journal papers? 50 conference papers?) – likely not. I tend to say that “the

Fig. 1 Hygiene and Motivator Factors of Becoming a Professor in IS



next journal paper will not be as relevant as the last” – their value curve is diminishing.

- A good teaching record, likewise, is a criterion that academics in most cases cannot afford *not* to have. But will selection panels get overly excited when seeing dedicated academics that have spent their career to date with improving and innovation teaching at the expense of, say, research or service? Again, likely not.
- In Australia, a successful track record in securing but also completing research grants is also indispensable. Not having secured grants as chief investigators will make it virtually impossible to satisfy promotion criteria; then again, the value of additional grants diminishes after a while.
- Service to the university or community. Academics need to offer services to editorial boards, conferences, university committees, and the like. What can be gained from being on several such boards? On being named on the program committee of 50+ workshops? Very little. In strategizing, less is more and quality of role (and outlet) should dominate quantity of roles.

So what are motivator factors? In my view, the following deserve mentioning:

- Industry engagement. Similar to the views voiced by most discussants in Loos et al. (2013), a track record of collaboration, research, or other forms of engagement with industry is becoming more and more prominent as a cornerstone of a professor’s portfolio.
- PhD completions. In Australia, PhD supervision is not necessarily a func-

tion of rank but a function of supervision training completion. This allows young academics to also (co-) supervise research students. And the number of PhD completions is a well-sought criteria that speaks highly of the research training capabilities of the academic.

- Excitement of the research program. In my view, an under-emphasized criterion is usually that of the proposed research program of the academic. What will be the focus of the research over the next 5–10 years? What is the likelihood of unearthing significant findings and making prominent advances in research given the area(s) of interest? The NeuroIS movement (Dimoka et al. 2012) is a great example of young academics defining and building an exciting new research stream in information systems.

Of course, there are other factors that I have not mentioned. Still, the distinction into factor categories remains helpful in devising a strategy for achieving career goals. In simple terms, a strategy could be like this. First, *secure hygiene factors*. If some skills are not yet existent (e.g., publishing in top journals), learn them now rather than later. Independent from what you think, you will never again have so much time to learn new things than now. Second, *understand relationships between hygiene factors*. For example, teaching and research can go hand in hand; however, successful grant acquisition (in my experience) is dependent on a successful track record – not vice versa. Finally, *stop worrying about hygiene factors*.

When you have met (not exceeded!) requirements, shift your strategy to excitement factors. What is your research program? What will you be known for in five years? Can you shift your achievements from yourself (papers) to others (PhD completions)? Can you build up a track record in working with industry?

I hope that these ideas and views contribute to the constructive dialogue about academic careers, and that they support individuals in their career strategizing.

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