

CDE: #26382

Is the Grass Always Greener?

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DEVELOPING YOUR PROFESSIONAL PROFILE



Do you feel like you're "stuck" in your current position? Are you trying to figure out the best way to advance your career? If you answered yes to either of these questions and the economy were stronger, you might be tempted to dust off your résumé and become a fixture on the online job boards. *The good news:* Although the most obvious direction career development goes is into job hunting, it's not your only option.

You can seek out mentoring and training and create a professional profile that will allow you to shine in your current position and bring you to the attention of those looking to fill the next supervisor's position in your own agency. A professional profile is an alternative or addition to your job objective. It can take its form in a paragraph that acts as a sort of personal description of your accomplishments, qualifications and qualities or can form a list with bullets to separate your different strengths.¹

But first, ask yourself why you're looking for a change. Are you unhappy with certain aspects of your current position? Do you believe you haven't found your niche yet? Are you *always* looking for something better?

BE HAPPY WHERE YOU ARE

The first step in developing our career or professional profile is to be happy where we are. I don't mean settling for less or believing there's nothing more to your (work) life. What I mean is, don't be desperate. Desperate people usually end up in a rut of "nothing is ever good enough." They can't recognize their strengths and their good fortune. They see others as getting a break and themselves as not having the advantages of other people. Snap out of it. Be happy where you are.

Take a moment to list what you do have in life. What have you accomplished and how far have you come? If you're reading this, chances are you're employed within a public-safety-related industry, you have skills, and you can read! Think about the things you take for granted. They may seem little, but they add up.

Think about the positive aspects of your career. Have you ever heard someone say that the moment they stopped looking, they found whatever it was they were looking for? You might have experienced it yourself. If you're happy where you are, you stop looking and then the opportunities come. Just dive in. If you look for one specific thing, there's only one right answer.

Identify your personal and professional strengths. Do you like helping people? Are you organized? Do you have a knack for knowing when an officer is in trouble just by recognizing the tone of voice over the radio? Can you communicate well in writing, as well as verbally? Can you deliver bad news, as well as good news? These are some areas in which you might have possible strengths.

As you examine your strengths, you'll undoubtedly think of some weaknesses. That's OK because it's the next step in your self evaluation. Don't just think of your internal strengths and weakness, but your external ones as well. Examples of external strengths could be a good support system. The people in your life who encourage you or support you are a strength. If you don't have a support system, reconnect with individuals who have had a positive influence in your life.

Write it all down. Don't rely on your memory. Make a list, and refer to it often, especially when you think of something that should be on it or if something changes.

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO BE?

Now put your focus on where you are in your career. Just as it's difficult to move forward personally without knowing yourself, it's difficult to advance professionally without knowing your current position. Know your job inside and out. Is there something you're rusty on? Is there some aspect of your duties you

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have little experience with? Brush up on those areas as though you're attempting to become a subject matter expert.

Know the ins and outs of the radio system. Know the vendor of your CAD system and all the potential aspects of the operating systems that support it.

Seek out individuals in your agency who are the subject matter experts and learn from them. Don't expect them to come to you. After you know your job inside and out, you can seek training opportunities to enhance that knowledge and further your career. More on that topic later.

There are so many things you can add to your skills, knowledge and abilities that it can infuse new life into your old routine and get you out of your rut. The more involved you are with getting to know every single aspect of your job, the more you'll know what aspects you like and want to do more of and the more complete your professional profile will become. (*Note:* This will also keep you busy while you're *not* looking for opportunities.)

REACH OUT

Another way to stop looking is to start interacting. Interaction or networking is often overlooked in our field because of our unique responsibilities. Interpersonal communications is the basis of our job as telecommunicators, and it's a shame how poorly we sometimes communicate. We need to treat every encounter with our customers—internal and external—as a public safety professional. Every conversation is a reflection on ourselves and an opportunity for the other person to judge us. Every encounter should reflect our professionalism and composure.

How and with whom do we interact? We interact with internal and external customers every day. It's important to reach out of our comfort zones and be proactive. When we start looking outward, we start reaching outward, which can lead to more professional opportunities and give you greater visibility to your own manager. *Examples:* A conversation about your job with your child's teacher could lead to an opportunity for you to present a classroom training session on the appropriate uses of 9-1-1

in that school. A conversation with a reporter could lead to a story on your center when you have something good to share, not just when something goes wrong.

The "how" is going to take practice for most of us. Most of us interact with "the outside world" only when we have to. We don't want to call around the neighborhood and ask if anyone needs our assistance. We wait for them to call us and go from there. The "how" relates back to the intimate understanding of our job. When we understand what we do, we can clearly and articulately tell someone else about it. When people used to ask me about my job, I would just say, "It's complicated." I didn't want to have to go into a mile-long speech about what I actually do, but neither did I want to leave it at, "I'm a dispatcher." I had difficulty finding a middle ground.

So what *do* we say to someone who asks, "What do you do?" How do we find the right words to encompass the complicated aspects of our job without overwhelming them with too much information? It's important to understand that there are two motivations for someone asking this question. The first is because they're social or polite, and it's a common question. The second and most important reason is that they're really asking, "What can you do for me?"

We're not the only ones who want to move onward and upward, so it isn't a stretch to meet others who may be next to or near us on our trips up the career ladder. Develop an "elevator pitch," a short few sentences about you and your profession. Because most elevator rides are short, your elevator speech needs to be short. We can adapt a guide intended to help a salesperson with their pitch to our careers as we attempt to develop our professional profile. Six questions your elevator pitch must answer:²

1) What is your product or service? Briefly describe what it is you do. Do *not* go into excruciating detail.

2) Who is your market? Briefly discuss who you are providing the product or service to. What industry is it?

3) What is your revenue model? In the sales world, this deals with money so you may think it doesn't fit your needs.

In reality, people are very interested in where their tax dollars go, and you want to be a good example of money well spent.

4) Who is behind the company? This is where you tell them what jurisdiction you serve. Don't be shy. Be proud of your community.

5) Who is your competition? Single-discipline comm centers may see a consolidated center as competition. But answering this question isn't that simple. If we weren't there, the public would be forced to take matters into their own hands, and we've all seen the effects of that.

6) What is your personal competitive advantage? Is there an achievement you can mention? Is there something that you were involved with that you can share that would bring to light an important aspect of your job? You need to effectively communicate how you are different or what makes you an important piece of the picture. Are you involved with training? Did you progress faster than others in your hiring group? This is the point where you would briefly share your ambition.

What your "elevator pitch" must contain:

- A "hook": Open your pitch by getting the other person's attention with a "hook." A hook is a statement or question that piques their interest to want to hear more.
- *About 150–225 words:* Your pitch should last no longer than 60 seconds.
- *Passion:* If you don't sound excited about what you do, you can't expect anyone else to be excited about it.
- *A request:* At the end of your pitch, you must ask for something. Ask what they do. Ask if they are interested in visiting to learn more. Have they had a good experience with public safety communications? Do they know anyone in public safety?

Example: Your pitch might go something like this: "I tell police officers where to go. I handle emergencies and help train others to answer 9-1-1 calls and gather the information necessary to help save lives and keep my community

(the city of XYZ) safe. It's a very rewarding job, and I experience something new every day. I'm actually taking on a project to educate elementary school children on how 9-1-1 works and what qualifies as a true emergency. Have you ever been inside a public safety communications center?"

After you've developed your speech, practice it until you're comfortable. It should sound natural and not like you are reading it off an index card. Practice on your parents and your friends. You have to be able to express yourself at a moment's notice.

ENHANCING YOUR PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

Now that you've taken the first steps in understanding the many facets of your strengths and duties, it's time to enhance your profile and improve your networking.

There are so many opportunities out there for skills enhancement and training that it might be a little overwhelming. Some training is expensive, and some is free (check out the list on p. 18 for some online training sources). Some is elusive, and some seems worthless. How do you separate the wheat from the chaff? We've already addressed looking within your agency for training opportunities. Now it's time to look outward. Certain training is generally required to work in a communications center. Are there courses that go beyond that?

One of the biggest steps you can take within the public safety community is enrolling in the Leadership Certificate Program.

The APCO Institute's Leadership Certificate Program is a comprehensive 12-month online program that leads to the professional designation of Registered Public-Safety Leader (RPL). This program provides aspiring leaders within public safety communications the knowledge and skills to achieve excellence.

Registered Public-Safety Leaders represent dedicated individuals from various positions within the public safety communications industry. Participants come from various regions of the country representing personnel from every facet of the public safety communications industry from the front-line

calltakers and dispatchers to the executive level.

Those who have earned the RPL designation have made significant contributions to the field and, as a requirement for renewal, will continue to be involved in improving the industry. These contributions include lobbying for 9-1-1 funds, the TERT initiative, public 9-1-1 awareness, VoIP funding, 9-1-1 for kids and more.

Visit www.apcointl.com/institute/RPL_Registry.htm to view the list of Registered Public-Safety Leaders.

APCO Institute, the training arm of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials International, is the premier organization addressing educational and certification needs of public safety communications agencies. The Institute offers a selection of affordable training and educational resources for public safety communicators throughout the U.S. and in the international arena. Instructional offerings range from first-line basic training to supervisory, and comm center management courses, technical testing, agency and agent certification, and Web seminars addressing current public safety communications issues.

APCO Institute offers several training options, including certification programs through traditional classroom instruction and APCO Institute Online Internet-based training. APCO Virtual College, a cooperative effort between APCO Institute and the Institute for Emergency Preparedness (IEP), offers a degree program in Public Safety Communications. APCO Virtual College is an Internet-based distance learning academic program designed for, and directed specifically toward, individuals in public safety communications. For more information, visit www.apcoinstitute.org.³

Local community colleges might offer courses on computer programs, such as Excel or Access, that can enhance your skills.

Budgets are tight and by showing enthusiasm and professionalism, you might be able to get some of those funds for training. There are also scholarships available, so don't be afraid to ask. Some agencies offer tuition reimbursement.

Take advantage of those opportunities.

You need to put your professional networking into high gear. Today, there are so many online networking sites that you may be wondering how to take advantage of them and which ones to avoid. First, realize that after you put something out on the Internet, it's virtually irretrievable, and *employers do not ignore the Internet*. Many people in prominent positions have gotten into trouble with their employers over what they posted online. Although you may have set your social networking pages to "private" or "friends and family," you will never have total control over who can see your information. You may find it tempting to post "My job stinks," but rest assured that no potential or current employer will look kindly on it.

There are two sides to online networking. One is geared toward social interaction, and the other is geared toward professionals. The professional sites are LinkedIn, Plaxo and PSCconnect, which is public safety communications specific and currently being developed just for you. Look for an announcement from APCO in the first quarter of 2010 about the launch of this important tool that will help you become more involved in your profession.

CONCLUSION

Know yourself, know your job, and know what you want. Seek out training opportunities. Let your supervisors and the comm center manager know you're interested in a career development path, and seek out a mentor who will help you get there. The keys to career advancement lie with you. **||PSC||**

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REFERENCES

1. Isaacs K: "How to write a career summary." 2008 Monster.ca. June 17, 2008. <http://learnhub.com/lesson/page/2466-new-lesson/edit>; and <http://careers.learnhub.com/lesson/2455-writing-a-professional-profile>.
2. Pagliarini R: *The Art of the Elevator Pitch*. SeekingCapital.com.
3. Adapted from an APCO International press release.

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- 1. The first question you should ask is:**
 - a. Why am I looking for a change?
 - b. Where can I find a better job?
 - c. Where can I find a good résumé writer?
 - d. Why do I work here?
- 2. What should you focus on first when developing a professional profile?**
 - a. Strengths.
 - b. Weaknesses.
 - c. Job description.
 - d. Job history.
- 3. When someone asks, "What do you do?" you should answer:**
 - a. "I am a dispatcher."
 - b. "I answer 9-1-1 calls, and you should hear some of the stuff that comes out of people's mouths. They're crazy! I can't stand my job because there's so much pressure. If I make just one little mistake, my supervisor yells at me."
 - c. Make something up on the fly.
 - d. Give them your well-rehearsed and comfortable elevator pitch.
- 4. When you tell people what you do, you should show enthusiasm because:**
 - a. All public safety telecommunicators are upbeat and fun to work with.
 - b. You might get in trouble if anyone hears you're less than enthusiastic about your job.
 - c. You don't want the other person to think you're boring.
 - d. If you don't sound excited about what you do, how can you expect anyone else to be interested?
- 5. RPL stands for:**
 - a. Recognized Professional Liaison.
 - b. Registered Personnel Leader.
 - c. Registered Public-Safety Leader.
 - d. Recognized Public-Safety Liaison.
- 6. It's OK to post derogatory comments on social networking sites because access is limited to my friends and family.**
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 7. A professional profile can be a paragraph that describes your accomplishments, qualifications and qualities, or it can be a bulleted list of your strengths.**
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 8. A professional profile should never be updated.**
 - a. True
 - b. False
- 9. Reaching out to members of your community and networking are important to your career advancement because:**
 - a. You might identify someone interested in public safety communications as a career.
 - b. Networking can directly lead to job offers.
 - c. Looking outward can lead to more professional opportunities.
 - d. All of the above.
- 10. Adding to your base of skills, knowledge and abilities can infuse new life into old routines.**
 - a. True
 - b. False

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