

ADVICE TO MID-CAREER RESEARCHERS

We are starting a new series to provide advice to mid-career researchers. There are a number of programs that SIGMOD organizes for researchers at the beginning of their careers (PhD Symposium and the like) and senior people do not (or should not) need much help. There are considerable challenges for those who are about to transition from an early researcher to a more senior role. In academia, these are people who are about to get tenured that comes with starting to think of moving from shorter-term research objectives to longer-term ones. In industrial research, this corresponds to the transition from participating in projects to initiating and leading them. As a community we don't seem to talk about these challenges much. That is the gap this series attempts to fill. We will get the views of senior researchers from diverse backgrounds and diverse geographies. We will continue as long as we find original advice and the views are not repetitions.

*M. Tamer Özsu
University of Waterloo*

Deciding What Not to Do

David Maier, Portland State University

I recall an early conversation with my advisor, a couple years after I completed my PhD. I was worried about not having been invited onto any program committees when others in my cohort were getting such opportunities. He assured me that it would come in time, though I was still anxious. He was right; after another year or so, the invitations started coming. At this point, I need to decline most of them, or I'd spend all my time reviewing.

It's pretty much guaranteed that anyone with a productive research program will reach a "tipping point" where the professional opportunities — PCs, conference organization, editorships, professional society offices, agenda-setting panels, paper and proposal reviewing — exceed his or her capacity to contribute. Some people get in a jam when opportunities start presenting themselves, saying yes to most requests, then being swamped with professional activities. While as a responsible member of the research community, you should expect to contribute your fair share of service, as your career progresses, choosing activities wisely becomes increasingly important.

Requests for professional service are often accompanied by reasons why you should accept the request, not all of which you should accept at face value. These are *not* reasons to say yes:

- Because you'd be the best person. (Or someone tells you you'd be the ideal person to do it.) The second-, third- or tenth-best choice might well do a wholly adequate job.
- Because it won't happen if you don't do it (or so you're told). Maybe such a lack of candidates for the task means it's time to phase out that activity.
- It's your turn. Perhaps it's true that you've never organized a particular conference before, but you may currently be contributing to the community in large ways that others aren't, such as editing a journal or heading a professional society.
- Your participation is sought to represent an underrepresented group. Obviously, diversity in professional activities is valuable, but there is a danger of overloading members of such groups precisely because there are relatively fewer of them. Moreover, in Computer Science, members of these groups are concentrated in the more junior segments, and such people need to focus on establishing their research and academic careers. If you are a member of an underrepresented group, remember that the imbalance is not your doing, and you can't be expected to represent the group in every opportunity that comes along. (If you know other people who might benefit from participation in the activity, ask them if it's okay that you suggest them as alternate choices.)
- Because everyone else seems to be taking part — all the "cool kids" are involved. First of all, you are

probably subject to observation bias: no one is pointing out to you the people who aren't involved. Further, you should have a more principled reason to say yes (see below).

You should figure out what are your valid reasons for saying "yes" — it shouldn't simply be to "pay your dues." You should be as strategic in choosing your service activities as you are in deciding on research directions. Your scarcest resources are your time and attention; you should invest them carefully. Think about how activities might benefit you and where you could make a unique contribution. What do you find enjoyable, what are you particularly effective at? Try to avoid what has caused you pain and anxiety in the past. Consider even writing down your reasons for saying yes (and revising them periodically), so you can consult them when an opportunity arises. My current list of reasons to say yes includes:

- There will be an opportunity to meet others outside my immediate field.
- It will help get me spun up in an area I'm interested in moving into.
- To repay help from someone else. I see this aspect more as gratitude than obligation. You contributed to my special issue — I could buy you a beer, or I could help you organize tutorials.
- To push policy changes. You might not agree with current policies of an organization — the activity offers a chance to advocate for changing it.
- To influence policymakers, such as agenda-setting workshops for funding agencies and government study panels.
- The activity offers a high return on time invested, such as organizing a panel.

I also try to have limits per category of task, for example, only one program committee at a time.

Some closing thoughts on service. It's better to do really well at a few things than make a minimal contribution to many. The latter may pad your resume, but won't enhance your reputation. Also, you get a better

reputation doing 100% of a moderate task than a moderate amount of a massive task. If you agree to do something, do it gladly, not grumpily. Don't say yes then complain constantly about the task. Do watch out for bait-and-switch, or ambiguity about an activity. Put bounds up front about what you are willing to do — hours per week, number of plane trips. Talk to someone who's done the job in the past about the effort required, and the kinds of activities. (How frequent are meetings? How much work between meetings?) Don't be shy about asking for paid support, such as a conference manager if you are General Chair or handling local arrangements for a conference. While some departments and companies may be willing to let you use staff for coordination and clerical activities, many organizations, especially in academia, are on tight budgets and short-staffed. You want to focus your time on tasks that can't be offloaded. Finally, if you are going to decline, do so quickly, and suggest alternative names, if you can think of any.

And remember to make time for your family. If you have children at home, don't neglect investing in them.