

Matthias Lein: Case Study

Publons puts the spotlight on Dr Matthias Lein - Chemistry researcher and lecturer with the School of Chemical and Physical Sciences at the University of Victoria, Wellington, New Zealand. Matthias tells us how he used his Publons profile, as evidence of his contributions and expertise, to help secure a promotion.



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353 Merit



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What was the position you applied for and why did you decide to go for it?

I applied for the top-level Senior Lecturer position. It's critical to keep moving up the scale if I want to be in a position to go for an Associate Professor role, which is my next target.

Can you describe the application process?

It takes a while. The call for applications happens in May. Applications are due in June and results provided at the end of October - about six-months start to finish. It is a paper based application.

Some essay format, some lists and tick-boxes. Probably about 25-30 pages long in total. You also need to nominate referees to write references for you. The whole thing goes to the Head of Department to comment and give context to the application. This is because the next step is a faculty-wide committee and someone from English or Theatre Studies isn't going to understand anything about my publication record, so they need the context and recommendations that the HOD provides.

What is the biggest challenge when applying for an academic promotion?

In general there are three categories that academics in

New Zealand are evaluated on, and it's pretty much the same world-wide:

- Research
- Teaching
- Service

Research is always the biggest one. That's your own publication record. When you talk about your publication record, that's easy. You just list your publications and your citation record and that's that.

Teaching is pretty much how much you do, how well it's received by the students and recognition through teaching awards, fellowships etc.

Service can be many things. For example working in academic leadership positions within the university - like a Dean, outreach activities, organising conferences, being on Government advisory panels and the like. Reviewing falls under the service category and I always struggled to demonstrate that.

Why is it so hard to demonstrate your review contributions?

You can always give a list of journals you review for, but it's not verifiable at all. I could say I do 20 reviews for Nature every week and no one could verify that, because it's all confidential. I really like the idea that with Publons I've got this cross-verified transcript of how much I do and for which journals.

"Now I can point people to my profile & there are the statistics. You can see my review acceptance rate, how many I do, for which journals and it can even inform people who might want to use me as a reviewer."

Some people claim insane numbers of how much they review and either they don't do a good job, or that's what they spend their whole day doing. Either way there is no credible way to be sure and Publons has fixed that.

You see it when you get the fresh-faced, young academics coming through and applying for jobs. They have a long list of the journals they review for because they think it's important, but they haven't realised that it means nothing unless you can verify the information.

Has Publons changed the way you think about using your review activity to demonstrate your service to the community?

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the statistics. You can see my review acceptance rate, how many I do, for which journals and it can even inform people who might want to use me as a reviewer. So it was an absolute no brainer to include my Publons profile and verified review record in my promotion application. Academic promotion criteria requires that I talk about what I'm doing to serve the community and as a scientist I like evidence and there it is on my Publons profile, right there.

Did you get any specific feedback on your application?

I did. Usually when you are successful you don't get a lot of feedback at all. It's just sort of "well done", "congratulations". But my Head of Department gave me specific feedback on two aspects of my application. One was my teaching. I had some exceptional comments from students that I incorporated as screenshots into my application, and they really liked that. The other was my Publons profile. It really stood out that someone could verify what I had done in terms of peer review. Needless to say that as my HOD is a physicist, he likes evidence!

What advice would you give other career scientists / researchers / academics when considering applying for a promotion?

The most important thing is to keep all of your documentation. Most people think it's just about your research and publication record - that's the easy part. But what were all the little things you did for the community, like refereeing? How many public seminars did I give last year? Was it five, or was one of those the year before? You need to document these things and keep a good portfolio of what you are doing, as that's the evidence you need. Then if the evidence is there, use it.

In terms of your review contributions, that's now really simple. Just keep your Publons profile up to date. It's easy, I just forward my review receipts to Publons and they do the rest. I also understand that when you review for a Publons partner, you just tick a box in the editorial management software where you do the review and it all happens automatically.

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Is that just the case for promotion applications, or do you need to keep a record of these things for other reasons?

We need to do this for the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) system in New Zealand too. It's an evidence-based method for awarding funding to researchers. They want 5-6 years worth of evidence about your research outputs and contributions to the research environment, such as reviewing. It's no easy task digging back in your emails five or six years to try and pull out the evidence you need. So when it comes to the next PBRF round, I'll definitely be including my Publons profile and review record, because last time it was just a list of journals I review for and that no one could verify and I don't think that meant much.

What's the most useful aspect of your Publons profile?

Aside from the obvious fact it has helped me to get a promotion, it was also the first time I realised how much I review, both in general, and for certain journals. It also showed me how that balance has changed over time. It's really nice to see the progression over the years.

For example there is one journal I used to review for a lot a few years back, but that has dried up in recent years. Now there is a really prominent publisher that I review for a lot and that's nice to see.

What's next for you?

I'm going to apply for another promotion again this year, for an Associate Professor role, and I'm going to use my Publons profile again!

That's great! Is it common to apply year on year?

That is just sort of the stage I'm at in my career. I am applying slightly early for the Associate Professor role. There is one more stage between my current position and Associate Professor, but I'm not prevented from applying for Associate Professor, so I'm going for it. I won a major prize last year, so it looks good but I'll see what happens.

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Congratulations on the promotion Matthias and best of luck with your next application.

If you have a story you want to share with the Publons community like Matthias, we'd love to hear from you.
Email: tom@publons.com