

Research Brief

Gaining Status in an Online Community

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How unknown individuals turn into influencers on a platform for programmers

Ever wonder why *that guy*, the co-worker who's not quite as smart, hardworking or capable as you repeatedly lands better projects, job titles and pay?

A new study offers clues about why status levels of seemingly comparable individuals might diverge dramatically over time. [The research < https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/full/10.1287/orsc.2021.1559 >](https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/full/10.1287/orsc.2021.1559), by University of Michigan's Inna Smirnova, University of Vienna's Markus Reitzig and UCLA Anderson's Olav Sorenson, is forthcoming in the journal *Organization Science*.

The researchers analyzed nine years of posts by about 30,418 users of the online forum Stack Overflow. Their findings illustrate how an unknown participant becomes a well-respected influencer, aka, the *that guy* of an online community.

It's All About Your Performance Record — at First

They found establishing a performance record — one that could readily be judged as useful — to be a necessary first step. But continuing to build status required contributions that were harder and harder for observers to evaluate.

Stack Overflow is open to anyone interested in computer programming, regardless of expertise. Members post questions, such as how to solve a coding issue, and other members respond with answers or comments. The site has posted some 20 million questions and 30 million responses since its 2008 inception.

Members also can judge each question, answer and comment as particularly useful (or not). These crowdsourced quality evaluations accrue points and badges for each user, prominently displayed with every post.

In other words, a member's status level in the community is revealed every time he or she posts. Their status in the outside world typically isn't known, as most users don't use full names or reveal where they work.

Leaders May Impede Others from Gaining Status

In the beginning, the study finds, members gain status by merely asking questions. Answering questions or commenting on others' questions does little to add status for members that are new to the community, the study finds. The group won't waste much time on these from new contributors.

But the benefits, statuswise, from questioning eventually plateau. At middle and high levels of status, it takes appreciated answers to make further gains. Answers are more difficult to assess, because the reader must take some time and possess expertise to determine whether the suggestion is useful.

Once a fairly high level of status is achieved — and not before — commenting on questions and answers further builds status, the study finds. Evaluating comments generally requires reading the entire thread deeply and having some knowledge of the pros and cons of potential solutions under discussion. Asking questions does little toward advancement at this level and may actually ding status.

At the highest status levels, a familiar positive feedback loop kicks in, the study finds. Their comments get even more responses, sending them higher up the status chain. The community perceives the difficult-to-assess nature of their contributions as further evidence of their higher value to the group. The status level itself becomes a key reason they gain more status.

Why doesn't every proficient worker achieve high status in their field? The findings suggest several possibilities.

First status milestones can be gained through doing well at tasks that are easy to evaluate, like providing accurate answers to objective questions. A statistician, for example, offers correct figures that can be double checked. An analyst prepares an error-free report that gives a thorough account of the situation.

But not every competent individual is comfortable expounding on more ambiguous issues or outside of their specific expertise, the researchers note. The statistician, for example, might not be comfortable debating an ethical issue in the field. A mortgage banker may turn down the chance to lead a discussion about Federal Reserve policies. Yet such displays of confidence beyond competence are necessary for moving up from a moderate level of status, according to the study.

Status leaders may also impede status building in the lower ranks, the researchers write, as they suck up the most attention and opportunities. Bias also plays a role because those bestowing status sometimes use characteristics like gender and race to assess. Finally, sheer luck helps, they write. Even random successes accelerate the speed of status building.

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About the Research

Smirnova, I., Reitzig, M. and Sorenson, O. (2022), [Building Status in an Online Community](https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/full/10.1287/orsc.2021.1559) < <https://pubsonline.informs.org/doi/full/10.1287/orsc.2021.1559> >. *Organization Science*. doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1559

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