



THE BENEFITS OF AWARDS—EVEN IF YOU DON'T WIN

By [Sharon Ann Holgate](#) May. 31, 2017 , 11:30 AM

Awards have played an important role in [Haley Gomez's](#) career. When the professor of astrophysics and head of public engagement for the School of Physics and Astronomy at Cardiff University in the United Kingdom interviewed for a €1.8 million European Research Council grant in 2014, "the first thing I was asked about" was a [Welsh public engagement award](#) that she had received earlier that year. (She got the grant.) And winning the [Royal Astronomical Society's Fowler Prize](#) in 2015 for her scientific contributions has "made a huge difference" when applying for promotions and research grants, too, she adds. "It's almost a badge that says you are externally recognised as having achieved something by your community. It's also something to distinguish yourself against others in grant applications."

But recognition aside, merely applying for awards or seeking to be nominated also brings a multitude of career benefits. Putting together an award application can help you reflect on your skills and career progress. It may push you to become more competitive by filling gaps in your CV and increasing your visibility. Seeking out senior colleagues who will cheer for you can help you build a strong support base for the future. Competing for awards also creates an opportunity to receive useful feedback about your work and how you are perceived from those who nominated you or awards committees, Gomez notes.

Of course, should you emerge from the process with an award in hand, all the better. But even if you don't win, competing for an award is often a worthwhile effort that will help you further your professional development.

It's all in the application

One of the greatest benefits of preparing an award application is that it encourages early-career researchers to engage in personal and professional self-assessment, says [Sharon Maguire](#), a careers consultant at the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. This involves "thinking about how you're developing as an individual, and how you're developing skills and experiences that can be applied in lots of different ways. That sort of self-reflection and self-awareness throughout the Ph.D. experience and beyond is really important" for developing a successful career, she says.

Studying the award criteria and looking at past winners may help you get a sense of what you want to strive for and identify skill gaps. Trying to fill these gaps will not only increase your chances of getting the award, but also put you in a stronger position for your future career planning and progression, Maguire says. Online tools such as the [Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#) or skills audits developed by your university can also give you some pointers for what may be expected of you, she adds.

Sometimes it's more a matter of adequately highlighting concrete evidence of skills and achievements you have already secured. Maguire recommends getting advice about how to do this from faculty members who have

experience applying for similar awards or your university careers service. For example, they may suggest that you adapt the language in your application or emphasize certain aspects of your background or work. Going through this process will also stand you in good stead for applying for research grants in the future, Maguire says.

Get out there

Submitting an application for an award requires a certain degree of boldness, and those who are naturally shy or lack self-confidence shouldn't let that get in the way of promoting themselves. "You have to take the bull by the horns," Maguire says. To make it a bit easier, she suggests building up confidence by asking for constructive and honest feedback from early-career researchers and your adviser or mentors about whether your work is worthy of an award and how well your application comes across. Other specialists within your university may also be able to offer such help with award applications, Maguire adds.

To give yourself a chance at the awards that require nomination by others, you need to be visible both within your department and in the wider scientific community, says [Jigar Jogia](#), an associate professor of psychology at the American University in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates who won a [Samuel Gershon Junior Investigator Award](#) from the International Society for Bipolar Disorders in 2011. "Go and give a seminar, do a lecture at a different university, and go to a conference and present findings. That's the only way that people know about you," Jogia recommends. Doing so will also "add to your portfolio of skills even if you don't win," and it will aid networking and collaboration opportunities, he says.

If you're eyeing an award that relies on nomination and you are working in a place that is not supportive or does not have a culture of putting its members forward, one solution is to find allies outside the department, suggests [Alfreda James](#), assistant director of the Career Center at Stony Brook University in New York. Mentoring schemes offered by your university could help you identify suitable mentors, Maguire adds.

Of course, one usually competes with the hope of winning. But in today's hypercompetitive environment, that can be rare, so it is worth being open-minded and creative when deciding which awards to pursue, as Gomez's experience with her public engagement award illustrates. It is also important to develop a thick skin in the face of setbacks and try again. "Don't take rejection too personally," Jogia says. "Maybe there was a flaw in your application and you could improve that, or maybe you were pitted against amazing researchers and it was just the wrong time to apply."

Applying for awards is time-consuming, however, and must not detract focus from research, teaching, or other duties. So, Jogia recommends, "don't just apply for everything. Apply strategically. ... Really think, 'Is this the right time for me? Have I done enough in my career, and have I got something to actually shout about, or am I just shouting?'"

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