

Description

How successful are you as a researcher? How good are your publications? What is the impact of your work?

There are, of course, many different ways to answer these questions. Traditionally, the strength of a researcher's career has often been judged on their publications. Publications in a journal with a high impact factor are considered to be the most prestigious. The impact factor of a journal is based on the average number of citations that articles in the journal receive.

But is there a way to measure the success of an individual, rather than a journal or institution? The h-index offers one way to do this.

What is the H-Index?

Simply put, the h-index is a number that gives an idea of a researcher's individual productivity and influence. The number is based on the papers a researcher publishes and the citations those papers get.

Publishing a lot of highly cited articles will increase your h-index. On the other hand, getting a lot of citations on only one or two papers will not give you a high h-index. For example, if you have an h-index of 7, it means that you have published 7 papers, each of which has been cited at least 7 times. If you are a "one-hit wonder", with only one paper that has a lot of citations, this will be shown in a low h-index.

How to Calculate Your H-Index

Not sure how to calculate your h-index? Don't worry, there are several online tools that can help you. For example, you can use Google Scholar's Citation search to track your citations or even Scopus as it offers similar functions. You can find some helpful hints and tips on how to use both these services here . You could also use any other service that tracks citations, such as Web of Science.

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In Scopus, for example, you simply need to search for the author's name. Then just click on the correct search result to see details including the h-index.

Pros and Cons of the H-Index

As with all journal metrics, there are pros and cons to representing a researcher's achievements as a number. You might have already spotted some of these yourself.

Pros

The h-index offers a useful (and simple) way to compare researchers who are at similar stages in their careers. This could be particularly useful for recruiters or others who are not from the same field as the researcher.

Using the h-index would stop a researcher who has lots of low-impact publications appearing to be more productive than someone who has fewer publications with a higher impact. This leads us to the second pro: h-index is currently the only way to combine productivity and impact in a single metric.

Cons

One problem with the h-index is that is cannot be used to compare researchers in different fields. It is also open to being unfairly manipulated. For example, you might get a group of researchers who often cite each other's work simply to increase their h-index.

The h-index does not tell you whether a researcher was a sole author on a paper, or one of a huge group. This means that someone's h-index could be boosted by work they had little to do with.

Finally, a big drawback of the h-index is that it tells you nothing about the science or ideas behind a researcher's achievements.

Should You Care About Your H-Index?

The h-index is not perfect. So, should you really care about yours?

The answer is probably, yes. These days, it is common for academic jobs to require a certain h-index. As most researchers know, competition for academic jobs, particularly post docs, is very high. Giving a minimum h-index is a simple way to eliminate job seekers who won't make the grade.

A strong h-index could also help you get promoted, gain memberships to scientific organizations, or win research grants. It helps people who are not experts in your field to understand what you have achieved.

But what can you do if your h-index is not looking great?

Boosting Your H-Index

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There are many ways to boost your h-index. Some of these are either illegal or immoral. For example, frequent/irrelevant self-citations will boost your h-index, but does not actually have value.

Fortunately, there are several acceptable ways to boost your h-index.

- Collaborate with more mature researchers. Research has shown that papers with famous first authors get more citations. So, if you are just starting out, try to collaborate with the most experienced researchers in your field.
- Choose your journal carefully. Well-known, established journals get more readers, which leads to more citations. Try to think about which journal to aim for early in the research process.
- Publish Open Access. As you might expect, open access journals get more citations. However, whether you choose open access partly depends on your field. In life sciences and medicine, for example, there are some very well-respected open access journals. In other areas, this is less true.
- Think about your audience. When choosing a journal, consider its audience. Does the journal have a broad or narrow scope? A more specialist journal might be more likely to get citations from researchers in your own field.
- Network, network, network. Attend conferences and meetings whenever you can. This will help you to promote your work and find new collaborators.
- Work on your writing. Most readers will find your article with a search engine. You might want to learn about search engine optimization. Make sure your article has a catchy but specific title. Think about what your keywords will be.
- Show up on social media. If you don't already, think about writing a blog about your work. Being present on social media will help to make other researchers aware of you and your work. It will also help you to connect with others in your field.

You might have noticed that most of these tips won't just help to boost your h-index: they could actually help with all parts of your career.

Do you know your h-index? Have you ever been asked to provide it in a job application or grant proposal? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Category

1. Career Corner
2. PhDs & Postdocs

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