

## A CV of failures

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A couple of months ago, I received a letter informing me that my fellowship application had failed. On the same day, Brazil's World Cup squad announced that football phenomenon Ronaldinho had not been selected. "Cool," I thought. "I am like Ronaldinho." But that thought offered only little consolation. No scientist enjoys such failures, but too often we hide them.

In a way, a fellowship rejection is to be expected. Most of these fellowships have success rates of about 15%, meaning that an applicant might be successful in only one out of every seven tries. For every hour I've spent working on a successful proposal, I've spent six hours working on ones that will be rejected. I don't mind the extra work — after all, if I abhorred tedious tasks with low chances of success, I would not be in research.

Even so, this means that for every endorsement, there are about six challenges to my ability, my determination and my vision. I find this harder to swallow. Perhaps this is because I have generally succeeded so far. I did well at school and later at university, earned the PhD position of my dreams, and have published several papers. This is the story that my CV reveals.

But that is exactly the problem. My CV does not reflect the bulk of my academic efforts — it does not mention the exams I failed, my unsuccessful PhD or fellowship applications, or the papers never accepted for publication. At conferences, I talk about the one project that worked, not about the many that failed.

As scientists, we construct a narrative of success that renders our setbacks invisible both to ourselves and to others. Often, other scientists' careers seem to be a constant, streamlined series of triumphs. Therefore, whenever we experience an individual failure, we feel alone and dejected.

Such is not the case with every profession. Consider Ronaldinho. A football player cannot hide his setbacks. Everything is out in the open — every failure to be selected for a big competition, every injury, every missed penalty is on display. Maybe this is a good thing. It shows young aspiring players what it means to be a football player. It helps them to cope with their own setbacks.

So here is my suggestion. Compile an 'alternative' CV of failures. Log every unsuccessful application, refused grant proposal and rejected paper. Don't dwell on it for hours, just keep a running, up-to-date tally. If you dare — and can afford to — make it public. It will be six times as long as your normal CV. It will probably be utterly depressing at first sight. But it will remind you of the missing truths, some of the essential parts of what it means to be a scientist — and it might inspire a colleague to shake off a rejection and start again.