

# The Informal Guide to AT&T Fellow, AT&T Operations Excellence Medal and AT&T Science and Technology Medal Nominations

## Recommendations for a Successful Nomination Process

The AT&T Fellows Honor, AT&T Operations Excellence Medal and AT&T Science and Technology Medal are presented to exceptional women and men whose ideas have changed our company. These prestigious awards trace their esteemed tradition from AT&T Bell Labs and celebrate those who have impacted our company and industry with extraordinary contributions through scientific, technical and operational achievements.

The success of a nomination depends first and foremost on the quality of the candidate. Usually, the candidate will not be familiar to most or all the committee members; a committee member that knows the candidate well could have a conflict and not be able to participate in the discussion of that candidate. Further, few committee members are likely to be thoroughly versed in the candidate's subfield or operational work area. Therefore, decisions on candidates will be based on the information provided by the short nomination and endorsements. Hence, the quality of these documents is paramount: While a good nomination may not help a weak candidate, a lousy one may certainly sink a good candidate. Most nominators and endorsers understand this and write well-considered nominations and endorsements. However, we still see some poorly written nominations and we see many poorly written endorsements. We hope that the following suggestions will reduce the frequency of those.

We assume that the process starts with a decision that a candidate is ripe for nomination and with the selection of a nominator. The nominator writes the nomination and selects the endorsers. The endorsers then submit their endorsements. The recommendations below cover the stages of this process: Selecting a nominator, writing a nomination, selecting endorsers, and writing endorsements; they address the people involved in these various activities.

## ***Choose an experienced and willing nominator***

Writing good nominations is a skill that improves with experience; it is also a time-consuming activity. Ideally, the nominator should be familiar with the body of work of the candidate and its impact to write a good nomination. If no experienced and willing nominator is to be found, then consider having a more experienced person read the nomination and suggest improvements.

## ***Involve the candidate in the nomination process***

A nominator might be tempted to nominate a candidate without her knowledge, to avoid disappointment in the case the nomination fails. This is a bad idea, for a variety of reasons: The candidate is best placed to provide accurate information on her achievements (i.e., what she did) and for selecting plausible endorsers. Besides, since each nomination is a bet that carries a risk it is best to consult the candidate before making the bet on her behalf.

## ***Don't let the candidate write her own nomination***

A candidate may want to write her own nomination; such a write-up could be a useful draft, but should not be the final nomination. For one thing, the nomination is supposed to be contributed by the nominator and express the nominator's views, not the views of the candidate. A nominator will have a more objective view of the importance of various contributions, the value of the contributions to AT&T and the industry, and a better understanding of how the nomination will be read by a committee that is not necessarily familiar with the candidate. The nominator should have more experience writing this type of document.

## ***Start creating the nomination early***

An earlier start means more time to iterate on the nomination text. It means that endorsers are more likely to agree to endorse and they have time to write a quality endorsement, validating the candidate's contributions. It means that endorsements are likely to be submitted well ahead of the deadline, thus ensuring that unforeseen events will not prevent a submission. Rather than soliciting more endorsements than needed and creating superfluous work, it may be advisable to solicit endorsements from the preferred endorsers and ensure that an additional person will be willing to write an endorsement on short notice, if needed.

## ***Focus the nomination write-up on the formal requirements***

The nomination criteria for the AT&T Fellows Honor states that *"The nominee's outstanding and unique contribution must be in the following areas:*

### ***Area 1: Technical Depth***

*Describe the candidate's outstanding accomplishments that have exhibited a depth of technical knowledge and insight as well as extraordinary inventiveness and innovation.*

### ***Area 2: Importance***

*Describe how the candidate's accomplishments and leadership have transformed AT&T's business or the Brand.*

### ***Area 3: Technical Breadth***

*Describe evidence of the candidate's technical breadth and significant contributions across various areas of the scientific discipline or across disciplines.*

### ***Area 4: Continuous Contributions***

*Provide evidence that the candidate has made a number of important contributions and has had continuous impact in his/her technical field(s) of importance to AT&T."*

The nomination criteria for the AT&T Science and Technology Medal states that *"The nominee's outstanding and unique contribution must be in one or both of the following areas*

### ***Area 1: Outstanding Technical Contributions***

*Enhancing AT&T's business or creating new business - in particular, services, network infrastructure and/or operations systems, achieved with one or more of the following criteria:*

**Innovation:** *A substantial and unique contribution to the business, leveraging technology or invention and bringing it to practice*

**Invention:** *A fundamentally new discovery based on original thoughts and ideas*

**Advocacy:** *Significant work and personal commitment towards promoting a technical solution or opportunity that results in enlarging the scope of the business*

## **Area 2: Technical Management and Leadership**

*Acknowledged in one or both of the following areas:*

**Demonstration of strong leadership abilities:** *Directing individual contributors and multi-functional teams through at least three significant end-to-end projects that are widely recognized as contributing to AT&T's marketplace position, its financial success or the AT&T Brand*

**Holding extraordinary technical credentials:** *Representing AT&T and providing notable leadership and contributions that demonstrate technical depth in technology forums, including professional and industry associations, university activities, and standards bodies."*

Similarly, the nomination criteria for the AT&T Operations Excellence Medal states that "The nominee's outstanding and unique contribution must be in one or both of the following areas

## **Area 1: Outstanding Operations Contributions**

*Enablement of AT&T business operational solutions in support of network, service or technology infrastructure that provides a quantifiable improvement in reliability, cost efficiency, customer experience, speed of delivery, or security that extends beyond the usual responsibilities of the contributor, achieved with one or more of the following criteria:*

**Innovation:** *A substantial and unique contribution to the operability of the business, leveraging technology or invention and bringing it to practice*

**Invention:** *A fundamentally new discovery based on original thoughts and ideas*

**Advocacy:** *Significant work and personal commitment towards promoting an operational solution or opportunity that results in enlarging the scope of the business, improving customer experience or improving our cost structure*

**Area 2: Operational Management and Leadership** - *Acknowledged in one or both of the following areas:*

**Demonstration of strong leadership abilities:** *Directing individual operations contributors and multi-functional teams through at least three significant end-to-end projects that are widely recognized as contributing to AT&T's marketplace position, its financial success or the AT&T Brand*

***Holding extraordinary operational credentials:*** *Representing AT&T and providing notable leadership and contributions that demonstrate operational depth in technical forums, including professional and industry associations, university activities, and standards bodies."*

The above text speaks quite specifically to operational and technical contributions and their impact to AT&T. The committee usually takes a broad view of operational and technical contributions. But success in an executive position unrelated to operations and technology will not carry much weight. Think carefully before devoting precious nomination text to such activity.

### ***Avoid platitudes and do not spend your page budget on evident claims or meta-discussions***

One obnoxious example is "*This nomination is a no-brainer*". It may be a no-brainer for the nominator (or endorser), but no nomination is a no-brainer for the committee. Let the evidence show that the nomination is a no-brainer. Don't paraphrase the CV of the candidate.

### ***Do not assume the committee is familiar with the candidate's operational/technical area***

A committee of a few people cannot possibly represent all operational and technical areas, and the committee member most familiar with the candidate may have a conflict. Therefore, it is essential to explain why an achievement is important. "She implemented system xxx" is not useful without an explanation of how broadly the system is used.

### ***Provide evidence of accomplishment that is most relevant to the type of accomplishment***

Accomplishments are meaningful if they have a visible impact. The nature of the impact can be different for different types of accomplishments. If the achievements are in applied research, the impact would be in the use of the developed technology; tangible artifacts could be more important than citations. If the achievement is to the computer and communication industry, then the impact would be industrial success, with products or services as evidence of impact. If the achievement is in the area of operational efficiency, then the impact would be in level of adoption and quantification of efficiency achieved. Of course, these are not hard-set rules,

and many caveats apply: for example, the commercial success of a product or service is only weakly correlated to its technical quality.

## ***Speak of the past, not of the future***

Fellows and Medalists are selected for their actual accomplishments, not for their potential accomplishments in the future. The nomination and the endorsements should focus on the impact the operational/technical work has had so far, not on the impact it is likely to have in the future.

## ***Select the endorsers carefully***

One is naturally tempted to pick the most senior managers that are willing to write an endorsement. Most will be diligent in doing so. However, some will write an endorsement that sounds like the "*Model of a Letter of Recommendation of a person you are unacquainted with*" that Benjamin Franklin once composed (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-23-02-0365>). Senior managers are busy people and, with the best intentions in the world, time pressure may result in pro-forma, weak endorsements. This is particularly likely if the senior manager is not already deeply familiar with the candidate's work.

Endorsements are more convincing when they come from people who work in the candidate's field of operational/technical specialty and/or have made use of the candidate's work. If the candidate created a technology, having at least one of the users of the technology as an endorser is recommended. On the other hand, endorsers from the same organization that are not closely connected to the candidate's work are discouraged, as are endorsers who have an obligation to the candidate (e.g., current supervisor). Carefully weigh the trade-off between the familiarity of endorsers with the candidate and their perceived objectivity; and between the familiarity of the endorsers with the candidate and the breadth and diversity of the organizations they represent collectively. If one cannot find endorsers that balance well these conflicting requirements, it is likely that the candidacy is premature.

Good nominations often use endorsers that can testify to the importance of different contributions; one might focus on continuous contributions, another on different aspects of the technical contributions. The right mix will depend on the types of contributions and their relative importance.

While the candidate's advice is important in selecting the endorsers, it is better that the endorsers be approached by the nominator: It will be easier for potential endorsers to say no if they are approached by the nominator, rather than by the candidate; a straight no is preferable to a tepid endorsement.

## ***Write meaningful endorsements***

A one-sentence endorsement such as "I believe this candidate merits fellow status" is poison, even if it comes from a very senior manager. Don't agree to provide an endorsement if there is a risk you might not be able to say more; don't choose an endorser you suspect may be content with a one-sentence endorsement. Substantive, thoughtful, convincing endorsements will provide enough detail for credibility.

There is no point repeating text that appears in the nomination – this is not new information. The endorsement is a "personal assessment of the candidate's operational/technical impact". Endorsers should explain why they believe the impact is important enough to merit recognition with award status. Ideally, this explanation is distinct from or expands upon the explanation provided in the nomination. If it is not obvious why the endorser is able to assess the quality of the candidate's contribution, then a short explanation to that effect will be useful.

Please remember: An endorsement of the form "I am very important and trust me on this one" is likely to do more harm than good.