

Career development workshop

Your PhD and beyond

University of Bath, 1 April 2004

Gradline Editor Jane Westwell focuses on careers in this issue, offering advice from UK Next Wave's Careers Doctor, Sara Shinton and profiling a job in science communication.

Postgrads and postdocs attending the recent SGM meeting at Bath were able to hone their personal skills by attending an evening workshop organized by Jane Westwell. Council Member Hilary Lappin-Scott chaired the session, a highly interactive one led by professional career consultants Andrew Bottomley and Sara Shinton. The first talk was on presentation skills and included 'volunteers' from the audience demonstrating speakers' strengths and weaknesses. This was followed by a session on CV writing (see below) and concluded with some career planning tips. At the end John Peberdy enthused the audience with a brief run-down on the Biotechnology YES competition, which provides a good deal of training in personal development for entrants. After all the hard work it was time for a buffet supper, a glass or two of wine and the chance to browse around displays by recruiters SRG, SGM, UKGRAD, Biotechnology YES and Science's Next Wave. SGM is grateful for their support.

Career Planning: Writing Your CV

■ Sara Shinton

My first visit to an SGM Meeting was extremely enjoyable and I'd like to start by thanking everyone who came to the Career Development workshop or the CV clinic I ran. For those of you who were unable to attend, I hope that by summarizing some key points and resources which I regularly refer to, I can help you begin your own career planning as well.

I must also thank Science's Next Wave for sponsoring my attendance. As Next Wave's 'CareerDoctor' I write a monthly column addressing individual career queries and concerns, so if you don't find the advice you are looking for in this article, why not email me (career doctor@science-int.co.uk) and I'll try to address it in future?

During the SGM workshop I presented the golden rules for CV writing (you can also take a look at the slides on my website www.shintonconsulting.com/sara/downloads.html until 1 August):

First impressions

Whenever I look at a CV, I hope I'll be able to pick up from it what kind of work its author is looking for. The way in which academic research is described often gives me the greatest clue. If the description is very technical and makes no attempt to engage the non-specialist, I'll assume that this CV is aimed at relevant research posts. If there is little evidence of generic or transferable skills or additional interests, simply a list of conferences, publications and technical skills, I'll then assume this post is in the academic sector, where the main emphasis is on research expertise and impact. If you're planning to leave academia, is your CV painting the right picture?

Visual impact

Although my years as a bench scientist are long gone, one of the many research skills that I continue to utilize

is giving information visual impact – something I learnt when producing posters for conferences. CVs are not so different from posters – they need clear navigation, easy-to-read fonts and a balance between information and 'white space' so as not to overwhelm the reader. The jury is out on whether to include photographs, but they can be very useful in speculative applications if you have previously met the person receiving the CV. Make sure it is appropriate – not a holiday snap or one obviously taken in your preferred hostelry.

Balancing your skills

Try to relate the amount of space you give to each element on your CV to its relevance to the job. There's no need to list every single undergraduate module or have a list of every scientific technique you've ever used – focus on the skills and experience that the employer is looking for.

Presenting your research

A standard rule is that CVs should be 2 pages long, although I frequently tell researchers to bend this rule a little by using an appendix to describe their work in greater length. This means that anyone who is not a specialist can focus on the CV, where they will find details of qualifications, skills and experience. Fellow researchers can focus on the appendix, which can include full details of publications, conferences, any funding awarded and an outline of your research strategies and aims for future work. You can also pull together several research projects into a coherent story, rather than breaking them up in a career history. Don't be afraid to use schematics or diagrams in an appendix if this is the most effective way to communicate your science, but don't get carried away as your appendix will ideally only be a single page.

Even with an appendix, the main body of the CV should still include a brief summary of your research, not just the title. I like to suggest researchers focus on aims and achievements and have written example CVs (see www.grad.ac.uk/2_2_5_2.jsp).

Postgrads and postdocs – Still chance to be entrepreneurial

The Biotechnology YES and BioScience YES Competitions for 2004 have now been launched so now is the time get organized and submit your team. Visit www.biotechnologyyes.co.uk or, if you are working in a Yorkshire University www.bioscience.co.uk and register NOW.

Attention to detail

Anyone who regularly looks at CVs will urge you to strive for perfection in the presentation of your application. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors are likely to eliminate your CV from the shortlist. Covering letters referring to the wrong company or position are also common, having been adapted from applications for different jobs. Also ensure that you include dates, names of employers and general locations (not full addresses) when describing your background. It can be

difficult to spot obvious mistakes in your own writing, which brings me neatly to my final point!

Feedback

All of you have access to expert advice. I would urge you to make the most of your university careers service. Try to talk to an adviser who knows something about scientific or research careers, but if they can't answer very specific questions, remember that the SGM and Next Wave websites carry a wealth of relevant information.

■ **Sara Shinton is a freelance careers consultant and worked with UK GRAD to develop the careers-focused GRADschool.**

<http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/uk>
<http://www.shintonconsulting.com/>

Careers help from SGM

The SGM's dedicated careers website is at www.biocareers.org.uk and we can also answer individual queries (within reason!) if you email careers@sgm.ac.uk. A range of job profiles is on the Biocareers site. If you would like to see your career path in print or on-screen, then let us know.

Don't miss the postgrad event at next year's spring meeting at Heriot-Watt University. It will try to help you to make a success of your PhD with sessions on *Managing Your Supervisor*, *Writing Up* and *Surviving Your Viva*. As usual the workshop will be followed by drinks and a buffet. Keep an eye on the website or these pages for details.

A job in... Science Communication

■ Profile

Name Emma Southern

Age 30

Present Occupation

Deputy, Corporate Affairs; Babraham Institute, Cambridge

Previous Employment

Nov 00–July 03:

Communications Manager, Astex Technology, Cambridge

Oct 99–Oct 00: *R&D Scientist, IDEXX Genera, Newmarket*

May 96–Sep 96: *Microbiologist, Anglian Water, Norwich*

Oct 95–Mar 96: *Teacher of English, Moonil Language School, Seoul*

Education

PhD, John Innes Centre, *The role of sigma54 region II in transcriptional regulation*

Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Bell Language School, Norwich

BSc, University of East Anglia, *Biological Sciences*



Q *What prompted your move into the Biotech sector after your PhD?*

I didn't feel my strengths lay in academic research. I wasn't completely sure that research in the commercial world would suit me either; however, my first job offered more than benchwork alone. It was also in an ideal geographical location for me at the time. In the end, the job was a 'stepping-stone' into my communications role at Astex. To be honest, I didn't think to look for a science communication job in an academic environment immediately after my PhD – at that time, I hadn't really decided this was the career for me.

Q *How did you find the transition from lab-based to administrative work?*

Thankfully, I found it relatively easy. My first job (as an R&D Scientist) was practical science, but was mainly computer-based. It was a small company, so there were far fewer people around, and initially I missed the busy lab environment and 'hands-on' aspect of my previous lab work. My next role was wholly office-based. But I was working on a range of different projects, and with a wide variety of people (senior management, graphic designers, lab scientists, public-relations consultants), so I was never in one place – physically or mentally – for very long! I had always enjoyed the 'administrative' side of my PhD – reading papers, writing reports and presentations, even writing my thesis (!) – so I was content to continue this type of work.

Q *What advice can you offer people looking for a similar career?*

Science communication is a popular area of work, so competition for certain jobs can be fierce. But the skills you have are applicable in a number of different environments – public relations for a scientific company, an agency or an academic institute, teaching, medical writing, science demonstrating at museums, science journalism or editing, working with schools, presenting to the public – so it's worth keeping an open mind about where you want to work. Try a few things out first: helping with open days, visiting schools, writing for an in-house publication, for example. You could opt to study for a qualification in science communication – a few places in the UK offer short courses or Masters' degrees. These may help you to refine your skills, but if you already have a sound science background and an aptitude in communicating science to a range of audiences, I think

the best option is to put your skills into practice whenever you can.

Q *Why did you move to the Babraham?*

At Astex I learned all about corporate communication and gained a great deal of experience. Obviously Astex, as a private biotech company, has specific audiences – its investors, potential collaborators and other biotechs, for example. After a while, I decided that I would like the opportunity to communicate science to different audiences, including the public. Hence my move to the Babraham Institute, an educational charity carrying out scientific research to inform the biomedical and pharmaceutical sectors. Audiences include the

local community, funding bodies and other research establishments. Interaction with schools is a significant part of the communications programme.

Q *What does your current job involve?*

I act as a press officer, helping to publicize the scientific achievements of the Institute, and am responsible for the school liaison programme, in which we link scientists with local schools to aid science teaching in the classroom. I also have the chance to visit schools myself. The design and maintenance of the Institute's internal and external websites, and also the production of printed publications are under my care. I also liaise with the local community, to keep them informed about developments at the Institute. Additionally, I have a 'corporate communications' role with Babraham Bioscience Technologies Ltd (the wholly-owned trading subsidiary of the Institute) involving similar press and publicity activities. And then anything else that falls under the remit of the Corporate Affairs group – I enjoy the variety!

Further information

- The Babraham Institute (www.babraham.bbsrc.ac.uk)
- STMPRA (www.stmpr.org.uk) offers practical advice for science communicators and a links page
- The Association of British Science Writers website (www.absw.org.uk) lists science communication courses, useful links and includes the downloadable document *So you want to be a science writer?*
- SGM offers small grants to support members planning science communication and outreach projects. Further information and application forms are available from the SGM Grants web pages www.sgm.ac.uk/grants/df.cfm