Description

It used to be so easy to plan. Discover your love for science at a young age, work through all the math and science courses to find the area you like the best, work hard through your undergraduate and graduate studies, and finally embark on the Ph.D. that you know will lock in that research career that you were meant to have. You work even harder, deliver some high quality and possibly even innovative research, and earn a well-deserved doctorate. A couple of short-term post-doc research assignments later, you're in with a job that puts you on track to a tenured position or your own research lab. This is commitment of the highest caliber.

A Question of Cost

Unfortunately, that commitment doesn't always count for much when departmental budgets come under scrutiny. If there's a way to get the same work done at a lower labor cost—an overseas subcontractor or a couple of trainee post-doc researchers under the supervision of a senior researcher—the budget line for the position you are pursuing can be cut in an instant. In a 2012 article, the *Washington Post* noted that the unemployment rate among chemists stood at 4.6%, its' highest rate in 40 years. For young chemists, the picture was even more depressing, with just 38% of new Ph.D.'s finding employment in their chosen field. This situation hasn't improved.

The Declining Value of What You Know

The old maxim of "It's not what you know, it's *who* you know," has never been more true than the current job market for research scientists. In a job market where Ph.D. graduates are now lingering in post-doctoral positions for five years or more rather than paying their dues for a couple of years and moving on, it is very difficult to find a position through the traditional recruitment process. This places an additional burden on young researchers struggling to balance their work responsibilities with the pressure to publish and the need to cover their living expenses. Networking takes time and requires constant activity. Reaching out to anyone you know, and anyone they might know to get as up-to-date a picture as possible of employment opportunities before positions are posted and flooded with resumes can be a full-time job in itself. The more committed you are to a specific niche and a specific geographical location, the tougher that search will be. If you go one step further and commit to a position with a specific company or on a specific project, you could be stuck in a holding pattern for months, and that's assuming you would even get an interview. In 2014, a National Public Radio (NPR) report estimated that only 15% of some 40,000 post-doc researchers would find tenure-track positions.

Thinking Outside the Box

The reality of the current job market is no doubt frustrating for research professionals who have committed a decade to their studies and, for some, decades more in the development of an impressive work history. Coming to terms with the prospect of walking away from that can be tough. For some, the financial realities of life can lead to adjunct teaching roles and part-time or temporary positions as they attempt to hold-on until the market recovers. Unfortunately, in many fields the positions that have been

cut in the name of fiscal responsibility may never return. For younger researchers, the prospect of positions in completely different fields can offer gainful and often lucrative employment. In August 2014, a Wall Street Journal article featured several young scientists who had put their research skills to use in markedly different careers. Chris Farrell, for example, “spent five years mining data from a giant particle accelerator [for his Ph.D. in astrophysics]. Now he spends his days analyzing ratings for Yelp Inc.’s online business review site.” Such a dramatic career shift may not appeal to everyone, but it at least serves to remind us that there are always options.

Category

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