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## Introduction

Welcome to the 'Best of the Vitae research staff blog', celebrating two years of growing popularity and informative and entertaining discussions.

[www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog)

In 2009, the year the blog was launched, there were 85 posts. In 2010 there were 234 articles, and in the first ten months of 2011 there were already over 200 posts, with more activity expected to be generated following the research staff conference in November. From the outset, the standard of writing has been very high and the breadth of topics covered wide.

A group of five core contributors provide most of the writing. They were selected to represent the five main disciplines in research – arts and humanities, biomedical sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences and engineering, and social sciences. The makeup of the group changes as contributors move on.

How this selection came about

The editors compiled a shortlist of 30 posts according to the number of page views and number of comments, taking into account representation of different authors and the editors' personal preferences. Readers of the blog were invited to vote for their favourite posts, which informed the selection that follows. Nine posts were chosen to tie in with the research staff theme of writing posts around nine subjects (for example, nine reasons, nine ways.)

These posts provide a taster of the quality and variety you will find on the Vitae research staff blog and we hope it will enthrall you to join in, whether reading, commenting or posting.

[www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rsblog)

Please note that the views expressed by individuals in posts are personal and do not necessarily represent those of Vitae.

For more information about the range of resources provided for research staff, visit the research staff pages of the Vitae.

[www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaff](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchstaff)

About Vitae

Vitae is the national organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of postgraduate researchers and research staff in higher education institutions and research institutes. We play a major role in the drive for high-level skills and innovation and in the UK's goal to produce world class researchers. Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers. Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK), managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities.

## Just don't call me a post-doc

**Sarah Davies (7 October 2009)**

This post was also posted at the opening of the blog and was part of Sarah's application to become a core contributor to the blog.

**I'm a little bit obsessed with the fact that I appear to look younger than I am. After spending my teenage years successfully getting served alcohol, retribution has caught up with me: in my thirtieth year, I get IDed buying wine at the supermarket and mistaken for an undergrad on campus.**

**Now, I know I should be flattered. I seem to have hit 18 on my thirteenth birthday and not aged since. But it does get a little bit wearing – and maybe this ties in to another obsession of mine.**

**I really don't like being called a post-doc.**

**If asked I tell people I'm a researcher – it's what I do, after all. But often the label gets applied to me whether I like it or not: oh, they say, a post-doc researcher. It's taken me some thinking to work out just why it bugs me so much.**

**I find it patronising. The assumption is that you're post something – your PhD – but very much pre something else – presumably the giddy heights of a lectureship. It places you halfway up a scale which everyone is assumed to be eager to ascend. You're better than a student, but not as good as 'real' academic staff.**

**But this just isn't my experience. Why shouldn't research be a career, rather than something you do until you get a permanent contract and are faced with the dubious joys of teaching? Why should it be situated 'post' one thing and 'pre' another?**

**I'm quite prepared to admit I may be being over-sensitive here. I'd be interested in what**

**other people think: is the term annoying, or just descriptive?**

**In the meantime, though, just call me a researcher. And, if I've left my ID at home, buy me a drink.**

### Comments

#### Angela Mortier

In the giddy world of academic jargon, it's hard to imagine everybody being happy with a single solution to the job-title problem. However, when I contact the insurance company to renew my car insurance I always take pains to record myself as a 'scientific researcher' to reduce my premiums :) To me, getting credit for what you do is more important than what you are called.

#### Richard Mead

Post-Doc and Proud (do you think a T-Shirt would sell?) Apparently we are all 'Career Development Fellows' now anyway (see other thread) so this article is of historic interest only. ;) For what its worth I describe myself as 'Research Scientist' also when speaking to the uninitiated.

#### Elizabeth Dodson

**I don't think I have ever been referred to as a Post-Doc. I'm not sure whether that should make me happy or sad lol.**

#### Dave Filipovic-Carter

I'm really keen to see this thread unfold. Just about every training session I lead for non-PhD, non-lecturer, research staff begins with the 'job title discussion'. It is a sad indictment of the lot of most researchers that the debate needs to occur. It always leads me to feel that there is an institutionalised (Yikes - US English spell-checker...) lack of value/respect for the positions, irrespective of individuals. And as for CDFs - presumably just another fadish name that will slowly fade..?

#### Sarah Davies

I have to say 'CDF' is new to me. I'm starting to wonder whether this is to a degree institution/discipline specific? I'm a social scientist, and the 'post-doc' position - ie a project

researcher on a fixed term contract - doesn't seem to be such a standard career path as it is in natural science. My guess is that in the arts, it's more unusual again. Plus institutions will, I guess, try and impose some homogeneity across particular job titles - at mine we have 'research associates' (who generally have a PhD) and 'research fellows' (who are not necessarily driven by project work). It's a minefield...

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

I work at a research institute within a university and a large proportion of the research team do not have PhDs. For my position, although a PhD was desirable, it was not essential - therefore it has never been referred to as a post-doc. We do a lot of field work, and experience is valued very highly, therefore some of the highest positions are held by people without doctorates. I went to a talk recently which was meant to be focused on building a research community, but the speaker focused entirely on post-docs. Maybe this is just semantics, but it felt like researchers without PhDs were being unfairly excluded. We also use "research associate" and "research fellow", but I am very aware that the definition of these roles varies between institutions (particularly research fellow - which can denote a very senior role, or a fairly junior one). We also use "research assistant". I too had never heard of CDFs before this thread! It would perhaps be useful to see more consistency in the use of titles across different institutions...?

### **Tennie Videler**

This is why we named this a 'research staff blog' rather than a 'postdoc blog'. Coming from a physical science background the two terms seemed pretty synonymous but I am now aware that they really are not! Again, terminology might be discipline specific, but I was under the impression that a career development fellow was a particular type of fellowship one might get from research councils and other funding bodies?

### **Matthew Salois**

I too have only heard the term CDF only recently and that was in regards to a specific fellowship

from the MRC (like Tennie stated). I am in the social sciences (economics to be specific) and the term post-doc is not quite the "dirty" word that it seems to be in the physical sciences. Increasingly, with a larger number of PhD graduates chasing fewer available university positions, the post-doc has become a rather common career stop in economics. However, there is the expectation that you do not remain a post-doc any more than a few years. Of course, a permanent tenure-track position (e.g. lecturer or assistant professor) is the more attractive job no matter what your scientific discipline. Still, I believe the focus should be less on the job-title and more on the prospects of the job for future career development. I would much prefer to be a post-doc for a university with a great reputation in teaching and research than a lecturer or assistant professor with a university that only has a so-so reputation.

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

But this goes back to what I believe was one of the central themes of Sarah's post - that some people aspire to make a career out of research and it can be very frustrating when it is so often assumed to be a stop-gap. Although the structured career progression and job security of a lectureship is appealing, this is an entirely different job needing a very different skill set. There are of course many people who both teach and do research well. There are also some exceptional researchers who have no aptitude for teaching, and some exceptional teachers who have no aptitude for research. I find it a strange assumption that having a good publication record would make a person good at engaging with students. It is sad therefore that many researchers see lectureships as the only way to get security and career development even if they have no personal aspiration to teach...

### **George Whale**

I agree. I like to refer to myself as a professional researcher. I have no interest in becoming a lecturer because I'm not very good at it. I do not take kindly to being patronised by academics.

## George Whale

@Elizabeth Dodson: 'We also use "research associate" and "research fellow", but I am very aware that the definition of these roles varies between institutions (particularly research fellow - which can denote a very senior role, or a fairly junior one). We also use "research assistant". I feel strongly that job titles need to be standardized if we are serious about providing meaningful career paths for contract researchers. In academia, everybody understands Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Principal Lecturer and the differences between them, so why not a similar hierarchy of Research Assistant, Research Fellow and Principal Researcher, with corresponding levels of experience/qualification, pay, responsibility and seniority, consistent across institutions? During my job hunting of the past few years, I have come across a plethora of titles for junior to mid-range research positions, including Junior Researcher, Senior Researcher, Postdoctoral Researcher, Research Officer, Research Associate and Research Fellow. Only by looking at the salaries do you get an idea of what they really are, and of course even that method is unreliable. My favourite job title so far was for a bog-standard print technician post at a well-known university, described in the advert as Print Research Laboratory Manager. I kid you not.

## Martin Whittle

The longer you stay in Universities as a researcher and the further behind you leave that thesis that caused so much grief the more you will see post-doc as patronising. It's a job title that does not recognise experience and seems to be having a resurgence to me. Or maybe it depends on department. I have worked in several (taking pay-cuts back down the scale on each move!) and I think that the term has been used more in engineering and science than it was in information studies (where RA was used more). New doctorates are, of course, quite pleased to be called "post"; which is how it sticks.

## Matthew Salois

Hi Martin, yes I agree the title can sound patronising at times. Maybe that's why Sarah and others just prefer to be called "researcher". It is

after all what we do, well most of the time anyway! As Sarah has also explained, this is sometimes not the case! (See her recent post: <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/156431-273041/Why-researchers-cant-research.html>)

## Simon Smith

This got me wondering whether the term 'post-doc' is peculiar to the English language, as researchers don't go by this name in the few other languages I know. In French the term 'chercheur' is the generic term used, and in fact the French wikipedia entry on researchers seems bemused about the English term post-doc, observing (with impeccable logic) that: "le qualificatif étant peu pertinent car tout poste de chercheur, hors doctorant, peut être évidemment qualifié de « post-doctoral »" (loosely translated, 'what a meaningless term, since every research post up to professor could evidently be called a 'post-doc!') <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chercheur>

## Matthew Salois

Nice job on the translation, Simon! How many languages do you speak, by the way? You've peaked my interest!!!

## Sarah Davies

Cultural differences are certainly key on this - Matthew and I have already had some exchanges about the fact that in the US, the 'post-doc' is the only position between the PhD and a faculty post (so if you say you're a 'researcher', people get confused). Whereas I've never heard my colleagues in continental Europe use the term...

## Simon Smith

Yes, there are strong cultural differences, even within Europe. In Czech and Slovak (the other languages I speak fluently, Matthew) people chuckle sometimes if I (a social scientist) describe myself as a researcher (výzkumník), because that's really a term associated with lab research. A social scientist would normally give their professional field if asked what they do. But there's certainly no equivalent of the term post-doc either!

## [The coffee club theory of departmental sociability](#)

**Hannah Dee (13 January 2010)**

This is a fantastic example of the lighter side of the blog but also of the value of the banter that ensues.

**There seem to be three types of coffee system in university departments. Type one, is a completely top-down system, in which a central body maintains a machine that you have to put money in for a cuppa; sometimes there's an electronic payment system, offering discounts to staff, but if the coffee runs out or the machine breaks down you've had it. In type two places there are coffee clubs, where staff chip in and share the cost of purchase, but it's generally informal. If the coffee runs out, someone goes and gets some more. And then there's the third kind of system, which isn't really a system at all. Each individual has a pot of instant on their desk - if your pot runs out, you get your own replacement.**

**In my (limited) experience, the type of coffee system is a good predictor of departmental sociability. Type one departments have some organised events (Christmas parties, maybe a departmental hike or awayday). Type two departments are more likely to have informal social stuff (the Friday night pub run, the friendly 5-a-side match, the walking clubs). Type three departments do have things going on, but you have to talk to the right people to find them. I'm a fan of type two departments, myself. I think that socialising with colleagues is good, and I think that a lot of staff development can happen outside of the formal setting. I've learned all sorts of things in pubs, on departmental hikes, or watching the staff-student cricket match.**

**So who buys the coffee in your department? Does my theory hold up? If it does, I think I might have come up with another question to ask at job interviews...**

## Comments

**Pam Wain**

Hmm -- I remember the time the departmental secretaries who ran the coffee club decided to quietly put us all on decaff. We didn't appreciate it.

**Simon Smith**

Earlier this week I attended a conference about interdisciplinarity. One of the speakers directs a Research Centre on climate change, which is about to move into new premises. He explained, only half in jest, that one of the reasons he was looking forward to this was that the new building is to have a single, centrally-positioned coffee bar, with the intention of encouraging the natural scientists and the social scientists who belong to the Centre to socialise with each other. But perhaps he is being naive to think that coffee can really break down the walls between deep-set disciplinary cultures! Can anyone cite any precedents?

**Matthew Salois**

My department has a "fix your own" coffee approach (type 3?), but we do usually have coffee together every morning (though I usually drink tea). In addition, we have regular social events like Christmas parties, Spring BBQs, special occasion dinners (e.g., a new lecturer being hired) and a trip to the pub typically every Friday. I am not sure if this fits in with your theory, but I do find the social aspect of morning coffee valuable. I don't think coffee can break down the walls between and within departments, but I do think it is a good indicator of the walls that may exist. I may add this question to my list of interview questions too!

**Tennie Videler**

Very interesting point! I used to work in an institute which held its canteen in high esteem- it was on the top floor, with generous space and everyone made use of it. Talking to people in other groups was very much encouraged, with senior academics regularly joining random groups. Skipping coffee or lunch was frowned upon. I think it worked to encourage

collaborations. We had a great christmas party every year but apart from that it was no more sociable than other places I worked. In the fix your own place I worked in coffee breaks were not all that sociable. I have also experienced a hybrid between fix your own and a canteen (the canteen had funny opening hours to allow its staff breaks at say lunch) which was otherwise a type II place (pub on a Friday). So not sure the correlation holds up all the time. My first experience of office coffee outside academia is very positive: we have a fabulous coffee machine and as we hotdesk, making coffee for that day's neighbours is a real bonding ritual..... Cuppa, anyone?

### **Sarah Davies**

Simon - I used to be in an interdisciplinary department which provided free tea and coffee for all its staff, in a common room, twice a day so as to encourage cross-fertilisation and general friendliness. Inevitably, the technical and administrative staff, the research students, and the physical and social science lecturers would all sit in separate corners...

### **Nick Dickens**

I like the theory - although I don't agree with it. I think it might be strongly influenced by layout of the buildings, etc (let's call it departmental geography). We are mostly a type 3 with our own pots, although some rooms are type 2, yet are a very sociable with both type 1 and type 2 events. I think this is down to the layout of the department - it is on 2 floors of a long, thin building. Each divided into offices of 1-6 people. These all run in a line on one side of the building, so we are separated and this is why individuals have their own coffee - or share within rooms. There is also a central machine but it is 4 floors down, so only really used at lunch/official break times. I used to be in a more open-plan type office, with a type 2 coffee club, yet this was definitely a more clique-based type 3 social environment...which is why I think your model needs to take into account departmental geography. But I like the idea.

### **Martyn Rittman**

About a year ago I moved from a department with a big, fully funded, recently refurbished coffee room to one with an unused, basement room with a couple of old, cruddy kettles. For me it made a big difference to the feel of the department and in the new place it seems people are much less open - even when it comes to letting 'outsiders' use their group's equipment. Two days ago I got an email saying the coffee room will be refurbished to encourage informal contact between academics. I think this is a great idea and I really hope it's used, rather than everyone continuing to hide in their offices with their own kettles.

### **Dan Black**

I think that when it comes to sociability in departments there are two factors: the type of social events and the amount. I think I would vaguely agree with your hypothesis, but I think it is a predictor of the type of social event. I have been in a department with full provision of coffee, but was rather anti-social (due, I think, to geographical reasons). I also think there is a tendency (in my experience) for people in type 2 departments to know each other a little better than usual.

### **Hannah Dee**

It seems that my theory does not account for the evidence! Do you think it is worth adapting or amending it to take into account geographical features and coffee quality, or should I abandon it?

### **Sarah Davies**

No, take it forward and - in true scientific style - amend the theory to fit the additional evidence. It seems - given the number of comments on this thread - that this is an issue dear to many of our hearts. It might be an interesting question for any further surveys on research staff experiences?

## 9 ways to tailor your CV

### Tennie Videler (22 March 2010)

This is the only example of the 9 theme that has pervaded the RS blog which has made it into this selection of 9 posts. It is also a great example of how the ensuing conversation can go off on a different tangent from the original post....

**I couldn't think of 9 reasons to... so have adapted this theme to listing 9 ways to tailor your CV.**

**On this forum we have discussed how important it is to tailor your covering letter and CV to every post you apply for. How do you?**

**1. For lots of advice on creating an effective CV, visit the Vitae website. The first distinction to make is whether you are applying for an academic and non-academic position. The links post to example CVs, where CVs of the same person have been tailored to different CV styles to give you an idea.**

**2. Put yourself in the recruiters' shoes and understand how they shortlist. On the 'researcher careers in the recession' part of the Vitae website Shiona Llewellyn wrote about how recruiters select people for their shortlist. This provides some great dos and donts.**

**3. Check the website of the employer you are applying for to get a feel for what is important to them.**

**4. Think about your skills. It is really important not to assume that employers will fill in any gaps or will realise what skills you have because of the fact that you have a doctorate or do research for a living. This is especially true for non-academic employers. And thinking that you will inform the recruiters of some impressive experience at interview may well be an expensive mistake as it may mean you do not make it to interview....**

**5. Chris's suggestion of using the employer's formulation in the job description to describe your skills seems pretty spot on. They will then not have to translate the skills that you describe to those they have specified. It should also mean you cover everything they are looking for.**

**6. If you feel there may be gaps in your skills/ attributes, think of skills you have gained outside of your research or think laterally about your research. An obvious example may be 'customer awareness'. Have you had any summer or part-time jobs with customer interaction? Or are there any people involved in your research you might describe as customers?**

**7. Supply evidence of any skills you list. Anyone can say they have a talent for say fund raising- when, what for, how much?**

**8. How much experience does the organisation you are applying to have in hiring researchers? This is worth finding out as research published earlier this year by Vitae suggests that the more experience an employer has of recruiting researchers the more they know about the skills associated with completing a doctorate. In addition they will rate these skills higher in doctoral graduates. The less experience they have the harder you will have to work to convince them of your strengths as you are likely to be directly competing with recent graduates.**

**9. Tailor your covering letter (okay, so I had to come up with 9...).**

**Anyone else any tips?**

### Comments

#### **Sarah Davies**

This is on a fairly superficial level, but I really think having a clear layout and presentation is essential. If you can't present the key points of your academic life in a way that can be taken in by someone glancing briefly at your CV, then it doesn't bode well for your ability to write well and present research generally (something which is pretty essential for most research jobs)...

### **George Whale**

The above are useful tips, and there's no escaping the fact that a thorough application requires a great deal of work. On employers recognizing the value of Ph.D.s, a careers advisor recently suggested to me that I remove my academic qualifications from my CV because they might "frighten" some employers!

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

Oh the joy of being 'over-qualified' for some jobs. I had a discussion with a colleague the other week who is considering doing a PhD alongside their current research post. They said something along the lines of, "At least i can delete it from my CV without having a gap in my career history if I think it will be a hindrance for some jobs". I found it quite sad that after so much work, in some circumstances a PhD can be considered a burden. My main CV tip would be: Don't write Curriculum Vitae at the top of your CV! So many people do it and its an unnecessary waste of space - as a CV should be clear enough for any potential employer to immediately recognise what it is.

### **Sarah Davies**

I don't get invited to interview because I'm over-qualified. That's my story and I'm sticking to it... ;-)

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

But then I have seen first hand where applications of the "overqualified" are thrown out, because they 'would probably be looking for better jobs and wouldn't stay very long'. I have wondered whether, if it was ever necessary, I would still get interviews for the types of job that I had before doing my PhD... Hopefully I won't need to test this anytime soon :-)

### **Hannah Dee**

So how do I hide a 4 year PhD in my (otherwise completely unbroken) employment history?  
Signed on? Went backpacking? Became a nun?  
Spent a while at her majesty's pleasure?

### **Tennie Videler**

In Holland, and in other countries in Europe you'd be an employee while doing a PhD....

### **Blanka Sengerová**

So how do I hide a 4 year PhD in my (otherwise completely unbroken) employment history? Re-

write as "researcher" at whatever university you were doing your PhD at? But I certainly hope not to have to hide a PhD\* at any point in my future career - if they can't accept the fact that I have a PhD and it has helped my personal development then I probably don't want to work for them anyway! :o) \* Now for the interesting question, how many of you went through changing your title to Dr on the credit/bank cards when you got your certificate??

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

Changing my bank card was one of the first things I did - and I was very disappointed that they didn't want any proof at all - so i could have had Dr on my card all along! For me being able to change my title was quite a momentous thing as I don't like to be defined by my marital status i.e. Miss, Mrs or Ms. I was also told by a friend that there is an added security benefit - in that someone was caught fraudulently trying to use a copy of their credit card - when staff at the shop thought the teenager in question looked far too young to be a doctor :-)

### **Matthew Salois**

I've had to actually remove some publications from my CV depending on the position I was applying for. I have found that in some interviews, if they see a publication in a journal they think is irrelevant to the post, I get unfairly judged as not being a "right" fit for the job.

### **Sarah Davies**

That's interesting, Matthew, as I've always been told that, at early career stage, the more publications the better, with the emphasis on less on what they're in. Did you get that as feedback on your CV? Or after an interview?

### **Tennie Videler**

I am sorry that people are feeling the need to hide that they have doctorates! I agree that there is still ignorance among employers about what a doctorate entails. The good news is that colleagues here at Vitae are working to educate them (the bad news is that this is a slow process). In the meantime it is up to us to show what rounded, skilled and multi-faceted people we are. And we need to show it in our covering letters and CVs as otherwise we might not make it to interview. Make your covering letter really good. Explain why the job would be good for you as well as why you'd be perfect for the job. And prospective employers do want to know, to put their mind at rest if you are 'over qualified' that you won't be flitting off. Changing my title on my bank card... slightly embarrassing! I knew the lady in my local branch to chat to and she was totally excited by my upcoming viva so she had prepared all the paperwork for me to sign as soon as I saw her afterwards! And I agree it's a fantastic way out of the sexist Miss/Ms/Mrs issue. 10

## How do you make a bullet and an alien move at the same time?

**Chris Thomson (16 March 2010)**

Autobiographical, which was also shared in discussions about whether research runs in your family. What motivates researchers? Posts about what is good about our job?

I'm occasionally asked how I came to be a researcher and why I am still a researcher. To me the title of this post encapsulates this career decision for me, but perhaps needs a bit of explanation...

When I was nine or ten (around 1988-9) I started to be very interested in computers, my dad had lent his ZX Spectrum 48k to my school for their computer club, but it was requested back as I became more interested in his Amstrad computer that he now used for work. At first I was mostly interested in playing games, such as Horace Goes Skiing, and the many demos that could be obtained on tapes attached to the covers of colourful magazines aimed at my age group. But it was not long before I became interested in how they worked.

Back then I was interested in how many things worked, but in a very experimental way, I can remember happy hours unscrewing various electronic things that had broken, even attempting to unsolder resistors and capacitors. I also had an experimental chemistry set that had been provided one Christmas, but I was never interested in following the built in experiments, I just liked mixing the chemicals together to see what happened, resulting in at least one very smell concoction and something that managed to strip paint of my bedroom windowsill. The main problem was that in the end these experiments ran out of materials, and I never did work out how electronic components work.

I also began reading widely after managing to overcome the worst of my dyslexia and finding things that I wanted to read (despite my mother's best efforts early on trying many reading schemes it really did take that long for me to get going). I remember fondly the books of the illustrator and author David Macaulay, particularly *The Way Things Work* and *Unbuilding* (seriously good children's books in my opinion).

It was in this spirit of discovery that I discovered that you could make a computer do what you want. With some guidance from my dad and the tutorials inside my magazines I began to write simple computer programs. Back then the Spectrum was a fantastic computer to learn on, with a simple programming language and a forgiving interpreter that let you experiment without the fear of making a mistake and running out of stuff. Also unlike chemistry things are infinitely repeatable without the need for precision measurements. And so it was that I began my career with computing.

Of course it wasn't long before I came up against hard problems, like the one in the title. I like so many children wanted to make my own games, to be creative on my own terms. But the problem the alien and the bullet was tough, just how could you make a computer do two things at once? By this point I was beyond my dad's understanding and the tutorials in the magazines did not seem to address this specific point, so I became, a researcher, not consciously at first, but over time that inquisitive and pioneering attitude has brought me to where I am today.

Of course the journey wasn't easy; in particular my use of English still troubles me today. My teachers according to my parents always thought I would end up in a practical job. So it is perhaps something of a surprise that I have persisted in this path. I certainly don't find it all easy, but every so often I stumble upon a problem that makes it all worthwhile...

**I do wonder though, why are other people researchers, can you pin it on something back in your childhood?**

## Comments

### Sarah Davies

Thanks for this, Chris - it's always great to hear people's stories. I'm really struck by the fact that your research career seems to have begun before you were 10! It seems like the trajectory you've come along has been quite intentional - whereas in my experience many of us kind of fall in to doing research. Did you imagine yourself in a university when you were unpicking your computer? And I'm curious - are you now a computer scientist? Or did your research take you in another direction?

### Matthew Salois

Hi Chris, what a good story. I have great respect for programmers and computer scientists. I took a class on C several years back and just found it a painful and tough experience. I do program when I have to, but I am not very good at it! As for me, I never set out to be a researcher. As a young boy I can remember wanting to be a doctor. Later as a teenager, I wanted so very much to attend the US Naval Academy and work on a submarine. Not until much time had passed, and I was in college, did I decide I wanted to study economics. Even then, my goal was not to be a researcher but rather to work in the "real world" for the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. I can even remember while writing my master's thesis how much I hated doing research! But the 2001 recession forced me to stay in graduate school and obtain my PhD. Of course, I am so VERY glad I did, because I absolutely love doing research, writing papers, and presenting at conferences. But the road to where I am now was hardly pre-meditated for most of my life. By the way, I found your use of English to be perfect. Where are you from?

### Tennie Videler

Hi Chris, great post and it set me thinking. I was interested in how things worked as a child, but would be more likely to try and look it up than work it out. I loved reading and finding out things.

My other passion was art. As my father was a lecturer research was a low threshold option but what swung it for me was the combination of finding things out and being creative, allowing me to find out things noone else knew yet! Agree with Matthew your use of English is pretty perfect!

### Chris Thomson

\*Blushes\* The real issue with my English these days is the time it takes to get things down on paper, and writing in an appropriate academic style. I'm from the UK, so it is my Dyslexia (now considered very mild and I never got any extra support in school or at uni) that caused the most issues - basically because it took me so long to get reading and writing I missed out on a lot of the teaching in this area at school. My 'home' discipline is computer science/software engineering. And really on the boundary, so I've published some papers in theoretical computer science and some about software engineering methods from a human perspective. I find the theory and maths papers relatively easy to get together as you simply move through a set of facts, the softer software engineering papers are harder altogether. I publish these in empirical software engineering where there is a emphasis on quantitative results and a scientific writing style - but I have worked with a lot of qualitative data or a mixture of the two, which is kind of hard to write in the expected style! I'm now working in a business school, and currently my research is in the field of doctoral education, oddly my experience in empirical software engineering seems to be paying off as people seem to like my approach to working with data... I'll try and work on another post which describes a little of how my journey into research went, but a small taster, I certainly did not want to do research at the outset, the thought of writing a thesis when I had such problems writing initially was not something that appealed... But I also think it would be wrong to say that I have found myself here because I fell into it - I've had opportunities to do other things along the way.

### Elizabeth Dodson

Hi Chris. Found your post really interesting. We are 'of the same era' and I spent many an hour programming a Vic20 - mainly to create mindless

adventure games! Academia is not a place that I expected to end up - as I made poor A' level choices and frankly gave up on the idea of university! I switched to a brand new vocational course, which I enjoyed far more and I found a renewed interest in education - and particularly psychology, which I had never studied before. But once I came back round to the idea of academic study, I then faced the challenge of persuading universities that my vocational qualification made me a suitable degree candidate. I was offered 3 places at decent universities - which surprised even the college lecturers - and I considered myself very lucky. I loved doing my psychology degree and at that stage thought I might qualify as a clinical psychologist - so I arranged placements to give myself a head start. I ended up as a regular volunteer at a centre for adults with acquired brain injuries and found the work incredibly interesting and fulfilling. I wrote my dissertation on the importance of this service to the people who used it and found that there was so much more that I wanted to understand and to write about. I applied to stay on at my university and expand my dissertation into a PhD, exploring the consequences of brain injury and the experiences of service provision far more broadly. I couldn't have been prouder the day I got my doctorate, and wanted to do more within the field that I'd specialized in. However my eye was caught by a research post investigating road accident causation and working towards improvements in road safety. As most of the people I had interviewed for my PhD, received their brain injuries in road accidents, I felt that accident prevention would be a really worthwhile field to move into - and I've been there ever since. So as Sarah suggested is often the case - I kind of fell into research, but love the work I do and feel very privileged to have this opportunity.

### **Andy Humphrey**

Thank you for all these reminiscences! My own story was very ordinary by comparison. I got hooked on sciences at quite a young age (marine biology first, then ornithology, then chemistry) and met someone from R&D in one of the chemical companies (can't remember which one) at a careers fair at school, and decided I liked the sound of what he did. Went to university, took a chemistry degree, and had my first try at research during the 4th year of my degree. Decided I liked it, found a niche that enthralled me (in bio-organic chemistry), started applying for the Ph.D., and here I am still in research 13 years post-qualification. My specialism has taken me into a lot of different areas, from cancer research through food security to the question of why seaweed is sticky... The challenging question for me, at the moment, isn't so much how did I get here, as where I can go next... but I think that's a subject for a new blog posting altogether!

## Age discrimination in funding bodies

**Andy Humphrey (15 August 2010)**

Thoroughly researched, with lots of links, turns what could have been a lament into something useful.

**What's the most depressing thing about applying for grant funding?**

I learnt the answer to that one last year, in the hours I spent trawling funding bodies' websites for details of fellowships. The research grant that was employing me was coming to an end, I had ideas that I wanted to carry on investigating, and it seemed logical to me that a research fellowship was the way to go.

Well, it would have been, if 9 out of 10 of those fellowships hadn't contained a clause buried in the small print to say that "applicants must be within x years of submitting their Ph.D. thesis" – where x was a small integer. Small enough to exclude me from applying.

There were get-out clauses for the benefit of women who had taken career breaks to have children. Quite rightly too; anything less would have immediately made the funding bodies fall foul of sex discrimination laws. There is legislation about age discrimination as well, but it's less clear-cut, and public bodies do not have the same positive duty to fight age discrimination as they have with respect to sex, race or disability discrimination.

In an effort to see if things have changed in the last year (and perhaps in vain hope that I might find something I'm still eligible to apply for) I've done a brief survey of some of the key funding bodies' eligibility requirements for research fellowships. The results are, to put it mildly, a cause of concern.

EPSRC Postdoctoral Fellowships: "There are no nationality or age restrictions on who may apply for a Fellowship. Potential candidates should have up to but no more than three years postdoctoral research experience by

the start date of the fellowship." No age restriction? Really?!...

EPSRC Career Acceleration Fellowships:

"Candidates should be within ten years of completing their PhD with a minimum of three years post-doctoral/industrial research experience."

BBSRC David Phillips Fellowships:

"Applicants should not exceed 10 years in active postgraduate research studies and postdoctoral research employment." That's the total of postdoctoral experience plus the time taken to do the Ph.D. So not as generous as it looks...

BBSRC Institute Career Path Fellowships:

"Applicants should not exceed 10 years in active postgraduate research studies and postdoctoral research employment"

NERC seem to have the most reasonable attitude towards applicants with long research careers: "Applications are especially welcome from candidates who are not yet established within the higher education system or who are intending to use the Fellowship as a means of re-establishing themselves in the United Kingdom following a period overseas." The funding handbook, section 40, states "Some post-Ph.D. experience is an advantage when seeking a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, and typically candidates will have one to five years of postdoctoral experience". That "typically" is an important qualifier; nowhere does it state that this is either a condition of eligibility, or a particular expectation.

AHRC Fellowships scheme (early career route):

"In order to apply through the Fellowships scheme early career route, you must at the point of application be either: within eight years of the award of your PhD or equivalent professional training; or within six years of your first academic appointment." There appears to be no restriction on the wider Fellowships Scheme but this is also open to established academics with permanent contracts so one can expect the competition to be fierce. In an environment where funding decisions are often based on previous track record, one assumes that the established permanent academics are more likely to be successful.

Royal Society University Research Fellowships:

"Applicants are expected to be

at an early to mid-stage of their career. As an example, you could have had between one and three post doc positions.” Doesn’t sound too strict. But then we read: “Before completing the application form all applicants should check that they comply with the eligibility requirements outlined above. These requirements are strictly adhered to and any applicant who does not meet them will be excluded from the competition.” So are those with more than 3 postdoctoral contracts automatically excluded? Who knows?

**Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin fellowships** (specifically for candidates with a need for flexible support due to parental or other caring responsibilities): “Applicants are expected to be at an early stage of their career. As an example, applicants could have had one or two post doc positions.”

**Cancer Research UK Career Development Fellowships:** “Applicants will have at least three and no more than six years of postdoctoral research experience at the time of submitting the preliminary application.” Other CRUK Research Fellowships are only available to staff with a permanent academic post.

**Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowships:** “Applicants... should normally be under age 35 and hold an awarded doctorate or have equivalent research experience at the time of taking up the award. Applications from those aged 35 and over will be considered if they began their academic studies at a later age than is usual or if they have had a career change or break.” Other Research Fellowships are only available to staff with a permanent academic post.

For researchers who are stuck in the fixed-term contract trap, research fellowships are usually cited as the best way to bridge that near-impossible divide between postdoctoral research and a career as a permanent research-active academic. But it seems clear from this data that for those of us who have been contract researchers for any length of time, the prospects are pretty bleak. We may no longer be “early career” in the strict definition of the phrase, but we’ve had no possibilities for career advancement. Our careers are effectively stuck in “early career” even though funding bodies won’t recognise this.

**One wonders what their motivation is, in denying us access to the opportunities that they so proudly make available to recently qualified individuals. If it’s not age discrimination by the strict letter of the law, it’s surely age discrimination in practice.**

## Comments

### Hannah Dee

Hi Andy - a very well researched post here. It's true that many of these are aimed at early career researchers, and it is clear that the definition of "early career" is fairly vague. As you point out, some define it by age (with exceptions for people who've taken "worthy" breaks), some by number of years post-doctorate, some by number of years research, some by number of post-doctoral contracts. Whilst I can see the advantage of providing early-career fellowships as a leg-up for people just starting out, I find the complete absence of support for those who have research experience but who aren't still classified early-career bizarre. It seems in my field as if you have to reach escape velocity within your first or second post-doc, and if you don't, then it's the fixed-term treadmill or a leap out of academia. Given the large role that external forces play in the success or otherwise of a research project, this does seem harsh. Or maybe it's a deliberate attempt to select for "luck"?

### Tennie Videler

Hi Andy, you've hit on a huge, PERSONAL, bugbear of mine. I too found it impossible to find fellowships I was allowed to apply for after a certain amount of time post doctorate. I always found it quite discriminating against the situation I was in: I'd carried on working while my children were young, but part-time and felt very penalised for that. Funding wise I'd have been better off taking a real career break. But this is not an option financially to everyone (it certainly wasn't to me) and I loved my research. It meant, however, that I wasn't working at a pace where I could reach escape velocity (love the phrase Hannah, I'm going to be using this one!!! ) I understand the funders' motivation is to keep opportunities open for people just starting out without them being outcompeted by us oldies with track records. But I just wish there was an

alternative route of funding for those who want to pursue research for longer than whatever definition of early career that is used. So really, a recognition of research-on-its-own as a valid career.

### **Simon Smith**

Makes depressing reading for me, too, Andy;-) Have you considered the European Commission's Marie Curie fellowships? They are explicitly targeted at experienced researchers (although their definition of experienced is pretty lenient at the lower end of the scale too). The catch is you have to be prepared to move to another country... I've just applied for one (more about this later), but I mention it here simply because it was refreshing to find a scheme that seemed made to measure for researchers of our 'maturity'.

### **Sarah Davies**

Is this in part a factor of the way that the academy has changed? My sense is that until fairly recently the 5-6 year cut-off points made more sense as by this stage most post-PhD scholars would have gone into lectureships, left academia, or decided to focus on a research-only career (hence the fellowship). Now, however, the PhD-one postdoc-lectureship pattern is the exception rather than the rule, with most having to - and often wanting to - take multiple research posts before a permanent position emerges. Like the very idea that a lectureship is the norm, I think this whole system is outdated and needs rethinking to fit it better to long-term researchers...

### **Andy Humphrey**

I wonder if anyone from funding bodies ever reads this blog? It would be interesting to know if the regular contributors' opinions (and we all seem to have strong feelings about this) actually have any impact with the people who have the power to decide future policy in this area...

### **Dave Evans**

excellent, if depressing as hell for a 48 year old who is 5 years post-award....

While i still have a job (till May 2011) I i'm on my Uni's Researcher Development committee, and they are so going to be given this article to read....

### **Mashhuda Glencross**

Hi Andy,

Thanks for writing a well researched account of the eligibility restrictions for fellowships that exclude many of us from applying for our own funding. Like you, I was very frustrated by these restrictions after getting through to the final panel of an EPSRC Career Acceleration Fellowship, not getting funded and having nowhere else to turn to as I'd fallen out of range for anything else. I wrote to complain to the EPSRC about there being no fellowship schemes available to older and more experienced research staff without academic posts and had no response from them.

Kind regards

Mashhuda Glencross

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

I've been looking into fellowships during my maternity leave and I too was surprised by how many I am no longer eligible for due to time lapsed since my PhD. Although I have managed research projects, I've never had the opportunity to be an official PI and yet I am now ineligible for many of the early career development fellowships designed to support researchers to get PI experience. It is very frustrating!

### **Tennie Videler**

If you hadn't realised Liz, what hope was there ever for the rest of us? How do we find out these things BEFORE it's too late? More importantly, how can we change the situation? Challenge on age discrimination laws? Make an economic case for retaining the experience and talents of longer-in-the-tooth research staff? Any ideas?

### **Elizabeth Dodson**

I knew that some fellowships had strict cut offs - but not how many. I've had 6 years of continuous and relatively secure employment, working on projects that I loved - so fellowships, while at the back of my mind, were not a priority. I was

committed to an overload of work and certainly not looking to take on more. It is only now that I have room to breathe that fellowships have come back into focus. I could blame the fact that no-one has been pushing me to apply for fellowships and giving me dedicated time to do so but at the end of the day, my career is my responsibility. I would however like to see the research councils and charities who provide funding to reconsider their cutoffs. I can see the reasoning - that they want to give opportunities to inexperienced researchers, without making them compete against those who are far more experienced. However this can leave some people in a limbo. Too many years post-PhD or having held too many postdoc posts to be eligible, but struggling for opportunities to be a Principle Investigator - and therefore lacking the experience for other mid-career fellowships...

### **Andy Humphrey**

Tennie: unfortunately legislation on age discrimination, unlike sex or race or disability, is pretty toothless. It's only since the 2010 Equality Act was brought into force that age discrimination, of itself, has been actionable in court. We'll have to see how the case law in this area develops before we see any change in the practice of funding bodies, and that will take time. (I'm very willing to put myself forward as a test case if anyone wants to pay my legal fees! : ) ). What is really needed is change at policy level, and soon. I don't see the funding bodies lining up to tell us that they're planning to make changes. Perhaps Vitae should be addressing them directly and asking them for an official statement of intent?

### **Sandrine Berges**

Well, it's pretty much the same in philosophy: the last ad for a postdoc I saw stated that you had to have finished your phd no earlier than 2006. And I've never seen a clause in philosophy post-doc or research fellowships ads that makes exceptions for women (or men) who've taken time off to have children. Basically if you don't apply for a research only post as soon as you finished you phd, you're never going to get one...

## How many languages can you work in?

**Sandrine Berges (18 January 2011)**

Readers of this blog turned out to be a multi-lingual bunch. Where else would you have gained such insights into the role language plays in research?

**This week I'm giving a paper in my native language. French that is. This will be the second time I do this and I'm duly scared. Writing the paper was hard: I had to get my mother and sisters to proof read it and tell me that some words I'm using just don't exist, or that they're direct translations of English expressions that mean nothing in French.**

**But on the whole it wasn't too bad. Considering I haven't written in my native language since I was 17 (and that's a good while back), I felt I was reasonably fluent. Now presenting it, and then answering a series of questions without sounding like a right idiot will be another matter. Sure, I speak French all the time. But to my children, about what's for dinner, whether it's ok put playdough on the carpet, not philosophy. Actually that's not quite true, my daughter has started to be interested in philosophy and she often initiates conversations. But still: not the same thing. I'm going to be sitting with a bunch of philosophers, as a native French speaker, looking for my words, using weird turns of phrases. I do that in English too: but then I have an excuse, I'm not a native speaker!**

**I know that there are a bunch of people out there who can present in more than one language with equal ease. In fact I was at a conference this summer in Italy and there were women there, from Italy and Germany, who would present in English, and then accidentally switch to French when they read out quotations in that language. It was strange, to say the least, when the presentation changed to French and the presenter wouldn't notice. A healthy proportion of the audience didn't speak**

**French, though, so there was quite a bit of embarrassed coughing when that happened!**

**Now I have this vague idea that it's not the same in science, that if you have enough equations, figures, and tables, you could basically present in any language. I doubt that's true, you tell me.**

### Comments

**Tennie Videler**

Merci beaucoup, Sandrine!

No, I don't really speak French but do find it incredibly difficult to talk about science or my current work with Vitae in my native language, Dutch. Dutch scientists tend to be used to speaking about their science in English too, so it tends not to matter if you muddle the two together.

I hardly speak any dutch at all these days as my daughters decided a long time ago that two languages was too tiring for them (these days they try, but it is a foreign language to them). So it has deteriorated resulting in a funny situation: I started asking some people in a Dutch zoo who were observing chimpansees about their research. You could tell they were completely confused by this woman who seemed to have an interest and good grip of research methods but the vocabulary of a 10 year old and without a foreign accent to explain it.... So I explained and we chatted happily.

In English I too like to play the 'I'm not a native speaker' card!

**Hannah Dee**

When I was working in France last year I did give one presentation with the slides in French. It was quite a strange meeting - I had slides in French but spoke in English; another woman had slides in English but spoke in French; and there were also French/French and English/English talks. Pretty much everyone in academia has to give talks in English sometime, so I think the PhD students were encouraged to practice.

### **Blanka Sengerová**

I absolutely agree with what Tennie and Sandrine have said, because I, too, would find it hard to speak about my science in Czech, even though I use my native language quite regularly in communication with friends and family. I think this is to do with the fact that all my scientific training (undergraduate degree - and even A-levels before that - onwards) has been in English. At a recent conference in Slovakia, there were some Czechs and Slovaks there and I was trying to discuss my poster with them in Czech - it worked somewhat but you do tend to realise that you've got the spiel pretty sorted out in English...

Having spoken to people based in labs in places like Germany, France and Denmark, it does seem like many labs tend to run their departmental seminars/lab meetings in English in order to accommodate those who are not native in the local language and the fact that English is the language of choice when publishing work. Maybe this gives us more flexibility than people in other professions in terms of being able to move round most of Europe knowing that we'd at least understand the work meetings, even if we struggle with the social stuff? But perhaps this practice is limited to the natural sciences and not so prevalent in the social sciences/arts/humanities?

### **Sarah Davies**

This is fascinating - I'd always assumed that having to present your research in a foreign language was an extra barrier rather than something that feels natural. Does that mean when you think about your research, you think in English rather than French / Dutch / Czech? I suppose this also says something about how far our research jargon is from everyday talk - that you can exist conversationally in a language without ever really overlapping with the way you'd speak in a lab meeting!

### **Sandrine Berges**

Sarah, this is absolutely right: but you'd think that in a non-scientific discipline like philosophy, it would be possible to express oneself with 'plain' words. Tennie and Bianca: it's reassuring that you have the same experience. I shall feel less of a fool this afternoon if I find myself lost for words... Hannah: I think I did this once. There was a big conference in Paris and either the powerpoint was in French and the paper in English or vice-versa. I thought at the time that this would be highly confusing but it turned out to be perfectly fine.

Now I've read and reread my French paper, I actually quite like it, and am much better able to think philosophy in French. I could, I think, bring myself up to the point where I could write and talk equally in both languages. I'll let you know how the paper goes.

### **Blanka Sengerová**

So how did the presentation go, Sandrine?

Sarah, regarding your question about "Does that mean when you think about your research, you think in English rather than French / Dutch / Czech?" I would say definitely yes. In fact, I'm pretty sure I think in English when I talk to people in English (and the same applied to German when I lived in Germany, I think) even in conversations away from science. And I think in Czech when I talk to people in Czech. I was told that you've assimilated the language when you start thinking in it, and even more so when you start dreaming in it - I have certainly dreamt in English, but it depends on what/who I'm dreaming about and which language I need to speak to them. ;o)

### **Sandrine Berges**

The paper went very well, actually, and what seems to have happened is that I am now more confident writing in French. I've noticed this in my ability to correspond with the University at which I gave the paper.

I think the thing about dreaming is not quite right. I remember first dreaming in English as a teenager when I first lived in England. By then I was a fluent speaker, I could express myself without much difficulties and I could read anything in English. But my linguistic abilities were very different from what they are now. And now, I have to say that I don't know when I'm dreaming in English or in French. And I can't always tell which language I'm thinking in either - that is, if you ask me after I've had a thought which language it was in, I won't know. Mind you, I sometime also fail to notice which language I'm speaking in if I'm in a multilingual environment. Attention to detail again...

### **Simon Smith**

In my experience of working in different languages it's much more about preparation and terminology than it is about fluency. I'm certainly most fluent in English, my native language, when it comes to everyday conversation, but rather like Sandrine, this isn't always the case in my research, for the two reasons I mentioned:

1. If I've prepared a presentation or an interview schedule in another language, it's easier to stick to it;
2. Much of my research has been on local/regional development and identities, where the 'indigenous' terminology often doesn't translate very precisely into English.

As a result, I've often found myself in slightly surreal situations, when conducting an interview, in which my (Czech/Slovak) respondent insists on speaking in English (convinced that they are making life easier for me), while I insist on speaking in Czech/Slovak (convinced that I'll get a better quality interview out of it). This battle of wills typically lasts a couple of minutes before one of us concedes defeat!

## Writing to do lists

### Blanka Sengerová (07 January 2011)

This started off several posts on personal preferences such as Myers Briggs and Enneagram. Quite often, posts would spark not only comments but fully blown posts in reply.

In an environment such as that of research, the demand on one's time is made by a large number of different tasks, from wet labwork (or research, if you will), to presentation/abstract/paper writing, to paper reading, to teaching, meetings and all the other stuff that needs to be done. (Has anyone yet managed to work out how to fit 48 hours into 24??).

At the stage of my PhD when it was key that I produced quite a large number of experiments in order to get the bulk of data for my thesis (from about a third of the way into my second year), I was running three or four experiments at the same time, the analysis of which was often done on a subsequent day, and the working out of the meaning of the data being done even later. At that point, it was important to keep track of things and know what needed to be done without spending much time thinking about it every morning so I started writing a running to do list on a notepad, which said things such as "Monday: experiment with low substrate, analyse Friday's data, experiment with long hairpin; Tuesday: write presentation for group meeting, 3-4pm seminar, experiment with long hairpin (repeat 2)..." etc. It worked pretty well, things got done, got crossed off and Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Monday, etc. were added. I found this very helpful and feel that having such an organised system certainly contributed to me finishing my PhD nearly on time (submitted thesis in 3 years and 4 months after starting, much earlier than many of my colleagues).

Not only did the system work very well for immediate (next 1 or 2 days) plans, but it also allowed for me to plan in the longer term (next 1 to 2 weeks), which was useful for instance when equipment needed to be booked. Additionally, when I went away on holiday, I would always plan the first two days of work before going so that I came back knowing "ah, this is where I was at" and getting into it much more effectively.

I took on this system when I started my postdoc and it worked pretty well, getting quite a lot done in limited time, perhaps managing to do two experiments in a day when one might have been seen as enough. More recently, I have wondered whether my obsession with using each and every minute of my time as efficiently as possible, has led to a reduction in flexibility and perhaps a lack of reading time, which wasn't always written in to the list. A few months ago, I have stopped using a running 'to do' list and have not felt that my efficiency has gone down, and I have also tried out a few new experiments/techniques that I wouldn't have looked at when simply trying to churn out more and more data at speed.

I suspect that if there are a few remaining experiments for a paper that needs to be submitted ASAP, I would still go back to writing a 'to do' list to plan out how best to do those required experiments quickly. But it brings me to the question of how other people manage their time and whether writing 'to do' lists, which are more or less continually added to and gradually crossed off, can help?

Personally, I now think there is a time and place for them. When you have a technique that is working consistently and you are simply trying to produce more data to confirm your results, it is a very sensible idea to have a to do list as it can reduce 'faff time'. If you're doing more exploratory work, it may be that having a list is a bit too restrictive and you need to give yourself a bit more freedom to 'suck it and see', even if that may be at the

**expense of not using every minute of your time with 100% efficiency.**

**But others' personalities may mean they either love or hate lists in all situations. What do you think?**

## Comments

### Sandrine Berges

I love lists. And I think they actually work for me. Recently I had a peek at the Getting Things Done book, and I've integrated a lot of it in my list making - like breaking things down in 'next actions', rather than vague projects, i.e. items you can get on and do straightaway. I tend to redo my list at the beginning of the month, so of course, I don't put everything on it. But I also have research lists, teaching lists, admin lists and personal lists that I revise as I need to. I know it sounds like a lot of work to have to manage all those lists, but frankly, I enjoy it, and it does help me to get more research done. But you're right - it's not for everyone.

### Tennie Videler

This is really interesting! It ties in with Myers Briggs personality types, which I've been planning to write blog posts about for ages, but not got round to. This will hopefully spur me on! In Myers Briggs there are people who like to plan and make lists and those who prefer not to. I am definitely someone who doesn't! And really admire organised people like you two who do!... Saying that, I have taught myself to have lists, especially when I am stressed with too much work to be done or feel like I am not achieving as much as I should. Because then there is a glow to be had from ticking things off the list. (does anyone else cheat and write really small things down, or add things after you've actually done them for the pleasure of crossing them off?)

### Hannah Dee

I'm a major list-writer. At any one time I have at least 2 lists on the go - one "work" one for the month, and a "personal" one for a similar time-frame. I quite often add sub-lists ("weekend to-do", for example) if I am feeling unmotivated or rubbish. For example, having spent the last 4 days in bed with the flu, I currently have a list with

such basic things as "READ EMAIL" and "HAVE A SHOWER" as these are now achievements to be crossed off!!

And yes, I do occasionally write things down that I've already done.

### Elizabeth Dodson

Lists are my friends :-). Is that sad? I function much better with to do lists as they keep me focused and help me to prioritise. My laptop died in December and I was suddenly lost without access to my electronic calendars, reminders and lists! Like Hannah I have both work and home related lists - with sublists! With my work lists I grade everything for urgency and importance. I don't think that I have lost any flexibility due to my slight list obsession - but I am better at keeping on track with things. Lists also remind me just how busy I am, so I can be realistic about my availability when asked to do extra things. Again it is not that I won't do things that aren't on the list, but I will try to delegate something on there if I'm feeling overburdened.

### Sarah Davies

I'm also an obsessive list writer - mostly because I just can't remember everything that I need to do unless it's written down. When things are getting on top of me I hand write a list in my research notebook: these lists usually include the immediate and easy ('reply to so and so') as well as the long-term ('write ethics paper'). There's nothing quite like checking something off a list as completed...

I also increasingly put reminders on my phone and laptop and set them to beep at me. Does anyone else use these? Though I'm attached to writing notes by hand, I find it incredibly useful to have reminders in a portable form, and use the iPhone app 'Todo' to help with this. I even have monthly reminders to help me write posts on this blog!

**Blanka Sengerová**

Interesting, looking at the replies to my initial post, it seems like many of you are finding lists just as useful as me. Perhaps it is just a little anecdotal, but does being organised in such a way make for a good researcher?

I was interested to see that many of you write lists for your life outside work too. I have occasionally done this, but think that I am a bit of an excessive planner so am making more of an effort to just let things happen and not worry too much about planning everything in advance. So for now, I will limit list writing (even if in smaller doses than I used to) to my work life and let my personal life just happen around me. Will see how that goes...

**Nathan Ryder**

During my PhD I was a confirmed list writer, but I used to have way too many things on for any one day. I switched to writing lists for a week and then eliminating things as I went along, but still got to the end of the week and found I had things that I hadn't completed.

I've not read Getting Things Done (although it is on my bookcase), but since starting as a freelancer I've tried to break things down a lot more like people have suggested in the comments to this post. If nothing else, at the start of each day, I'm thinking more about the things that need to get done and by taking things down to their components it tends to get me a lot more focussed on the nuts and bolts of what has to be achieved.

## Freedom and accountability

**Elizabeth Dodson (28 July 2011)**

This post generated various comments on the advantages and disadvantages of having to complete timesheets and the difficulty of accounting for 'thinking' time.

**For the past few years I have had to complete detailed timesheets every week, showing down to the half hour which tasks I have worked on for which projects. This is partly because researchers in my department tend to work across a number of large and complex projects at once, many of which have European funding for which there are strict auditing requirements to meet.**

**However completing the timesheets is a job in itself and can be quite complex. Using formal systems such as this raises the issue of what you count as work. For instance do you charge time for doing some reading and having a think...? (What about if that reading and thinking goes on outside of traditional working hours?) Does charged time have to be clearly measurable in terms of direct outputs? What about the broader development of ideas that might relate to any number of current and future projects?**

**Which brings me to the question – what is research work? I get paid to deliver project reports and to complete clearly defined tasks (e.g. design and deliver some training on X). How I get to those end results may be quite flexible, but is academic freedom compatible with micro-managed accountability? The work of course needs to be finished on time and to a high standard – and any interim targets, milestones and progress reporting agreements need to be met - but what about the stuff in between? Is it truly measurable and should we even try?**

**I'm interested to know how common such formal accounting for time is in research – I'm assuming not very – but then I should probably never assume anything!**

## Comments

**Blanka Sengerová**

That's an interesting attitude. I have certainly heard about timesheets in the context of a private company job (because they have to know who to charge the time to), but not really in terms of academic work (except in the case of someone doing a PhD in engineering in Switzerland who apparently had to sign in and out for their time spent in work).

I would think it could have both positive and negative effects. On the plus side, having to account for your time might make you more productive and efficient. However, it could also stifle the freedom, which I have grown to see as an integral part of an academic job - if I go and have my haircut in the afternoon, that's fine because I might have been in the lab for an hour at the weekend to set up an overnight or because I was in really rather early. On balance, I think I would find it hard to get used to that sort of detailed time accounting.

**Sarah Davies**

I've been thinking about this very question recently, Liz, as - given that I'm now in Arizona, where daytime temperatures can be around 45C - I've decided to become slightly nocturnal, starting to work at 4am when it's relatively cool, taking a nap during the day, and going to bed mid-evening. This working pattern obviously puts me out of sync with most of my colleagues (though, helpfully, it does mean that I'm working at the same time as people in the UK), and that I feel that I've finished my day about 2pm. While I've never kept a strict schedule of my hours in the past, I do want to make sure I'm still putting in a full day's work so I've been trying to keep track more than I normally would. And it's definitely hard to decide what should count...many of my best thoughts are in daydreaming, train-riding, or down time. I'm really not sure that such times should be included in my contracted hours - apart from anything else, I have a hunch that the very fact that they're \*not\* 'work time' is why they can be so productive - but at the same time I couldn't do my actual work without them...I guess I'm just

fortunate that I have this degree of flexibility in the first place!

### **Blanka Sengerová**

Talking about this has reminded me about what my contract has to say on my hours of work, stating that "Your hours of work are such as are reasonably required to carry out your duties to the satisfaction of your head of department."

Which may be a good thing and encourage flexibility, but could also be a bad thing because an unreasonable boss could expect you to be in every day from 6am till 10pm, and every weekend too. I would be in favour of the contract saying something about 40 hours a week - even if most of us probably do more than that, it means that if you are regularly doing 40 hour week you can't have your boss call you up and say that your working hours are simply unacceptable short.

What do people think of this sort of clause in a contract?

### **Simon Smith**

I don't have to account for my time on the project that pays my regular wage, but I have done some consultancy work a couple of times. On one occasion the payment was agreed in advance, and it was down to me whether I thought of that as a set number of hours or as a task that would just take as long as it took. I took the latter attitude (and probably put in much more work than I should!). On the other occasion I really did have to count the hours because I had to send an invoice after completing the work. That made the whole business more accountable, but it felt very alien to academic work. Like you I was faced with dilemmas such as how to count thinking time.

What I didn't like was the sense that strictly accounting for my time reduced the work to a simple exchange relationship. That did seem to grate with my sense of autonomy. But perhaps we're kidding ourselves if we pretend that academic work is all that different from any other kind?

### **Sandrine Berges**

I don't know of any one in philosophy that's had to do this. But the ramifications are quite worrying. Certainly, thinking and reading should count as work – we philosophers don't do much else, so I don't think we'd get paid at all otherwise! But it'd be quite hard, if not downright impossible to limit the thinking to certain hours. I don't mean to say that philosophers work longer than anyone else – I know I don't! - but anyone who has to think through an argument, a problem, or anything relevant to their research will sometimes go on thinking about it in their sleep! And even if you can carry on being productive in other respects while you're mulling through a problem, you won't be as productive as you would be if you weren't also thinking about that other thing. I think that's one very good reason why we should be weary of time sheets, and certainly include as much thinking time in it as possible. Maybe it's possible to encode it in a more respectable way? 15Mins brains storming, 1hour note taking, argument analysis?

### **Andy Humphrey**

Blanka: most employment contracts will now specify what the University considers to be the "standard" working hours in a week (usually between 37 and 40). They have to do this to comply with EU legislation on limiting working hours. In practice, of course, most academics and many researchers put in way more hours than this, and the "such hours as are reasonably required" clause is used to justify a multitude of unrealistic expectations.

This is an area of employment law which changes quite rapidly. As far as I know there have been no senior court rulings over working hours in UK universities yet, but it could happen. If it does, it is likely that the employers will have to be much more rigid about how they implement EU working time legislation, and time sheets could become the norm. Personally I don't think that will do academic creativity any favours, but it might clamp down on the number of unreasonable bosses who expect ludicrous working hours from their staff...

## Can peer review be taught?

**Dan Weekes (29 July 2011)**

This post and comment thread nicely pulls together the need for training for career development, weighing up informal and formal training and the experience of peer review in research.

**The House of Commons Science & Technology Committee this week published it's report on peer review in scientific publications**  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/856/856.pdf> and it's well worth a read. As the name suggest the work is focused on peer review in the sciences, however, I'm sure many of the findings and any down stream policies will have relevance to all areas of research.

On the subject of training the reports states "we consider that all early-career researchers should be given the option for training in peer review". Now, to me this sounds like a very good idea, throughout my career I've been lucky to have helpful PIs who have given me opportunities to learn from them and practice peer reviews. But since the requests for reviews have started to drop into my inbox, I still feel I have more to learn and wonder if formal training would help. On the other hand, how easy is it to learn to peer review? and are the different approaches that each reviewer has to the process the beauty of it? Some may say that a more standardised learnt approach would make it easier "to play the system"... I'm not sure... my gut feeling is training on peer review for all researchers would be a good thing.

**Has anyone had experience of formal peer-training and how would you rate it?**

### Comments

**Blanka Sengerová**

The only "training" of peer review I have done is doing journals clubs during my undergraduate

studies - as a group you take apart a recently published article, examining the conclusions and experiments critically.

As part of a UK Grad residential course, we had to put together a mock-up grant proposal and one of the things in the review stage involve critiquing (is that a word??) other people's proposals so maybe this was a kind of peer review training session as well?

I have never had to review papers for journals yet, but I would certainly agree that courses on how to do peer review might actually be quite a useful thing for early-career researchers.

**Jonathan Branney**

Thank you for highlighting the report Daniel. I do think formal training would be excellent for early career researchers especially since the whole process of science and scientific publishing has come under recent criticism. Of course peer-review won't always root out fraud, the central issue in the Guardian article I just referred to, but of course it is one of the safe-guards. Peer-review is supposed to be part of what makes the scientific method so effective - so training in this seems a very logical step. You may already be aware of this but the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme is a really excellent resource for those who might be reviewing health and social care research (I dare say it might be useful in other research areas too).

**Sarah Davies**

Thanks for posting on this, Daniel - I think this is a really important question. I do quite a lot of reviewing (which hopefully means I am a good, or at least helpful, peer reviewer, otherwise journals wouldn't keep coming back...), but this has been very much learnt 'on the job'. Thinking about it, I've realised the only discussions or training I've ever had were connected to my research, in the

context of talking about scientific fraud (I'm a sociologist of science)! This to me seems faintly terrifying - it's all very well learning informally from colleagues, or indeed from getting reviews on your own papers, but surely we need some way of making sure that all of us are operating according to the same standards when it comes to writing reviews. (In the context of fraud and misconduct, for instance, there's an enormous question around what should count as a conflict of interest. When you know (or can work out who is) the author? When your research is so similar as to be almost identical? When you're funded by the same people?)

### **Sandrine Berges**

I think training for peer review is an excellent idea, not just for scientific publications, but also for humanities and social sciences. So much depends on what an unknown reviewer chooses to say, or not about our work! And there's so much poor practice: not reading the paper properly, and claiming that the author omits an argument that is discussed at length on p.2, recommending that the author reads a paper or a book that is on a completely different topic, or simply, in the case of internal referees, scribbling 'I don't like this' on the back of an envelop. I've seen the latter happen when I worked as an editorial assistant early on in my career. So yes, please, let's have some training.

### **Sarah Davies**

I've had email conversations with editors about reviews I've given, which has been interesting - you get a clearer sense of what they were looking for and their thoughts on your review (and the piece you were reviewing!). But I guess this is pretty unusual - most editors don't seem to have the time / interest to engage like this.

### **Simon Smith**

The Vitae Collaborative Researcher course also included a peer review exercise around mock grant proposals, although the focus was more on the proposals than the reviews, which perhaps tells us something about the assumptions we make!

I think Sarah's right to focus on the ethical side of peer reviewing - that's where we ought to be respecting some sort of general code of conduct. When it comes to the substance of the review, I don't know how practical it would be to offer training, since journals/conferences/grant agencies have their own formats and instructions. Then I think it's up to the editor/organiser to give clear guidance to their reviewers about what kind of reviews they want. Feedback from editors to reviewers about how useful their review was would also help people learn. Have you ever had any? I haven't.

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