



Commentary

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How to become a successful researcher: tips for early career researchers

by [Peters S](#)

The tips summarized in this paper would be of great interest for early career researchers (ECR) looking to pursue a career in academia. Although many things may seem obvious to more senior scientists, for ECR it is often unknown territory. This may be even more so for ECR with limited access to good mentors.

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How to become a successful researcher: tips for early career researchers

By Susan Peters, PhD¹

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Academia is a world on its own with many hidden rules that can be confusing for early career researchers (ECR). Moreover, research is highly competitive. A young scientist pursuing an academic career faces a future of writing applications for fellowships and grants, whilst establishing a strong research track record. These aspects can bring stress, and there is often no job security. How can one balance this with family and social life? Becoming a successful researcher requires some strategic planning.

Twelve senior scientists – selected to get an appropriate gender and geographical representation – volunteered to coach ECR in a Career Development session at the 2013 International Epidemiology in Occupational Health (EPICOH) conference in Utrecht. Each scientist provided three tips for a successful career in academia, all of which are summarized in table 1. This overview is not meant to be exhaustive and may not necessarily be the opinion of all the senior researchers. Nevertheless, it may offer ECR guidance on building their research career.

Understandably, the participating senior scientists provided tips focused on how to build a career in the current system. But is the system pragmatic? Is it compatible with modern life? Universities and researchers of all career stages have a crucial role to play in these matters. As an ECR myself, I would like to reflect on a few of these the issues a bit more.

The tips in table 1 are very helpful when aspiring to succeed in the academic world, but there are many roads that lead to Rome. The challenge lies in selecting the tips that work for you. Besides, to what extent can we actually steer our careers? Sometimes it is just about being in the right place at the right time. You do have some control, however. For example, if you are known for your expertise or hard work and are pleasant to work with, these

attributes will definitely increase your opportunities.

A good mentor appears to be key: he or she can be helpful in many aspects of career development. Although finding a mentor is largely the ECR's own responsibility, universities should encourage this and can provide assistance. [For more about mentorship, see (1).]

With regards to “expertise”, one option is to focus on a particular element on which you aim to become a world-expert. For others it may be more beneficial to develop a wider set of skills. Having greater flexibility may enhance your ability to work in different areas. The difficult part as an ECR may be to find your own niche, which differentiates you from your supervisors and close colleagues.

Moving overseas for a postdoc is an often recommended step in an academic career. It widens your view but may not suit everyone. When staying in your own country, it is still worthwhile to work in different places. Even short stays at other institutions help. Working in different settings will absolutely benefit personal development and helps in becoming an independent researcher.

It seems good to know where one wants to be in “x number of years”. Having a clear plan can help the decision-making process. However, interests may change, other opportunities may arise, or things simply do not work out as foreseen. As mentioned before, academia is competitive, which means that researchers must be able to deal with rejection. We can all learn from critical comments but should avoid taking them too personally. In any case, it is important to remain open and flexible. Particularly in academia, where short-term contracts are commonplace, long-term planning can be problematic. For example, how does one

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Table 1. Overview of tips for Early Career Researchers (ECR)**Publications** – “Getting published is one of the most important aspects for ECR”

Original data are the key to papers, so find a project/position in which you have access to data.

Besides writing your own papers as a first author, publications can also be achieved by getting others on board as co-authors. Yet primary publications and co-authorships need to be well-balanced: as an ECR you want to show that you are productive and can write papers.

In order to be a good writer, you need to invest in your writing skills. Keep up the habit of writing.

Mentorship – “A mentor, either within or outside your organisation, is an important support in your career”

Working under the guidance of a good mentor can help you develop your skills and experience, bring you into contact with other researchers, and give you more responsibility and independence as your career progresses.

Choose a mentor who can guide you through the academic maze. Check what has happened to his or her previous postdocs or students. Are they moving on to fulfilling careers?

Remain critical of your mentor’s achievements and choose the different elements from your mentors carefully. Someday you need to become an independent researcher yourself.

Passion and motivation – “It requires hard work to be a successful researcher, so find a job you love”

Follow your dreams and remember that research ideas are everywhere: in your reading, in discussions over lunch, or from clinical or service practice.

Maintain your drive and determination, even when things are not going so well. The best researchers are not necessarily the cleverest, but they are highly motivated.

Apply project management techniques and balance your time commitments between teaching and research.

Career planning – “Besides short-term planning, also think about what you want in the long run”

Find out what will make you stand out from your colleagues in 5-10 years’ time and focus on that.

Ask yourself: “What are the requirements for that fellowship, grant or job?” and “What steps do I need to take to get me from here to there?”

When planning a postdoc, keep in mind what you expect to learn and how you can build a good track record. There are basically two options: (i) go for the short-term goal that is to get a better publication record and then move on to a more senior position and develop further; or (ii) invest in new studies, which may harm publications in the short-term, but will bear fruit in the future.

Look around early to find senior people who have had a career path that you would like to follow. Think about how they got where they are now. Ask them how they got a particular project or group up and running. Nevertheless, you should find your own path eventually: “Observe, mix and do!”

set up a new longitudinal study without the security of having a paid position for the coming years? The effect of short-term contracts on the quality of research content and staff should therefore be a consideration for universities’ policy-makers.

Finally there is the topic of work–life balance. The age of the typical ECR is around that of many people when they start a family. Obviously, one cannot be discriminated against for being pregnant or having a caretaking role outside of work. However, it will be much harder to work the same amount of hours as other

Table 1. Continued**Expertise and personal development** – “Have a firm grasp of the principles and methods and stay focused in order to excel in research”

Move out of the institute where you have been trained. You should learn to work in a different environment and extend your knowledge in new fields of research.

Develop an area of expertise that will get you recognition and on which people will want to collaborate with you, especially if it is some type of methodological expertise. Choose an area of research that complements what your mentor does and make sure it is mostly unexplored, so that each paper you write will make a contribution.

Strive to maintain intellectual integrity regardless of financial and administrative pressures. Think for yourself and don’t just chase whatever seems to be ‘hot’ at the moment. Reality, however, may be more complicated. Funding may not always be available, and you may have to research hot topics, as this is where the money is.

Keep attuned to new developments in your field, including what is happening outside academia. Do not allow your interests to become too narrowly focused: read and think broadly. For example, go to seminars on different disciplines and read books that have nothing to do with your specialty. It is often easy to make rapid progress by borrowing ideas from related disciplines and applying them in a new setting. Moreover, reading widely will help you become a better writer.

Networking – “Invest in a network to work in teams both within and across disciplines”

Relocating and travelling can help building up an international network.

Discuss your ideas with other people: they may see possibilities that you didn’t see before and you will develop as a colleague who others want on their team. Be careful though, as you don’t want to give away your best ideas.

A network will help in the development of new collaboration opportunities, which may subsequently lead to new papers.

researchers and business travel will be less convenient. Track records will inevitably be affected. So is it possible to become a prominent researcher while raising a family? At the end of the day, it all comes down to making choices, but it is also a task for universities and grant schemes to consider the social and family life of researchers. Even though regulations exist on how to assess a track record considering pregnancies and other career disruptions, positive role models for young female scientists are unfortunately still scarce. A study among UK PhD students in chemistry indicated that the lack of such role models could be discouraging for women who want to start a family while building their academic career (2).

Personally, I think finding a job you love is a must for any career. Since writing is such a critical part of our work – both for publications and getting funded – passion for writing is also essential in order to be successful in a research career. Hopefully the tips from the senior scientists as presented in table 1 will help ECR consider and build their academic careers. It is important to encourage and support younger people entering the field of occupational health to ensure its future. The issues discussed here may also inspire more established researchers to rethink their position and role in the academic world.

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