

## Advice for “Hunting Season”

University professors have seasons that, in certain neighborhoods in the vicinity of large research campuses such as where I live, loom even larger than those dictated by our planet’s journey around the sun. Right now we are deeply entrenched in the one I call hunting season—job hunting, that is. It starts ramping up in early fall with a surge in postings for faculty positions and pilgrimages of industrial recruiters through the top universities. Meanwhile, students and postdocs come out of the woodwork to schedule appointments with me to “talk about life”. Every year I know it is coming, yet am still freshly surprised by the collective angst that hunting season provokes. Interestingly, the malaise seems just as acute among those not yet on the market as among those actively applying. Many trainees suddenly panic that they have not checked all the boxes en route to that elusive “ideal career”, the one a multitude of career panels and job fairs promised would materialize if they honed the right skills and networked with the right people.

For academia-bound individuals, there is pressure to join the [*insert pedigree*] lab so that they can publish in [*insert high-impact journal*] on their research in [*insert hot field of the day*]. Those interested in industrial positions are warned that they must acquire deep expertise in one focused technical area, such as natural products synthesis for medicinal chemistry jobs or nanoscale lithography for work in the semiconductor industry. More leeway is given to trainees who seek “nontraditional” employment. Sidebar: the meaning of this term becomes ever less clear as no particular career paths seem to dominate over others these days. But even there the advice can be suffocating: be sure to perfect your “soft skills” (not so clear on what those are either); read broadly across science, policy, business and law; network with anyone and everyone; volunteer, pursue internships, write a blog, launch an organization.

OK, take a breath. None of this is bad advice and to be honest, I have served on enough search committees, both in universities and companies, to know that hiring teams sometimes adhere to the above scripts like robots. The problem is this: it is not inspiring. Career advice that frames every choice as a formulaic means to a distant end dampens the joy of discovery in the moment—the satisfaction of

proving your hypothesis by achieving the highest standards of scholarship as an end in itself.

So, to this season’s symphony of career advice let me add an orthogonal chord: Find a problem so interesting and compelling to you that you cannot help but think about it day and night. Consider the problem from every angle, read about it, talk about it, make a plan of attack and revise that plan, relish every experiment whose outcome points in a clear direction and give every facet of your training experience your very best effort. That is, live in the moment. Do not overplan for the future. Because the truth is, you cannot know what form that first job will take so many years from now. Sectors that are hiring at a fast pace today might be stagnant five years later, and this you cannot control. It breaks my heart when students tell me they formulated their training plan as a means to an end, but when the time came, that end was no longer available and their training therefore had no value. You should pursue knowledge that has meaning to you right now, and that is value enough. When I interview job candidates, I usually ask why they chose that particular Ph.D. or postdoc project. A response framed around a means to an end is wholly uninspiring, and even if they are too savvy to say it out loud, it shows in their job talk. Above all, hiring committees want to be inspired by the person they choose as their next colleague. Scientists who follow their curiosity and interests with creativity, gusto, diligence and attention to detail are the ones who inspire. Everything else flows from there, including that fantastic job.

There is one specific skill that you should strive to master: how to recognize opportunity in all of its surprising guises. Sometimes it is borne of failure. A project that veers off-track might end up in a more interesting place, or be transformed from lemons to lemonade by a stroke of ingenuity. How you morphed defeat into victory is much more interesting to your hiring committee than a sanitized story of success. Whether in research or the job search, the skills of spotting and seizing opportunity are built on imagination and the courage to venture into the unknown. Your mentors can help by shining a spotlight on job opportunities not already on your radar screen, by making introductions and brokering relationships that might lead to new prospects. And when

**Published:** December 23, 2015

opportunity crosses your path, it likely will not be part of your Plan. All the more reason to go for it.

**Carolyn R. Bertozzi**, Editor-in-Chief  
Department of Chemistry, Stanford University

#### Author Information

E-mail: [eic@centralscience.acs.org](mailto:eic@centralscience.acs.org).

#### Notes

Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the ACS.