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## The art of courtship ▼

As an academic, my relationship with industry is like teenage sexual angst: we flirt from time to time at holiday resorts. I am occasionally invited in for dinner, but it always seems that others get to go to the prom!

Why is that? There is no doubt that, for my part, I am clumsy in the art of courtship. Industry has its own language, hierarchies, culture, jealousies and insecurities; not more or better ones than academia, but different. All this reminds me of an old experiment with male fruit flies that 'dance' to attract the attention of females. Regardless of skill, mutants that danced with a different rhythm were just not successful.

My foibles aside, industry could also be imposing its own limited view on the relationship. I feel, for example, that I am expected to sell my ideas to them, in the way that I sense they sell investors on their company. I am not especially confident at asserting the monetary value of ideas even if I can be confident in assessing their scientific value. This could be one of those, albeit superficial, differences stereotypical of the cultural divide between the 'ivory tower' of academia and industry. (Of course, this entire letter, although based on a true story, is a gross generalization of

industry and academic behaviour and meant only illustratively.)

### Mutual interests

An emphasis on the research itself has its place and is a source of legitimate exchange between the two research communities. However, the two communities have other mutual interests, some with monetary implications almost as large as potential sales. Both of us are interested, for instance, in scientifically skilled people. Usually, I am interested in them as students and postdoctoral fellows and usually the industry is interested in them after they have been students or postdoctoral fellows.

Industry, government and academia can claim many excellent examples of programmes throughout the world that nurture ties between education and employment. New Zealand, for example, has a scholarship especially for postgraduate student research sponsored by industry. I have also been the guest of industry-sponsored conferences that were clearly designed to lubricate the communication mechanism. These are welcome 'carrots', providing incentives for researchers in both academia and industry to pursue closer ties.

Nevertheless, even within such programmes, the initial approach is still

governed by the same restrictive rules. The scholarship might make it more attractive to fund a particular project, but the project is the reason the relationship exists.

### More communication

How do the two communities expand the spectrum of communication between themselves? Perhaps, in addition to the fine examples already discussed, more emphasis could be placed on sponsoring long-term relationships between academic and industrial groups, to exchange skills that are not necessarily tied to research output. In a more personal way than just making donations to university departments, the two communities could seek relationships based on identifying complementary skills or desirable research and training practices.

For example, an industrial research team could identify a particular academic researcher or department as having a training approach that they value (even if the research is not of direct relevance). For exchanges of this nature, however, the courtship rules will have to be changed. We must learn to recognize a variety of dances each in its own valuable context.

I wonder if it might be time, at least on a trial basis, for both industry and academia to re-negotiate their positions in the academia-industry courtship dance. Certainly these ideas are not new, and some have put them into practice in various guises. The lesson is, though, that they are not universal. Should they be? I would be eager to learn more about the successes or failures of others trying to broaden the range of academia-industry interactions.

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