

STICKY WICKET

The Great Resignation I

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

I have noticed that there is a hole in my inbox. Where once I received five or six requests for a postdoctoral training position in my lab, I am now receiving maybe one. And these often used to be generic, an indication that many emails were going out to many labs. “Dear Esteemed Professor, I have read your research with great interest, and I hope you will consider me for a position in your laboratory.” They then often would go on to describe their own interest in an area completely unrelated to my own. No, I didn’t respond to such requests, but I got many more that *were* properly addressed to me and *did* indicate an interest in our work. These always received a response, even when I had no available positions. And if I did, well, there might be a new postdoc in the lab soon.

But that isn’t happening, and there’s a hole in my inbox. I figured that there might be a few reasons for this. First, a lot of graduate students are struggling to complete degrees that were put on hold during the Terrible Pandemic. Second, although we work in a

number of interesting areas (interesting to *me*, that is; hey, I can’t work on everything, although I try), I confess that at the moment none of these qualify as ‘hot’ (fashions in science, as in everything else, come and go, and sometimes come back again). So maybe folks aren’t so interested in what we do. And third, while we have a great track record of Molets going on to really good places, and we regularly publish in journals with nice, soft pages or shiny, glossy ones (and actually are published on paper), I’m an admittedly old insectivore, and maybe folks want to go to labs run by people who actually have hair on their heads. All of these are valid reasons, so I figured that the hole was just in my own inbox.

Wait, I just read that, and it sounded arrogant (“You, Mole?” you say sarcastically, “Never.” Okay, sorry, I will clarify). When we submit a paper, we try it out at the ‘best’ journal that we agree *might* be appropriate. There are two goals here. The first is that we would

very much like our work to be read and discussed, maybe in your journal club. Secondly, the Molets are looking for competitive jobs, and until we change the way candidates are selected, those that publish in Crosby, Stills and Nash (sorry, these are my names for the journals we deride, complain about and usually read) will have an advantage in securing such positions. And while we sometimes succeed in sneaking something in through the gauntlet, I assure you that most of our work comes out in ‘lesser’ journals, but still, with an eye on giving the Molets (and I confess, my grants) the best chance they can get.

So, there’s a hole in my inbox. But like I said, I thought that this was down to me. Then, at the last meeting I attended (an actual meeting, in person and everything) I was having ‘tea’ with Dolphin, Red Fox, Goshawk and Leopard (sadly Quokka was not with us, and was missed), and they assured me that this was not unique to me and my lab. Applications for postdoc positions have gone away. But yes, they said, I’m also really old.

There is a social phenomenon I have been reading about called the Great Resignation, mainly affecting North America and Europe but perhaps extending to other continents. While the reasons are not fully understood, it seems that many people are quitting their various jobs to find positions that either pay more, allow them more time to work from home (or a coffee shop, or wherever), or both. The theory says that this came from work experience during the Terrible Pandemic, but that is just one theory. Another one is that there is a resetting of the work–life balance; money isn’t everything, and people are recalibrating their professional goals. Both might be correct. Or not. I’m not a social scientist, but recently, I spoke with Professor Vulture, who is (as an aside, Vulture was very nice and ate sandwiches, not roadkill). He told me that while the phenomenon appears real, the theories are based on conjecture not data. So, we don’t know.

Is there a Great Resignation among graduate students completing their degrees? Maybe so, based on commentaries I have read in the ‘trades’. And as with the more general Great Resignation, there are a lot of theories and not a lot of evidence to support them. But hey, I’m the Mole, and I’m comfortable with wild speculation. So let’s make a list; it’s what I do. So here are Mole’s ‘Reasons not to be a postdoc’.

1. Academic science is hard

Most, but not all, academic science has to be done in or near a lab. If you are doing ‘wet work’ (and by this I don’t mean assassination, which is what ‘wet work’ seems to mean in movies, but work that requires pipetting colorless liquids or grinding up cells) then you really can’t do this at home. And if you are, say, a computational biologist, it is frequently required that you meet and talk with those who do the ‘wet work’ to gain a full understanding of how data were generated. But being in person is not what makes science so hard. We have to repeat our experiments and verify results in different ways, and then do it all over again when reviewers want more. And despite all of our efforts, and no matter how satisfying our hypotheses are, we are often simply wrong about biological reality. It is frustrating, even miserable, and the best we can hope for is a good paper and a few slaps on the back (or polite applause at our talks), and then it quickly fades into ‘but what have you done recently?’ It isn’t Top Gun, where Maverick shoots down a few MiGs and then gets a cushy job that doesn’t involve military action

and promises steady promotion (at least, until the next movie). No matter what we have succeeded in doing, we have to keep doing it again.

2. Being a postdoc is hard

For many of us, we look back at our postdoc years as ‘golden’. (Not me, but that’s another story for another time.) We have learned skills as a graduate student, often working on a project that we did not have much input into (because we took it on before we knew enough to find a better project), but now we get to *choose* where we want to work and what we want to work on (to some extent). And we have enough knowledge to gauge whether the project we are doing is exciting or at least *potentially* exciting. We don’t have to attend classes or committee meetings, we have no administration, we don’t have to continuously ply for grant money; we just get to do science. But too many postdocs find that their mentors lose interest in what they are doing, or that funds are too restricted to actually do what they want to do. And through all of this, they are living from paycheck to paycheck. For many postdocs, they find they have no ‘life’. And this leads to reason number three.

3. Everyone agrees that you shouldn’t be a postdoc

We are all connected, and we talk. And those who are the most discouraged are often the loudest. When I am frustrated with the ‘system’, I can readily find a chorus of voices who agree with me online (or more usually, on my phone). Postdocs (and graduate students) are ‘slaves’. (I very much wish, for other reasons, that this term would not find any purchase in our discourse on those who work in labs; it denigrates people who were, or currently are, actual slaves. In no history of the world could anyone who works in biomedical research be a ‘slave’. Shame on anyone who would say it, but here we are.) Postdocs and students are not valued (much better). Postdocs do all the work, and professors get all the ‘glory’ (such as it is). Anyone who even thinks about being a postdoc is crazy. And this doesn’t only come from trainees in the Twizzliverse. Professors are chiming in, in droves. It is impossible to get grants. It is impossible to publish papers. Don’t do this. Anyone who even thinks about being a postdoc is crazy. (I know I already said this, but this time someone else is saying it. Lots of someones.)

I am relatively sure that if you are currently a graduate student, none of this is news to you. It is all very compelling. And if you are a postdoc, you might agree. Look, being an academic scientist is not the only job out there; indeed, there are not a lot of these jobs. And there is *nothing* wrong with thinking about alternative ways to use the knowledge you have gained in other rewarding careers. If you can imagine yourself being happy doing something else, by all means go for it. It is *your* life.

But if, like me, you have always dreamed of running a research lab where *you* get to decide what might be interesting to explore, don’t give up. Next time I’ll talk about what needs to be fixed, what doesn’t need to be fixed and why, maybe, you *do* want to be a postdoc, or at least give it a shot. I love being a real-life explorer in the world of academic research. Many of the ex-Molets do, too. So, let’s keep talking.

‘Tea’, anyone?