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Radiating good will

It's been a good few months for synchrotrons. The Swiss Light Source recently began testing its beamline at the Paul Scherrer Institute in Villigen. A United Nations body this month formally approved the plans for SESAME, a synchrotron facility to be based in Jordan. And the US National Institutes of Health announced plans to add three beamlines to Argonne National Laboratory's Advanced Photon Source.

All these developments, in addition to existing plans to build two more synchrotrons — one in Britain, the other in France — are welcome news to two groups of scientists. More beamlines will make life easier for structural biologists, who use the high-energy radiation to decipher the three-dimensional structures of molecules. More synchrotrons also offer the prospect of more jobs for the physicists and engineers needed to operate them.

For structural biologists, an increasing demand for access to beamlines — mainly because of the rising profile of proteomics — has meant that most researchers have to wait their turn in a growing queue, and often travel a long way, to do their experiments.

But additional facilities, by themselves, only address half the problem. Without experienced engineers and physicists to run them, the machines will not be able to serve their clients as well as they might. But specialized staff are not easy to find — skills have often been developed only by working at synchrotrons for years.

The new facilities will need to find ways of recruiting existing specialists and, hopefully, should plan to train new ones and find ways of retaining both. Perhaps a start would be to ensure that the technicians who run the machines receive due credit when new structures are solved.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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