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## Ground control

For many PhDs, the job outlook is increasingly grim. Unemployment among chemists in the United States has almost doubled over the past year, and biomedical research is looking less stable. But there is one discipline that is holding its own — Earth and space sciences. Unemployment among new PhDs in this field has fallen over the past five years, according to a recently released study by the American Geophysical Union, the American Geological Institute and the American Institute of Physics.

Despite the fact that many of the survey's responses were collected during the general economic downturn that followed the terrorist attacks in September 2001, the outlook for geoscientists still seems to be improving. In 1996, 59% of the survey's respondents considered their job outlook to be "hopeless" or "bad". In 2001, that figure was just 21%.

But some cracks are inevitably starting to show. Although salaries for most posts have seen steady growth, starting salaries for geoscience postdocs have not changed for two years. And the number of people doing postdocs, rather than securing permanent positions, is rising. Hints, perhaps, that the market may be slowing down or that federal grants are becoming harder to acquire.

Some geoscientist PhDs manage to secure better pay for one simple reason — experience. About a fifth of new PhDs in the field are awarded to people who are over 40 — a group that tends to be paid more and is less likely to pursue a postdoc. On average, geoscientists wait the longest before returning to university after they graduate, according to the US National Science Foundation. During these 'gap' years, they tend to gain valuable field experience, as well as clarifying their area of specialization. The fact that this approach seems to pay off begs the question of why graduates in other disciplines don't try it.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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