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## The best years of our lives

I've lost count of how many times I've been told by tenured, senior researchers that doing their postdoc was the best part of their scientific life. I usually bite my tongue to stop myself from saying: "Then why don't you go back?" Senior researchers, now burdened with management and grant-writing duties, tend to remember their fellowship years as a period of pure scientific pursuit. And poverty is so much more romantic when you are no longer experiencing it.

But postdocs now are very different from the fellowships of old. Today's postdocs are feeling the squeeze. They often need to start seeking their first grant as soon as they begin their fellowship. And their long-term future is far from secure: there are far more fellows than there are tenure-track positions. Administrators, of course, prefer ever greater competition so that they can fill the few permanent slots with the best and the brightest — the scientific equivalent of rock stars.

Sadly, not every scientist can become a rock star; there simply isn't room on the stage. So what can the scientific equivalent of the opening acts and road crew do? Some simply leave — one researcher on a fixed-term contract at the University of Birmingham, UK, quit to train as a gas fitter — whereas others seek work outside the lab (see *EMBO Rep.* 5, 660–662; 2004).

The present system simply doesn't offer a solution. Too few tenure-track positions and a practice of short-term contracts, especially in Europe, mean that new scientists are constantly pushed into the system, but they often don't have a destination.

Clearly, there needs to be some middle ground. A mechanism that allows experienced scientists to continue doing benchwork, if they so choose — the kind of work that tenured management looks back upon so fondly.

**Paul Smaglik**  
Naturejobs editor



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