jobs — and he did not want to play a part in what he views as an unfair system with enormous stakes. "If you're a responsible PI, you would like your postdocs to proceed somewhere after your lab," he says. "It's difficult to assign them risky projects. You're playing with their lives."

He had a plan for avoiding his ethical dilemma: he would bring in staff scientists who were committed to their lab careers. But when he actually got his faculty position earlier this year, he realized that pragmatic considerations outweighed the ethical ones. He estimates that at his institution, it costs nearly twice as much to hire staff scientists as it does to hire postdocs, partly because they get benefits such as paid time off and health insurance.

Unable to stick with his original strategy, Kryazhimskiy has started to interview postdocs. He is looking for candidates whom he thinks will have a good shot at a faculty job, even in a tough academic market. Another option is to find someone with other career goals, such as a job in industry. From a purely practical perspective, he thinks that postdocs will be the best investment of his grant money.

PIs whose labs — and grants — are on the large side may be better able to absorb the cost of staff scientists. For Teichmann, at least, her two staff members are key to her lab's success. Both are accomplished researchers who know how the lab works and how to get things done. She expects to hire two more professionals: a lab manager and a software developer. "Then I would have four core people who can support my postdocs and PhD students," she says. Unlike postdocs and graduate students, those four professionals wouldn't be locked into a pressurized timeline to graduate or to move on to another job.

"The bigger your group is, the less face-to-face time you're going to have."

Venken would eventually like to add a few people to his lab, too — perhaps some postdocs, graduate students or a mixture of both. "I just want people who are invested in everything that we're doing," he says.

The size and structure of a lab can be hugely important, but in the end, the quality of any workplace comes down to the quality of the people, PIs say. Whether they are looking for graduate students or postdocs, whether they desire a large or small research group, new PIs need to find team members who are ready to contribute. "The first set of individuals that you hire is very important," Liu says. "They set the tone for the entire laboratory." ■

Chris Woolston *is a freelance writer in Billings, Montana.*

TURNING POINT
Out for chemistry

David Smith, a chemist at the University of York, UK, spent his early career avoiding personal discussions with colleagues because he did not want to reveal that he is gay. In January, he gave the plenary talk at the first LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) STEMinar, a conference devoted to networking.

JOHN HOULIHAN

How did the LGBT STEMinar come about?
A postdoc at the University of Sheffield, UK, Beth Hellen, decided that she wanted to get a bunch of LGBT scientists she knew through Twitter together for networking. She thought 20 people would attend, but about 80 showed up. It was, as far as I know, the first ever meeting in the United Kingdom to specifically target LGBT scientists across all disciplines. It was a really nice meeting, with genuine networking. Similar things have gone on in the United States, especially at the big conferences, like the American Chemical Society meetings. But this has never been a feature of UK–European science.

Do you think it will continue?
Yes. One of the most heartening things about the meeting was that it got support from high-level societies such as the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics. It's a time of big change in science. Fifteen years after the culture broadly changed, we are now talking about our personal lives and acknowledging who we are. There are plans for another LGBT STEMinar at Sheffield next year.

How did you find the diversity as a student?
It was not great. I think when I was at the University of Oxford, UK, where I got my PhD, there were about 1,000 chemists in total. At least 75% of them were white men. I have no idea how many of the chemists were LGBT, but I do know that they were silent. Occasionally, there were rumours or gossip about individuals, but it was always negative. It was a hostile environment in the early 1990s. That started to change when former prime minister Tony Blair introduced civil partnerships in 2004.

So 'don't ask, don't tell' was the de facto policy?
Yes. I wasn't 'out' when I started at the University of York. As a result, I engaged in a lot of self-censorship. When chatting about the weekend with colleagues, I'd neutralize the gender of my partner or just not talk about my personal life at all. But I'd end up in difficult situations — half lying, half telling the truth and trying to remember what I had told individual people to be consistent in conversations.

What prompted you to come out?
I was in a long-term relationship and it got more ridiculous not to talk about it. I had been in my job for 4 or 5 years when another gay colleague arrived in the department. It gave me a bit of confidence. I came out in 2002, and I received an overall positive response. Some people were surprised but the uncomfortable period didn't last long. York has one of the most diversity-friendly chemistry departments.

You've been very open since then. Do junior colleagues contact you to discuss LGBT issues?
Yes, I get tens of e-mails from people globally, often people in junior positions, such as postdocs who are unsure about what impact coming out could have on their career. The apprenticeship model leaves junior researchers dependent on their supervisor's recommendation. People worry that even unconscious bias could bleed into a reference letter for a job application. There's no easy answer. Every supervisor is different. The last thing I want to do is say 'come out', and have supervisors write horrible letters.

You make fun YouTube videos, and encourage your students to do so, too. Why?
My videos — notably the chemistry of mephedrone or the science behind the television show *Breaking Bad* — got general traction beyond students. I decided to encourage my students to make videos as a way to empower them with a voice. I wanted them to realize that they don't have to just absorb knowledge, they can be a source of it. It also became a way for me to discuss diversity issues and use it as an education tool. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.