GRADUATE JOURNAL

First-night nerves

My first talk at a national meeting provided me with a great educational experience — and a bit of stress. The day before I left for the meeting, my adviser asked me to add some new details. This initially threw me, because I had thought my talk was set — adding more details could push me over my allotted time limit.

Apart from this, I was also worried about the question-and-answer session, because this is where the unexpected can happen. I was concerned that no one would have any questions or that someone would ask something I couldn't answer.

Both those concerns led me to practise and perfect my talk — meaning I didn't have so much time to take detailed notes on other speakers and poster presentations.

In the end, my nerves worked to my advantage. After I cut out some flashy but unnecessary animations, my talk finished on time. My preparation for the question-and-answer period paid off, too. I fielded several great questions about issues that I had thought about and so could address confidently. That felt really good. And focusing on my own talk stopped me from rushing to as many sessions as possible. Instead, I attended only those talks and poster presentations I felt were essential. The whole experience gave me fresh inspiration — and ended without trauma. ■

Anne Margaret Lee is a graduate student at Harvard University.

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

Postdoc problems — postdoc solutions

Since it was set up in 2003, the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) has been raising awareness about the challenges faced by postdocs in the United States. It advocates three main collaborative approaches to help solve these issues: positive change, the provision of resources to empower stakeholders who seek change, and the formation of a network and virtual gathering place for postdocs and their allies.

Recent months have seen developments in each of these three areas. Advocacy has brought an increase in the amounts that institutions can receive in training grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The NPA will also play an active role in encouraging the NIH to implement the recommendations in the National Research Council's recent *Bridges to Independence* report.

Meanwhile, the NPA has developed three new resources to improve the postdoc training experience. The *Recommended Practices Guide* targets leaders of research institutions and presents recommendations from national organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences and the Association of American Universities.

The Postdoc Association Toolkit aims to help postdocs start up or maintain a local postdoc association. This online toolkit includes sample by-laws, budgets and guidance on how to represent postdocs within a larger research institution.

And the International Postdoc Survival Guide offers guidance to postdocs from outside the United States. The website explains the differences between a postdoc in the United States and other countries, provides a comparison of the different types of visa available to foreign postdocs, and gives advice on how to negotiate with a principal investigator.

The third prong of the NPA's work has focused on networking and community-building activities. The association's third annual meeting, held in San Diego last month, brought together postdocs, faculty members and administrators from research institutions and national organizations across the United States. Participants debated the best strategies for seeking positive change.

As the national conversation about the postdoc experience shifts from identifying problems to focusing on solutions, the NPA will continue to work for the best interests of postdocs. ■

Keith Micoli is executive board chair, National Postdoctoral Association.

www.nationalpostdoc.org

MOVERS

Tim Berners-Lee, professor of computer science, University of Southampton, UK

One thing Tim Berners-Lee would like, he says, is an in-depth knowledge of a subject area: he calls himself "jack-of-all-trades, master of none". From the inventor of the World-Wide Web, that seems a startling claim.

But Berners-Lee may be on course to get his wish, as he takes up an appointment at the University of Southampton, UK. There he will immerse himself in the Semantic Web, which aims to give information a clearly defined meaning, so that computers and people can work together more effectively. He will retain his current professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but by working more closely with Southampton, he hopes to give the semantic project increased momentum.

Berners-Lee followed an unusual path. The son of two mathematicians, he grew up with a love of electronics. On his way to a first-class degree in physics at Oxford, he spent much of his time building a computer from an old television set and some cheap parts.

"At the time, I was a budding engineer," he says. "I didn't personally know any people doing computer-science research, who might have served as role models. Maybe I should have gone to the United States to do a masters and then come back and done a PhD in computer science."

Turning away from academia, he took a series of jobs in Dorset — largely because he liked the seaside location. In 1989, as a database engineer at CERN, the European Particle Physics Laboratory, he got on with another spare-time project, and the World-Wide Web was born.

"An awful lot of things had to be in alignment for the web to take off," he says. "For the first few years, it didn't have the critical mass to make the world sit up and take notice. I and others at CERN did a great deal of work talking to people and encouraging them to give it a try."

Now, with the Semantic Web, he faces a similar challenge — getting people to adopt a new technology when others are already in place. But he is exploring how the Semantic Web could be useful for life sciences, which he is learning more about on the fly. And in the process, another field may benefit from Berners-Lee's jack-of-all-trades inventiveness. ■

CV

1994–current: Senior research scientist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and director, World Wide Web Consortium.
1984–94: Computer engineer, CERN, Geneva, Switzerland.
1981–84: Head of technical design, Image Computer Systems, Wimborne, Dorset, UK.
1980: Consultant software engineer, CERN, Geneva, Switzerland.
1978–80: Software designer, D. G. Nash, Dorset, UK.
1976–78: Principal engineer, Plessey Telecommunications, Dorset, UK.