

Has the gamble paid off?

I was pretty nervous when I first arrived in Johannesburg for my postdoc 10 months ago, and not just because I had not set foot in Africa before agreeing to work there for a couple of years. I was also wondering if my move would turn out to be a positive step forward in my scientific career. I felt that to make progress I needed a change, but was I making the right change? As I reach the half-way stage of my postdoc, and the end of my tenure as a Naturejobs journal keeper, am I any closer to knowing either way?

It's taken me some time to get used to a new country and a new department, but on balance I've really enjoyed my time in South Africa so far. For a geologist, it's a truly spectacular place to explore: I've sampled three-billion-year-old lavas that looked as if they were erupted yesterday; seen in ancient tidal ripples evidence of a time when the Moon loomed much larger in the night sky; stood right on the Cambrian boundary and examined fossils of the earliest multicellular life; and much, much more. The challenges of trying to decipher the magnetic signature of rocks hundreds of times older than any I've studied before, and learning about new techniques and equipment as I do so, have also contributed to a definite broadening of my scientific horizons since I arrived here. For that, it's been well worth putting up with a slightly less up-to-date lab and the rather more than occasional power cut.

But however enjoyable my day-to-day experiences have been, I still have some way to go before I can consider my postdoc to be a success professionally. When I'm thinking about what comes next – which is something you do quite a lot when you're on a short-term contract – my biggest concern is whether I'm doing the right things to ensure that there *is* a next. Future employers will want to see tangible achievements from my time here: in other words, publications. I've got to the stage where I have some potentially interesting results, but I've still got plenty of work to put in over the next few months to refine these preliminary data into a well-supported, and publishable, scientific story about the early tectonic evolution of Earth's surface.

My other concern when I first arrived here was developing the skills necessary to progress towards being a truly independent scientist – moving from working on a single research project to developing, running and funding a coherent research programme. As a postdoc, I am still working within the confines of someone else's project, so there are limits to how far I can develop in this respect. But I am expected to work with much less guidance than a PhD student, and as the only palaeomagnetist here in Johannesburg, I am given considerable leeway in the direction I choose to take my research. I need to make sure that I make the most of that independence over the next few months. I also need to keep following up on loose ends from my last position and my PhD, which is still generating important new publications, and will help me to develop new research ideas in the future. I'm starting to understand what it means to be a principal investigator and what skills I need to become one.

So I can certainly see many positive aspects to my move to South Africa. On the negative side, although I've helped out on some very enjoyable field trips, I have missed being more involved in teaching. My lecturing or supervisory duties were the most rewarding parts of my previous job. I enjoy my research, but for me to have a truly satisfying academic career, research is not enough. That's still a useful insight,

though, which gives me a much more focused idea of where my future path should lead than I had this time last year.

In my first column, I spoke of moving to South Africa as a bit of a gamble – an attempt to get my career out of the doldrums. Although my long-term survival in academia is still by no means guaranteed, I feel much more in control of my own destiny than I did a year ago. This suggests that my gamble has largely paid off. But only time will tell.

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