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Rewards of seeing potential

Youth and enthusiasm: those two characteristics dominated my impressions during a visit to the Sanger Centre in Hinxton, near Cambridge, UK, earlier this month. They are qualities that the centre has used to make up for shortages in trained bioinformatics and sequencing technicians. Rather than cast a global recruiting net, the centre chose to look more locally. Rather than focus on PhD pedigree, recruiters have emphasized potential.

Many of the centre's home-grown talent came to the Sanger with little formal science training, often nothing beyond the odd university course. Although potential is less tangible than a degree, the centre seems to have successfully tapped into it, as recognized by these people's contributions to sequencing the human genome and other organisms.

Training people and recognizing them for their efforts — technicians at the Sanger routinely find their names on scientific papers — pays off, says Carol Churcher, a group leader for pathogen sequencing. Churcher, who herself has no postgraduate degree, says that technicians tend to stay for several years; seldom do they leave within months. Some of them, with the centre's assistance, go on to more formal training.

As more projects emphasize discovery science over the hypothesis-driven approach, there could be room for more people keen to contribute who, for one reason or another, never pursued a postgraduate degree. In order to attract these people, research institutions must be willing to train them and to treat them as partners rather than as service employees. The Sanger Centre is already recognized as a model of genomic excellence. Perhaps it should also be considered as a model of scientific training.

Paul Smaglik

Naturejobs editor

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