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Physical paradoxes

During a recent visit to some federal physics labs near Chicago, I saw three career trends that seemed to be contradictory. First was the discovery that physics graduate students and postdocs are likely to find it hard to secure a long-term faculty post. Yildirim Mutaf, a graduate student doing his thesis research at Fermilab, notes that only about 10% of his peers would secure such positions.

Compounding matters was the sense that the search for qualified people to staff the labs is not easy. "By and large I have to look outside the United States," says Robert Rosner, chief scientist at Argonne National Laboratory.

Perhaps most perplexing of all is Fermilab's seeming insistence on contributing to its own apparent obsolescence. Several groups there are creating instruments for the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Switzerland, which will be seven times more powerful than Fermilab's own Tevatron collider. An operational LHC could well move the epicentre of high-energy physics away from Chicago.

How are the national labs dealing with these apparent inconsistencies? By selecting physicists who are adaptable, as well as creating new opportunities, says Rosner. Mutaf, for example, is keeping his options open, training himself in basic research techniques ready for an academic job, but making himself aware of opportunities in the private sector, such as finance. Rosner, meanwhile, is trying to attract more top physicists by sponsoring the development of new technologies and by touting generous postdoc programmes. And Fermilab scientists, by helping the LHC, are setting themselves up as collaborators.

By employing such agility, scientists at Argonne and Fermilab have managed to make three sets of opposing perceptions equally true — maybe Illinois should be renamed the quantum state.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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