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Experience counts

Old scientists don't really retire, they just find somewhere new to work — and Vida Vambutas is trying to help them. A former instructor at Hunter College in New York, Vambutas is building a database to help older scientists to find work, and to help companies and universities to tap into their knowledge. The seeds for this fledgling Retired Scientists Cooperative (www.retiredscientists.org) were planted a few years ago, when Vambutas was wondering what to do when she reached retirement age. During a subsequent fellowship at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York, she met other colleagues who were pondering the same question. They now sit on the cooperative's board.

The idea has met with some interest from the corporate world. Vambutas initially wrote to companies about hiring retired scientists on a temporary basis. They wrote back asking for a list of available scientists, which she didn't have. Since then, she has built up a database of more than 200 retired scientists, but is seeking to get more diversity into the roster, which is weighted towards microbiology.

The construction of such a database should be a win-win situation. The scientists listed have spent a lifetime accumulating knowledge. Companies and universities could benefit from tapping into that knowledge, without much expense, as retired scientists are only seeking short-term work. Some of that knowledge — especially old techniques that have fallen out of favour — may still be relevant to today's workplace.

If successful, the model could be used by other associations and disciplines. Scientists, after all, are always looking for more problems to solve. And even when they have full-time jobs, many scientists are interested in extracurricular activities as independent contractors.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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