GRADUATE JOURNAL

Undertaking undergraduates

One spring, when I was an earnest and energetic young master's student, an undergraduate asked if she could work on a summer project with me. Thoughts of generating twice the data per unit time and having someone else brew the lab coffee fleetingly crossed my mind. Why not?

The idea of an immediate increase in data evaporated when I found out how time-consuming it is to bring an undergraduate up to speed. I wanted her experience in research to be good, so I organized a four-month project for her, briefed her on the wider scope of her work and checked her results. It was harder than I thought to make a series of repeated experiments seem important — how do you motivate a student when research is often quite dry? My own work slowed down.

In the end, we generated a fairly complete report. The student was happy, although I had accomplished less that summer than I had wanted. But I learned a lot about organizing someone else's project, and it became somewhat addictive to show students how rewarding research can be.

I have since supervised other summer projects. But not this year — I need to focus on finishing my own work. It's time for another fresh graduate student to figure out their supervising style. ■

Sidney Omelon is a PhD student in bone biomaterials at the Samuel Lunenfeld Research Institute, Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, Canada.

NUTS & BOLTS

Interview preparation

It's the moment you've been waiting for. You have managed to get an interview for a coveted position. The next step is to show up and dazzle them with your qualifications and charm, right? Not quite so fast.

An interview is as much about your potential employer as it is about you. So you need to do some research. Granted, this isn't a typical scientific assignment, but finding out as much as you can about your possible workplace can only help you in the interview.

The first step is obvious — hit the organization's website for an overview. This applies for posts in academia as well as industry. Most academic departments have their own website, as do many principal investigators. It's good to familiarize yourself with the work of potential colleagues before you meet them — whatever the sector.

With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

After you've seen what the organization has to say for itself, move on to find out how others view it. You can get corporate information from directories such as Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Hoover's Online and D&B Million Dollar Database. And Vault.com goes beyond financial data to offer company snapshots.

For an outside perspective of academia, publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* provide a good overview of the US system. Academic society

publications and scientific journals also offer timely coverage of issues and organizations.

But the best source of knowledge comes from people who have worked for the organization. Try talking to someone who holds a similar position to the one you are seeking, or contact former employees who held the position in the past.

Continue researching during the interview by talking to your prospective co-workers. Find out what they spend their time on, as well as what they relish and abhor about their jobs. Soak in all you can about the position and the culture to imagine yourself working there.

Such thorough research will impress the interviewer with your knowledge and, more importantly, will allow you to judge your fit with the organization. ■

Deb Koen is vice-president of Career Development Services and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal's CareerJournal.com*.

MOVERS

Vishva Dixit, vice-president of molecular oncology, Genentech, South San Francisco

Vishva Dixit almost gleefully chose a career path that ran contrary to conventional wisdom. Raised in a strong family tradition of medicine (both of his parents practised in Kenya when he was growing up), he traded his MD for a research position focusing on molecular biology. Rather than doggedly pursue an early interest, he switched to another topic after reading a popular magazine. And after climbing the academic ladder to

tenure, he left for industry. Once there, he thought he'd be content to while away his career doing research, but late last year he joined the ranks of senior management.

Dixit's first change, when he chose basic research over clinical practice, mortified his mother. "She always said: 'Why did you go to medical school if you're going to do this?'," Dixit says.

But he was fascinated by cellular processes, and pursued a line of research in extracellular matrices. "Then one day, out of the blue, I decided to change focus," he says. "I just wasn't making inroads."

The defining moment came when he read an article in *Scientific American* about tumour-necrosis factor. Back then, this protein was noted for its association with inflammation, but Dixit was struck by its ability to kill cells. So he contacted the biotech firm Genentech in South San Francisco, which was doing research on the protein and could produce large

quantities of it, and asked for some samples. "The company was exceedingly generous and sent me a thousand times more than I needed," Dixit says.

Those samples allowed Dixit and his colleagues to tease apart the mechanisms of programmed cell death, or apoptosis, and led to Genentech inviting him to a job interview. At first, Dixit wasn't interested — he planned to see his career out as a tenured professor at the University of Michigan. But he thought he would take advantage of the flight to the Bay Area to visit his brother.

Once at the company's offices, he was impressed by its commitment to basic research, but was still wary. He had what he describes as "the academic's traditional suspicion of industry". So he talked to David Goeddel, one of Genentech's scientific founders, who had left to run Tularik, a Genentech spin-off. He helped to convince Dixit to go against the grain one more time. ■

CV

1999–: Adjunct professor, pharmaceutical-chemistry department, University of California, San Francisco

1997–2003: Director and then senior director of molecular oncology, Genentech, South San Francisco

1986–99: Assistant professor rising to professor in 1995, pathology department, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, Michigan

1982–86: Postdoctoral fellow, Department of Biological Chemistry, Washington University School of Medicine, St Louis, Missouri