GRADUATE JOURNAL

A foot in two doors

When I decided to leave my industry job to earn a master's degree, I knew I would return. Consequently, I sniffed out opportunities, went to interviews and even got a few job offers before I handed over my lab keys. When I left industry for the second time to do a PhD, I again assumed I would be back. But this time I did not feel the same drive to have a safe industry offer.

While talking to a senior scientist at a conference (see *Nature* **427,** 570; 2004), he pointed out that great research careers can spring from working on the leading edge of a new field. If given the option, he opined, a young researcher should run for risky, less-mature fields of research, and work to be part of a new wave.

Of course, that is easier to say when one holds a secure senior research position, but I think he has a point. Hunting down a postdoc position in a challenging and emerging field may be the least risky career move I make.

The job market will always fluctuate, and no one knows which research fields will boom in the future. There will be few times when I can follow my instinct and see what happens. Still, I won't make that jump without sending change-of-address notes to my industry contacts. ■

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RECRUITERS & ACADEMIA

E-recruiting

In academia, researchers traditionally use osmosis to build multidisciplinary collaborations — scientists diffuse into a new field by reading research in an area, then picking their partners. But the splitting of science into smaller units and the explosion in the amount of published literature has made creating such connections difficult.

This problem can be overcome by using the Internet. Hosting profiles of users can serve as a worldwide magnet for like-minded, if far-flung, kindred spirits, and can simplify the process of bringing scientists together.

Over the past five years I have used such e-recruiting techniques to help seed the growth of a new field called 'telepreventive medicine', which uses the Internet to educate people about preventive medicine. The network has grown from fewer than 50 individuals in 1999 to more than 13,400 scientists from 151 countries this year. The mission is to tap into every scientist interested in disease prevention, and to provide, for free, a 'supercourse' — an open-source set of PowerPoint lectures on prevention for educational usage worldwide.

The e-recruitment strategy combines technology with social currency to boost involvement. For example, scientists working in epidemiology naturally want to help arrest the spread of disease. So they share lectures because they know their work will benefit others — especially colleagues in the developing world.

The network has expanded using both low- and high-tech methods. On the low-tech side, many on the network tell their friends and faculty members who, in turn, become users. And, as a group, we annually distribute 10,000 CDs with 1,000 lectures on them and ask recipients to pass copies to colleagues and students.

On the high-tech side, the network uses weekly updates to alert users to additions. It can also respond quickly to a crisis. For example, should a tornado hit Oklahoma, an announcement for information can be sent out through the network and within hours there will be a 'tornado supercourse' set of experts, accompanied by lectures that people can tap into.

The next step may be to widen the network beyond public health into all of science. I envisage a broader application that could bring together scientists with common interests but from different disciplines. ■

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MOVERS

Matthew Sherman, senior vice-president, Synta Pharmaceuticals, Lexington, Massachusetts

Matthew Sherman's career path seems almost cyclical. Emerging from an academic background in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, he went to work for the Genetics Institute, a small biotechnology company in Cambridge. That was eventually acquired by the drug giant American Home Products based in Pennsylvania. Now, some 12 years later, Sherman finds himself back in the Boston area as senior vice-president and chief medical officer for another small company, Synta Pharmaceuticals.

CV

1992–2004: Associate director, clinical research rising to clinical site head, clinical research and development, Wyeth-Ayerst Research/Genetics Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts and Collegeville, Pennsylvania

1983–1992: Fellow in medical oncology rising to assistant clinical professor of medicine, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, Massachusetts

Sherman attributes his career direction to Alexander Rich, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with whom Sherman worked as an undergraduate. Rich was an MD who had opted for a career in X-ray crystallography rather than clinical practice. He pointed out to Sherman that the traditional path from MD into practice or PhD to tenure was not obligatory.

Sherman took that advice and after earning his MD began a fellowship that allowed him to split his time between patient care and oncology research. That led to a position where he could add teaching to his research and clinical practice. "I love all three," Sherman says.

During his nine years in academia, Sherman began cultivating an entrepreneurial side. "I was interested in combining all the skills I'd learned in the lab with the business skills of what it took to put a company together and to develop a product," Sherman says.

So in 1992, he bit the bullet and left academia to join the Genetics Institute. There he was able to learn the business of drug discovery and development. But after five years of on-the-job training, the company was bought by American Home Products and Sherman found himself working for a very large firm.

Now that he has spent time in such an environment he is ready for a new challenge. "I wanted to take the skill sets I learned and apply them to the small biotech setting at Synta," he says.

The Synta job appealed to him because, having specialized in oncology and immunology, he can now work across all disease groups and have a broader involvement with the drug-development process. And in doing so, he wants to keep the spirit of good mentoring alive. "As a professor, your biggest impact is on the students you teach. In industry, it's the employees under you," says Sherman. ■