GRADUATE JOURNAL

Through the looking glass

The English countryside flew by as I sat on my train heading for Cambridge, the university where I spent four years as an undergraduate. This time I was going there as a postgrad to take part in a multidisciplinary retreat.

Once there, I found myself with 80 other PhD students. We were an eclectic bunch: scientists, historians, theologians, psychologists, mathematicians and composers. Over a few days, we had to team up to manage an environmental crisis, help a developing nation, and even run the European Commission.

When you throw strangers together and attempt to solve such problems, some amazing things happen. People fell into different roles quite naturally — leaders, thinkers, coordinators — and I found the team dynamics fascinating to watch. Many students work in relative isolation, so working intensively with others for 12 hours a day was a real eye-opener.

An odd thing for a PhD student to do, you might say, but it was a wonderful experience. I gained insight into myself and others, and made new friends. By the end of the week I was shattered but I didn't want to leave. As my train pulled away, the countryside was the same but I was looking at it through slightly different eyes. ■

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NUTS & BOLTS

Passing the interview

So, you've done your homework on the organization, applied for a job and landed an interview. How can you give yourself the best possible chance of success? The key is preparation.

Before you go, pick three to five points that you believe are essential for you to make in the interview. This will allow you to highlight these messages if you're asked open-ended questions such as: "Tell me about yourself" or "Why should we hire you?"

You also need to be ready to deal with 'behaviour-based' questions. These will focus on your past behaviour in an effort to predict your future performance. They are designed to make you give specific examples of the competencies and behaviours that the interviewer is seeking. To respond well, you should cover three aspects:

With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

situation, action and result. For example, rather than simply stating that you're resourceful, offer a specific example that shows this.

Early on in the interview, you should identify the interviewer's main priorities. Assess the most important issues and address them in your responses. Capturing the interviewer's perspective will allow you to present your strengths in a way that matches their needs.

Don't talk for the sake of talking. Spend at least half of your time listening so that you better understand the requirements and

underlying needs of the position. Asking questions about the corporate culture and development opportunities will allow you to assess your compatibility for the post.

Once the interview is over, remember to follow it up. If you are still interested in the job, close the interview by expressing your enthusiasm. Find out the timeline for the appointment, and encourage the interviewer to contact your references. Send a letter reinforcing your interest. About a week later, call the company to check on the vacancy's status and again express your interest.

A strong presentation coupled with questions that reflect interest and insight will put you in a good position to get an offer and make a decision that is best for you. ■

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

MOVERS

Alistair Walker, director, Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory, La Serena, Chile

To follow a waxing interest in astronomy, Alistair Walker had to leave his native New Zealand. He chose South Africa as a place to do his PhD, partly because the University of Cape Town's astronomy department was one of only a few places that used the computer-controlled instrumentation that had captured Walker's imagination.

As an undergraduate, Walker had heard of high-speed photoelectric photometry, a new technique for rapidly measuring light emitted by stars and storing the data digitally. This technique was a revolution in the early 1970s, when

basic photographic work was often the norm in astronomy, says Walker.

The technology was developed by Edward Nather at the University of Texas and applied to astronomy by Brian Warner. Walker found it "technically exciting", so when he heard that Warner had moved to Cape Town, he jumped at the chance to work with the pioneer.

That turned out to be a good decision because, in addition to tapping into Warner's expertise, the Astronomical Observatory's Sutherland facility provided him with ample observing time and state-of-the-art equipment. But the distance and isolation proved trying at times. He travelled from New Zealand to "spectacularly beautiful" Cape Town by ship, and never went to a single international conference during his PhD. "That would be very unusual these days," Walker says.

After that, he bounced back and forth between South Africa and South America

— often drawn, as before, by new technologies and techniques. For example, he returned to South Africa following the development by Alec Boksenberg of University College London of an image photon counting system (IPCS) to improve two-dimensional spectroscopy. Boksenberg had built two machines, one of which was designated for the William Herschel Telescope in La Palma, Spain. But because that telescope was then two years from operation, the IPCS was sent instead to the South African Astronomical Observatory, so Walker followed.

Walker says that it is important to identify technology in its infancy and "to take a chance". He has even passed up an opportunity to work closer to home, in Australia, choosing Chile instead, because he thought he had better scientific opportunities there. And he is happy to have built his entire scientific career south of the Equator. ■

CV **1987–:** Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory (CTIO) in Chile — member of scientific staff since 1987, deputy director since 2000
1979–87: staff scientist, South African Astronomical Observatory, Cape Town
1977–79: Assistant scientist, CTIO