

GRADUATE JOURNAL

The 'lab widow'

It's 6 p.m.. I'm in the lab and my wife rings: "When will you be home?"

"Well," I say, "I've got to finish some mini-preps, plate out some bacteria, set up a PCR and transfect some cells, so I should be there in a couple of hours. Maybe around 8 p.m. or so."

At 10.15 p.m. I call my wife. She doesn't answer (probably annoyed that I'm so late). I leave a message on the answering machine and rush home.

After regularly repeating this episode, I have concluded that I am perhaps the worst-ever judge of 'lab time'. I'm so bad that my wife automatically increases my estimated arrival time by a third. She has a 'normal' job with an eight-hour day, whereas I'm doing crazy trying-to-finish-my-thesis hours, which run from about 10 a.m. until whenever, every day. At times, we can go for days seeing each other only in passing.

When she told me that she was beginning to feel like a 'lab widow', I knew I had to do something. So now, I try to reserve at least one night every week for us.

It is hard for scientists to maintain relationships with partners who don't work in the lab. Maybe that is why inter- and intra-lab romances are so common. Passion for one's research is a good thing. But we should try to be at least equally passionate about those who have passion for us. ■

Tshaka Cunningham is a fifth-year graduate student at Rockefeller University in New York.

Seeking feedback

Most people relegate professional feedback to an annual review or an approaching tenure decision. Some have such an aversion to criticism that they try to avoid it altogether. Whatever your approach has been, consider the benefits of seeking feedback regularly and informally.

Feedback can affirm your self-awareness, identify skills gaps and align priorities. At the very least, it can reduce the fear of the unknown. Rather than restricting feedback to a formal process, seek it regularly from a variety of sources. To get the most from it, focus on three key elements: who to ask, how to receive it and what to do with it.

The people to ask for feedback are individuals who are familiar with your work, have credibility in your eyes and who will be honest with you. An



With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

effective feedback provider will be specific, offer examples, and address strengths as well as potential problems.

Select one person to start with and set up a meeting time. During the discussion, listen carefully to comments without interrupting. Don't resort to denying, defending, attacking or withdrawing from unfavourable views. Seek clarification and ask for specific examples if you're uncertain about the message. For feedback on your work, consider the following questions. What strengths do you feel I have?

What is my reputation? Are there any tough messages I need to hear? What talents am I not using? What actions would you suggest that I take? What other people or resources would you recommend to further my development?

Feedback comes to life only after the discussion, when you consider its implications and make choices about your follow-up. Document the discussion for future reference, and look for patterns in responses, giving particular attention to themes that emerged from more than one source. Finally, create a development plan for your own use or for integration into the existing review process.

By doing this, the feedback process will greatly enhance your personal and professional development. ■

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

MOVERS

Charles Alcock, director, Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, Massachusetts



Charles Alcock gained autonomy relatively early in his career — although it proved to be something of a mixed blessing. As a fellow at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study in New Jersey, he had a respectable stipend and stimulating weekly lunches with other astrophysicists, but he didn't have to do any teaching, grant-writing or administration.

CV 2000–04: Professor of astronomy and astrophysics, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

1986–2000: Director, Institute of Geophysics and Planetary Physics, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, California

1981–86: Associate professor of physics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge

1977–81: Long-term member, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey

1977: PhD in astronomy and physics, California Institute of Technology

The downside to this was that he quickly had to learn those additional skills during his first professorship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge. "The life of a professor is demanding," he says.

But Alcock was pleased to find that responsibility outside research can bring its own rewards. Teaching a course in statistical mechanics at MIT allowed him to "correct a gap in my own education", he says. And the "outstanding" standard of students there forced him to prepare rigorously for his lectures.

If his time at MIT helped him with his teaching, Alcock learned most of his management skills in his next post at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California. Alcock says he was lucky that his first boss at Livermore was Claire Max — now professor of astronomy and astrophysics at the University of California, Santa Cruz — who had an almost intuitive

understanding of how to get people to work together on large-scale projects.

"She had a very good sense of how to ask other people what they could do," Alcock says. "She was very interested in other peoples' skills and finding out what they were interested in."

With Max, Alcock learned how to manage his own large project, the Massive Compact Halo Object (MACHO), which aims to monitor the brightness of 1.8 million stars. "I don't think I had any of the skills needed to get a group of 18 or 20 people working together," Alcock says.

At his new position, heading the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that skill will be even more valuable. The centre has more than 300 PhD scientists associated with it, and several large-scale projects running simultaneously. But Alcock believes he can show that his early autonomy is no barrier to success. ■