

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Brave old world

Growing up in the Thuringian Forest in East Germany, I faced the Berlin Wall from the wrong side until it collapsed in 1989. Eight years later, I headed west to study medicine in Würzburg, Bavaria. At the time, western Germany seemed significantly different from the east: there was less urban decay, for instance.

But the differences between eastern and western Germany were minor compared with what I've just experienced trading Würzburg for Oxford. After I graduated last year, I decided to pursue neuroscience research rather than become a clinician. A Wellcome Trust studentship helped me take the next step, and brought me to Britain.

Arriving in Oxford was like entering another dimension — the place seems more like an ancient Greek city-state. It has its own traditions, myths, laws and anachronisms. Imagine being tested on the latest developments in molecular biology while wearing an academic gown, dark suit, white bow tie and plain white shirt.

Cutting-edge science and traditional dress, innovative research and rigid traditions. That's how Oxford is — a living contradiction. It's one of the most fascinating places I've been. Life here spans several centuries and lifestyles. It makes Oxford a special place. And it makes moving here the biggest change in my life so far. ■

Tobias Langenhan is a first-year graduate student in neuroscience at the University of Oxford, UK.

Online applications

Ever wonder if anyone actually reads the CVs that you submit online in response to a job advert? Because many companies have switched to electronic systems for tracking applications, it is important to use their established framework. But how do you ensure that your bid for employment gets noticed?

Before clicking on 'submit', make sure you have customized your application for the position. This may seem like a lot of work, but it's time well spent. First the job-tracking software and later the hiring manager will be scanning for as exact a match as possible.

Does this mean you should inflate or fabricate to fit? No. Be true to yourself and show your best side by highlighting the actions and results from your experience that are most likely to meet the employer's needs. Link the



With Deb Koen
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words you use to the terminology in the job listing — this will help you make the initial cut. And tailor your message by using the space that's generally provided for a cover letter to focus your comments on the potential value that you offer the position and employer.

Beyond customizing your materials, you must go 'live' at every opportunity and as quickly as possible. Although the front end of the application process is immersed in technology, the hiring decisions are always made by humans. Go out of your way to make

contacts that may be helpful to you to learn about organizations, to generate leads and to make referrals. Employers love it when someone they respect makes a referral to them because it simplifies the selection process.

Approach your own network of fellow researchers, former advisers and colleagues for possible referrals that may draw attention to your online application. And be sure to return the favour. Networking is an ongoing, mutually beneficial exchange that builds lasting relationships (see *Nature* 430, 812–813; 2004).

With hundreds, sometimes thousands, of CVs submitted online, customizing your message and making contact can turn a virtual application into a concrete opportunity. ■

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

MOVERS

Richard Perham, master of St John's College, University of Cambridge, UK



The new master of St John's College looks out of his window onto the ancient Cambridge gardens and says: "To this day, I think I'm lucky to be here." It's more than just a modest remark from Richard Perham, former head of the University of Cambridge biochemistry department.

Brought up by a widowed mother, Perham became the first person in his family to go to university, with the help of scholarships. Although he has enjoyed stints in Australia, mainland Europe and the United States (he met his wife, the biologist Nancy Lane, at Yale), he's remained based at Cambridge since he arrived there fresh from national service in

1958. He has always found inspiration, he says, "walking down these streets that Newton and Darwin walked down, in this place where so much has happened".

Robust funding at that time created an innovative environment. "With money around, one could do all sorts of things," says Perham, recalling the start of his work on self-assembling structures, multi-functional proteins and macromolecular complexes. "It was a more rosy future than young people perceive now."

Key interactions with legendary scientists further fuelled Perham's enthusiasm. Max Perutz was an early mentor. And Fred Sanger — on his way to a second Nobel chemistry prize — taught Perham to choose a problem that didn't have an obvious solution.

"It was a lively place, a lot of fun," Perham remembers. "At the same time, I was impressed by people's dedication to research." He has tried to create that same atmosphere in his own labs, and

draws on memories of the generosity of Perutz and Sanger when he helps his own students and postdocs.

"I always remind them that they work with me, not for me," he says. "They'll make their own mistakes, and that's part of the learning process."

It's crucial, Perham adds, for group leaders to learn from their students too. "One goes to a lot of trouble to recruit the brightest and best, and it would be silly not to recognize that they have very acute minds," he says.

Perham is still involved in research, collaborating with colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, to make safer forms of vaccine that contain none of the original pathogen. But his new concern as master of St John's is to raise funds for scholarships and bursaries. If getting his chance at Cambridge was "lucky", he is determined to spread that luck around as many bright young hopefuls as possible. ■

CV **1964–2004:** University of Cambridge biochemistry department (rising to head of department in 1985)
1961–1964: PhD, Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology, Cambridge, UK