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Bench partners

Postdocs and grad students are often called the engine of the research enterprise. That may be true — up to a point. But it leaves out one group that is essential for powering the process: lab technicians.

Data on this group are hard to find: how many are there, what degrees do they hold, and what are their career trajectories? The traditional view is that technicians hold a bachelor's degree or equivalent, have a fixed skill set and often remain entrenched in the role.

But anecdotes that I have collected over the past few years run counter to that. Some students take technician jobs between undergraduate and graduate degrees. Technicians constantly learn new scientific skills and sometimes rise up the management ladder. One former technician I met at the University of Edinburgh, UK, took training courses and is now an administrator there. A columnist on the *Naturejobs* Graduate Journal took a few years off between degrees to work as an industrial technician; he has since gone on to complete a PhD and is now in the middle of a postdoc at the US National Institutes of Health. In one Scottish biotechnology company, a group of technicians completely

shifted the firm's scientific focus in six months. These examples belie the belief that technicians lack career mobility and seldom acquire fresh skills.

But there is more to be learned. What formal training programmes exist for career advancement? How many doctoral students who prefer research to grant writing opt to be technicians after their graduate work? Are technicians able to switch between sectors, and how many go on to excel in non-bench activity, such as management, business development, marketing and regulatory affairs? With the launch of the *Naturejobs* online technicians' portal we aim to explore those questions — because even if technicians are not the engine of research, they are certainly vital cogs.

NATUREJOBS TECHNICIAN FOCUS

◆ www.nature.com/naturejobs/focus/online-tech.html

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