

very helpful to busy editors, who want to know who is familiar with the work and will be easy to reach. Authors should not suggest reviewers who are personal friends or institutional colleagues; including those people could immediately erode the editor's trust. Authors need to find a balance — it is fine to exclude a couple of reviewers who are direct competitors or known naysayers, but restricting too many qualified reviewers can backfire. “As an author, your job is to make the editor's job as easy as possible,” says Blumberg.

New authors can feel overwhelmed when the reviewers' comments come back. Wojtal likes to let reviews sit for a week to let his “blood pressure return to normal”. Blumberg advises copying all of the reviewers' comments into a new electronic document to address each one step-by-step. Authors should work through the list and explain how criticisms were addressed, or why they were not, in the resubmission cover letter to the editor. A clear, succinct resubmission letter may result in an editor making their own decision rather than sending the paper back out for another round of review.

The worst thing an author can do is to ignore a reviewer's criticism and send it back

without an explanation, says Wojtal, who was an editor for the *Journal of Structural Geology* for six years. This, he says, wastes an editor's time trying to resolve the issue on his or her own. Green authors often wonder whether they should appeal a rejection. “If you strongly believe the reviewers have erred and that the editor should hear from you, definitely send an e-mail,” says

Blumberg, who, as an editor, is happy to hear from authors. “Be as polite as possible, stick to the facts, and keep it to the point.”

Young scientists would be wise to embrace written communication as the foundation of an academic career and the key to earning tenure, winning funding and, ultimately, sustaining a research programme, says Hauber. “If your result is not published, you haven't done anything,” he says. “You might not set out to be an enthusiastic writer, but you should try to learn to love it.” ■

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“Recognize that writing is a long process. Find a mentor to guide and coach you.”

Bill Nazaroff

COLUMN

A search for stability

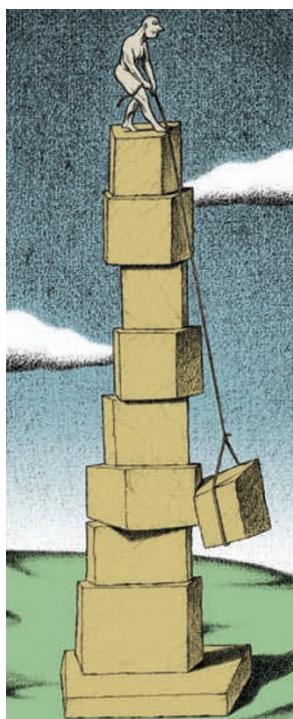
Embracing the unknowns of scientific research is easier when your job has certainty, says **Claire Thompson**.

One big question plagues all postdocs and almost-postdocs: ‘what are you planning to do after you finish?’ It echoed around the room during a poster session at a conference I attended recently. For PhD students, a stint as a postdoc can seem like the obvious answer. But for those who are already postdocs, finding a satisfying answer becomes increasingly difficult.

Everyone has a different response. Some would rather not think about it just yet; others are confident that opportunities will arise when they need them. However, many are pessimistic about their chances in academia and are making plans to escape the well-worn track to research-group leader. Instead, they aim for industry or teaching positions, or ponder the opportunities of a life outside science. After hearing such a range of responses, I began to wonder whether in the end we are all seeking the same thing: to gain stability in our lives.

Stability was something I once thought I would achieve by becoming a postdoc. During my PhD, I lived the life of a typically unlucky student nomad in the difficult rental market of Sydney, Australia. Landlords were selling their properties off, rents were increasing and my life involved a tumultuous whirlwind of fantastically crazy housemates who came and went as I drifted between abodes. By the time I decided to relocate to Germany, I was a professional at hauling all my possessions into a backpack at a moment's notice. There was great satisfaction that as a postdoc I could now afford to rent a place of my own, and I looked forward to setting down some roots.

However, I have since come to the difficult realization that professional life is anything but permanent as a postdoc; no matter how much you love the project you are currently working on or the lab you inhabit, something will have to change eventually. Initially, a two-year fellowship can seem an eternity. It feels



like an endless stretch of months in which to conduct experiments without interruption. However, for me the time has passed quickly. Now, as I streak past the halfway point of my fellowship, I am again hearing that dreaded question.

As a foreign postdoc, I find that this poses particular difficulties. A postdoctoral position is considered a transitional step between being a student and being an academic. Postdoctoral fellowships and contracts are for only limited periods of time, and stipends in particular usually do not include payments towards retirement or social security. At some point postdocs must consider whether to return to their home countries, stay in their adopted countries or seek their fortunes in yet further new academic environments.

This decision requires a lot of careful thinking. It can be particularly difficult for those who have families in which the needs and wants of partners and children must be considered. Enlisting the help of trusted mentors or colleagues who have had comparable past experiences can be immensely valuable.

Although I am reluctant to stop my bench work and think about the future just yet, I am starting to think strategically about where I want to be in the next few years and what steps I can take to get there. I do not want to mindlessly start another postdoc without a solid career plan. To take incremental steps towards my larger aim of a stable, full-time position, I plan to step up my networking at meetings. And I plan to save up some money — I know I may have to weather a job drought before I find the stable position I'm looking for. ■

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