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CHARITIES

Profiting from non-profits

Scientists interested in doling out funds to worthy grant recipients may thrive working at science foundations.

BY ALLA KATSNELSON

Anita Pepper's second career, as administrator of biomedical grant programmes at a non-profit organization, came about through a combination of luck and circumstance. A geneticist by training, she was approaching the end of a five-year postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in 2008 and was thinking about what to do next. She and her husband did not want to relocate, but she knew that an academic job search in a single city was too limited to be successful. And although she enjoyed bench work, she was a naturally social person who liked the idea of interacting more frequently with people.

So Pepper set out on a mission to meet anyone in Philadelphia who held leadership positions, particularly those involved in improving health through education or research. Lunch with a brand executive — who worked with companies and others to design brand identities — led her to another contact who told her about a senior position at the Pew Charitable Trusts in Philadelphia and Washington DC. Pew wanted someone to help administer two biomedical grant initiatives, the Pew Latin American Fellows Program and the Pew Scholars Program. Pepper eagerly applied, captivated by the opportunity to help young scientists to find their footing in an increasingly challenging climate — a struggle she could relate to. Pew hired her as a senior associate in 2008. "It was completely random," she says. "I didn't even know that these jobs existed." She was promoted to director of the programmes in 2012.

CHARITIES CALLING

For people more attracted to facilitating research than to toiling at the bench themselves, working for a foundation or charity could be a great fit. Programme officer jobs in such organizations offer healthy salaries — starting in the range of US$60,000–110,000 in the United States and €30,000–80,000 (US$41,000–109,000) in Europe. Yet many, like Pepper, simply do not know about the existence of such jobs. Even those who do often have mistaken ideas about what they entail. "I think many people have the impression that you're just reading grant applications," says Michael Madeja, managing director at the Hertie Foundation in Frankfurt, the largest private funder of brain research in Germany. "But it's a job with travelling and meeting people, a lot of communication, ▶

and developing your own agenda — it's a very creative situation," says Madeja, who also maintains a lab at the University of Frankfurt.

Most people who escape from a lab to a foundation or other private funder start out as a programme associate or director, overseeing grant programmes that further their organization's agenda by supporting a general area of research, funding work on a specific topic or in a region, or helping a particular group such as early-career scientists. And yes — reading grant applications is almost always part of the gig.

HERTIE FOUNDATION

"What we are looking for is very intelligent, engaged people."
Michael Madeja

"If you don't like reviewing, this is not a job for you," says Richard Wiener, a programme director at the Research Corporation for Science Advancement, a foundation based in Tucson, Arizona, that supports the physical sciences. But just as important is building relationships with current and prospective grant recipients and the research community. "You really need to know your science, but you're also really focused on connecting and developing people, and establishing new collaborations and opportunities," Wiener says.

Communication skills are thus at the heart of such a career. Developing a deep understanding of the topic or population that one's organization funds involves attending and perhaps arranging conferences and cultivating contacts with established experts, up-and-coming researchers and scientists who a programme already funds. Many foundations work closely with grant or fellowship applicants to help them to strengthen their proposals. Some, like Wiener's, also spend considerable time advising researchers whose applications were denied. "It's a supportive role," he says.

The programme manager's precise duties depend on the types of project, but variety is often a key feature. Marta Tufet, an international-activities adviser for science funding at the Wellcome Trust in London, the United Kingdom's largest biomedical research charity, is part of a six-person team that develops the strategy and policy for the Trust's scientific research portfolio in low- and middle-income countries. The team has, for example, funded projects across 51 institutions in Africa, aiming to strengthen universities' research capacity. She seeks out deserving researchers, advises them through the application process and helps to monitor their progress once a programme has been funded. Tufet travels frequently to the African institutions, attending scientific advisory-board and steering-committee meetings and advising on operation and governance matters, as well as on institutions' scientific directions. "It allows me, early on in my career, to have quite a lot of input at a high level, which you wouldn't necessarily have as a young researcher," she says.

Non-profit funding organizations vary greatly in size, structure and culture, so it is helpful for early-career scientists to think about what interests them most. A larger organization might have more of an impact on a field, even if only in the amount of money granted, whereas a smaller one may offer its staff a wider array of responsibilities and more flexibility, but pay a smaller salary. Some organizations engage exclusively in funding; others have advocacy or education components. At the Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation in New York, for example, most scientists oversee grant programmes. But the foundation hired Penny Dacks to collect and summarize the literature on proposed prevention strategies for Alzheimer's disease and cognitive decline and communicate this information to the public, as well as to researchers and clinicians, through opinion pieces in medical journals.

Potential applicants should also decide whether they are committed to bolstering a particular field of research — perhaps one close to their own — or whether they would prefer to work for an organization that funds many areas within and outside science. Betsy Myers, programme director for medical research at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York, found that she loved her daily interactions with experts in the broad swathe of subjects that her organization funds, including environmental conservation, performing arts and child well-being programmes. "Do your homework and really think about where your skills and creativity match up with the organization's," she says.

ALEX PARLINI

"You have to have the confidence to go to somebody who you are not sure will be helpful."
Anita Pepper

PROMISING FUTURE?

The proportion of research funded by the non-profit sector seems to be growing. In 2011, private philanthropic organizations in the United States spent about $1.3 billion on biomedical research. In 2012, public charities, which raise money from a multitude of sources, spent $1 billion. Non-profit organizations took a hit from the economic downturn, with some funders cutting or freezing programmes; but the sector is bouncing back, with many organizations reporting that once-stalled programmes are running again.

"Foundations are actually looking to hire more PhD holders because they want to drive research," says Gina Agiostratidou, a senior programme officer at the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust in New York, who oversees the research portfolio of a programme on type 1 diabetes. The increasing squeeze on US government funding "makes the role of the foundation even more important now", she adds.

But none of this means that such jobs are easy to land. Although there are many non-profit organizations out there, each hires relatively few PhD holders. Tufet estimates that there are about 600 staff members at the Wellcome Trust, but fewer than 40 in the scientific-funding division. Dacks says that when her team sought to hire an extra scientist last spring, there were 100 applicants for the job.

There is no clear way in, says Myers. "And once you're in, you often have to learn through an apprenticeship model," she says. There are exceptions: the Wellcome Trust and the Hertie Foundation both offer internships of a few weeks or months to give career changers a taste of a foundation track. But potential applicants will often need to do legwork to learn about organizations that align with their interests.

This may entail searching the Internet for non-profit organizations that fund or support a particular topic, strolling through the exhibitor booths at conferences to find representatives from such organizations, seeking them out at a university career office or working through the contacts in one's professional network in search of people who hold related posts. The next step is to request an informal chat to find out about prospects at the organization. "You have to have the confidence to go to somebody who you are not sure will be helpful," says Pepper.

Dacks, who realized in the first year of a three-year postdoc that basic research was not her calling, advises scientists who are on time-limited fellowships to start thinking about their career options early, especially if they suspect that academia might be a poor fit. Another tip is to get involved in non-lab activities — as a student representative, say, on a university or research-society committee — that demonstrate and develop one's abilities beyond the bench.

For the right person, the rewards can be tremendous, says Madeja. Although his organization gives out a relatively modest €10 million per year, he feels that it has made a real difference both to the careers of many talented researchers and in supporting Germany's neuroscience community. He likes the way that his foundation can launch new projects with little red tape and take risks with what it chooses to fund. And he appreciates the family-friendly nature of the workplace. "What we are looking for is very intelligent, engaged people," he says, "who just realize that laboratory work is not for them." ■

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