

What You Need to Know in Your First 5 Years Out of Grad School *by Gwen Acton, PhD*

The first five years after graduate school is an exciting and challenging time in the life of most scientists. We face significant decisions about the general route of our careers, tackle our first jobs, and we face new opportunities in our personal lives. Here are some key points to keep in mind about this important time period.

1. Recognize your valuable skills

One of the saddest things I hear from graduating students is the statement, "But all I can do is research." Nothing could be further from the truth, and a belief like that can be very limiting. For example, anyone who has written a thesis must be competent as a technical writer. A graduate student who has spoken at group meetings or given seminars has developed public presentation and communication skills. Doing research in science inevitably requires adept competence in program management. And it's nearly impossible to get by in science without terrific problem solving abilities.

The list goes on and on. Keep in mind that even though you are highly trained in scientific research, you also have acquired important and valuable skills that are applicable to a wide variety of situations, both within science as well as outside of it.

2. Consider your options

Because scientific training takes place almost exclusively in the context of academic labs in large research universities or hospitals, many graduate students have little exposure to the wide variety of choices that are available to them. In your first five years after graduate school, consider all your options.

For example, academic careers can be pursued at large or small universities. Post doc positions can be obtained in both the non-profit and for-profit sectors. And companies employing scientists includes both those explicitly in the life-science sectors, but also those who provide services to those companies (such as legal, consulting, financial), as well as companies in unrelated industries.

3. Focus on what you like

Most of us had little time in graduate school to ponder how we wanted to spend our time, since our thesis work was so all-consuming. The first five years after graduate school are a good time to explore which aspects of what you do are most appealing, and try to focus your efforts on those things.

Some questions to ask yourself: Do you like doing primarily bench work? Were your favorite parts the writing? Or the collaborations? Do you have some other passions outside of science that you can incorporate into your life? You might as well enjoy what you do, because after all, most of us did not choose science for the pay!

4. Discover what is important to you.

It's important some time in your career, hopefully sooner rather than later,

to make sure you are working on problems and doing things in your life that are important to you. If you are working on a research problem or for a company, and you don't care what the ultimate outcome will be, then it is time to ask yourself whether you are in the right position. If helping to cure people is important to you, then working on something abstract might not be the right choice for you.

Similarly, you will be faced with decisions about how to balance work and personal life. Hopefully, you will be in a position to choose to pursue both to a satisfactory level. But at some point you should ask yourself how you want to balance out these needs, since either one could easily justifiably take all our time and effort.

5. Consider your future

Many of us are so happy to get our first job out of graduate school that we may lose sight of where we might want to be in the long term. Some of the best advice I was ever given was to think about where I wanted to be 10 or 20 years from now, and weigh my career and life options in that light. This can be a big help in deciding how to choose between different career paths, or how to pick where to take a job. Of course, you should continue to revise and update your life plan throughout your career, but it can be especially helpful to start doing this in the first five years after graduate school.

6. Research jobs and careers

You could not possibly have survived graduate school without terrific abilities to learn complex new material, perform research, and locate information when you need it. Sadly, many recent graduates forget to apply all these finely honed skills to their own career.

It is important to spend time and effort gathering information about potential jobs, careers, and life style choices, even once you are working. Even if you think you know what you want to do, spending a little bit of time looking at other options can be very productive, if only to reaffirm your choices. After all, you wouldn't conduct an experiment without the proper controls, so why do that to your own career?

Research on your own life choices can involve using the internet to gather information about possible job and careers, and interviewing individuals (such as friends, friends of friends, relatives, or acquaintances) who are working in your desired fields, or are in the organization you are considering.

7. Actively grow your career and life

The first five years after graduate school usually involve investing in your career and personal life. Make sure to try to learn new things and gather new skills. This will sometimes require initiative on your part, such as actively seeking out new training, asking someone to be your mentor, or experimenting with a new technology. On the personal side, don't forget to invest in your life outside of your career, so that you continue to be a fulfilled and happy person. In the long run, this will make you better in your career as well.

8. Success is rarely a solo activity

Most of us didn't get where we are entirely on our own. We had supportive friends and family who helped us get good schooling, as well as a helpful mentor and lab mates who guided us through our research. After graduate school, it's important to actively seek out others who will help you achieve your goals. Find others who support you, both in work

situations and personally. Many people find that it is these personal connections, more than anything else, that are the key to their long-term success.

9. Don't reinvent the wheel

As scientists, we are often cynical about getting help from non-scientists, especially since our careers are so highly specialized. However, there are many important things that are not taught or modeled in graduate school. For example, many of us end up working in the commercial sector, but have had little to no training in business. Or, we end up leading a lab or supervising a group, without having any previous management experience. Some examples of topics that

you might find helpful from a book, class, or coach, include management tools, career advice, business strategy, interviewing tips, public presentation skills, and networking suggestions.

10. This is only the beginning

Even though the first five years after graduate school are formative times in our careers, it is never too late to apply these suggestions. If things don't go exactly the way you want them to (and they often don't), look forward to the next five or ten years, and recalibrate your goals. As a scientist, you know that you can always do the next experiment, even if involves your own life.

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