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A busy manager can't be so shortsighted as to look for only smarts.

**Tooling Up: Defying Gravity**

David G. Jensen  
United States  
22 August 2008

"In a perfect world, scientists should be judged purely by the focused use of their brainpower and by their accomplishments using that faculty," a Ph.D. student told me after a seminar a few months ago. I nodded in general

agreement, but as he walked away, I felt frustrated. We had just completed 60 minutes of Q&A about how companies choose their candidates--and it *isn't* via the "focused use of a person's brainpower."

A short while later, a discussion began on the AAAS *Science Careers* [Discussion Forum](#) with a message that started out the same way, "In a perfect world, ..." Many conversations came to mind that have included this same phrase.

The forum conversation started as a normal back and forth about networking, a subject that comes up often. But soon it mutated into a discussion about the "artificial" nature of the job-seeking process and included the accusation that *Science Careers* promotes this disingenuousness. Earlier Tooling Up articles on networking were dissected and used to support one member's view that we promote annoying phone calls and spam e-mail.

Of course, we do no such thing. Rather, I stress in my articles how important it is for candidates to reach out to people already in industry. Whether it is in person or by telephone or e-mail introduction, it is important to find out how others have made the transition ahead of you and to get--and offer--help when you can. Some high-minded people, it seems, can't get their arms around this concept. They see it as "cheating the system" in some way.

Once I calmed down enough to see past the misuse of my words, I considered the point carefully. I discussed this phenomenon with our forum advisory board and also with a number of my clients in industry. Why is it--besides bitterness--that some people view those who succeed in the job-seeking process as ethically challenged?

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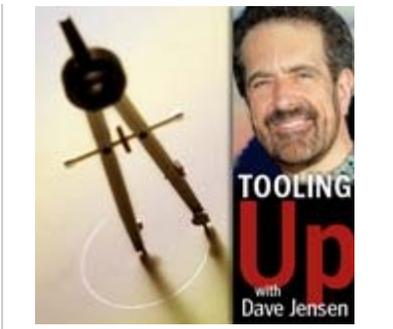
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Some of the managers I talked to believe many young scientists acquire this worldview during their training. They are, in the words of one of my clients, caught up in the "perfect world syndrome." Scientists with this ailment have trouble relating to the way things work in the *non*perfect world we live and work in. Although most scientists recognize that there is more to success, in the corporate world and in life, than brainpower and purely intellectual feats, many of those same scientists fail to fully recognize the implications. They get upset when people don't hire them just because they're smart.

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It's important to realize that companies *do* search for the best, the very smartest people they can find. There isn't a hiring manager in the world who'd admit to anything less. Every search I've conducted over the past couple of decades bears this out. Except that those people--the people who get hired--have other virtues that are equally important in the workplace.

A busy manager can't be so shortsighted as to look for only smarts. She has to look for a person who can do today's job--plus what the position will morph into in the near future. In addition to that, she's hiring someone who needs to work well with a variety of people throughout the organization, so personality counts as well. That's bound to upset you if you are the "perfect world" sort.

There's the problem in a nutshell. The world of employment differs from this view of perfection because it takes more than just brains to make an imperfect world more perfect.

#### WORLDLY MISCONCEPTIONS?

Here are some comments I've heard over the years during my seminars or seen posted on the AAAS *Science Careers* Forum. Do any of them sound familiar to you?

*In a perfect world, I'd be offered a job in industry based solely upon my ability to do the work required.*

As mentioned above, that's industry's goal as well. They want to hire bright people who can do the described work. Unfortunately, for perfect-world advocates, other attributes are necessary to get the work done. That's something hiring managers know that inexperienced scientists often don't. Interpersonal style and cultural fit rank as high as scientific expertise.

Kevin Foley, a forum adviser, reminded me recently that looking at curricula vitae in a big stack doesn't tell a manager anything about their candidates' abilities in these areas. "In a competitive job market, where hiring managers often have multiple, equally qualified candidates to choose from, it is the intangibles that can distinguish you from the crowd and make the difference," Foley adds. In a perfect world, perhaps, all that would be obvious from a curriculum vitae.

*In a perfect world, wearing a suit to an interview would not be necessary because companies would care about things other than your appearance.*

Despite a parade of forum experts discussing how important it is to wear appropriate interview attire, there's a surprising amount of pushback on this topic. Derek McPhee, another forum adviser, says there are social norms for interviewing just as there are for your personal obligations. In a perfect world, perhaps, people wouldn't think less of you for refusing to conform to social norms. But in this world, they do.

*In a perfect world, I could concentrate on my science, and employers would come to me because I've done my job well.*

A bit of self-promotion during one's career is not only a good thing; it is expected. Tens of thousands of toadfish line San Francisco Bay on summer evenings, humming their own individual mating calls. How well would the lone toadfish do at attracting a mate if he left it up to

the female toadfish to notice his desirability?

*In a perfect world, everyone would follow the same path to the employer's door, and networking and schmoozing would be unnecessary.*

No one ever said in the pages of *Science Careers* that the hiring process is great. It's not. Industry rewards people with job offers when they take shortcuts and go around the process. Yes, I can see why purists could feel that this leads to a skewed hiring process, one that favors those who can "schmooze." Like it or not, industry is not offended by this, as long as the behavior is not boorish.

Cory Bystrom, who began posting on our discussion forum years ago when he was an academic scientist, is now principal scientist at Quest Diagnostics. When a forum poster described networking as an "annoyance," Bystrom rose to the defense of those who extend themselves beyond their usual sphere of contacts.

"Personally, I feel indebted to the many people along my career path who have taken even the smallest slice of their time to talk with me," Bystrom wrote. "I've been very lucky to receive help, both solicited and unsolicited, and I always try to return the favor when others call or email me."

Like many other managers I've worked with over the years, Bystrom operates on what I call the law of reciprocity. He is simply returning the favor, paying forward for help he received during his transition to industry. Now *that* sounds like the kind of behavior you might expect in a perfect world.

## IN CONCLUSION

When I was growing up, I was close to my grandfather, who began every sentence with "In my day, ..." The world around Grandpa was no longer the same as the world he remembered. Things had changed--dramatically--and the adjustment was difficult.

This focus on an ideal world reflects the same inflexible attitude. Just like "In my day," sentiments such as "in a perfect world" only begin abstract, philosophical discussions. In our imperfect world, we have to pay attention to things such as relationships and communication. If you can't deal with the *real* issues that you--and your employers--face, you'll spend your life on a career plateau.

A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, Dave Jensen is the founder and managing director of [CareerTrax Inc.](#), a biotechnology and pharmaceutical consulting firm in Sedona, Arizona.

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