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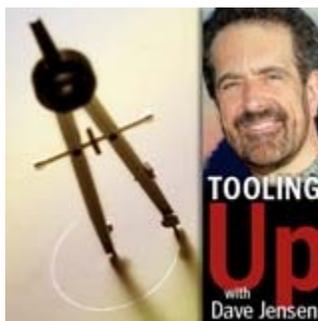
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## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Tooling Up: Breaking Free of Academia (A Test and a Quiz)

David G. Jensen  
United States  
21 March 2008

It's quite a transition you're planning. You know, the one where you leave Plan A behind (*you*, in a prestigious tenure-track faculty position) in favor of some last-minute, rush-rush "Plan B." "Transition" is the word most often chosen to describe such a change of direction, but it's hardly an adequate choice; one doesn't "transition" out of a burning building.

Leaving academia, like leaving a burning building, tends to work better with a little foresight.

I don't mean to suggest that, from a career standpoint, academic science is a building on fire (although that *is* a case you could make). I mean, rather, that in preparing to leave a burning building, you probably don't want to take the same approach you would for a trip to the grocery store. Abandoning academia, for industry or any other career path, is a radical change that calls for a different approach. Yet

when some job seekers abandon Plan A in favor of Plan B, they leave the process itself in place, unconsciously continuing on with old habits. That's a mistake.

Leaving academia, like leaving a burning building, tends to work better with a little foresight. It helps to know where the furniture is that might block your path, which windows are likely to provide promising egress, and which rafters are likely to collapse and block your way. Problem is, when you leave the academic track, you'll be in a building you don't know very well, so you may not be able to avoid the obstacles. But by learning as you go and learning from the experiences of others, you can be mentally prepared for the challenge.

### WHO SET THE BUILDING ON FIRE?

Most industrialized countries have long produced more Ph.D. scientists than are able to find actual jobs. My life sciences recruiting career began in the early 1980s, which was the beginning of the big push for more science and engineering graduates in the United States. Since then, the talent pipeline has turned from a dribble to a full-blown broken water main, although it varies by field. I've switched metaphors, from fire to water, but you get the idea.

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## THE BIG TEST: YOUR RESPONSE TO THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

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Most people in a job hunt, especially in the life sciences, find themselves represented by a few sheets of paper in a tall stack of application packages. That's frustrating for people who have always been the best at everything and who now find themselves in competition with hundreds of similarly accomplished scientists. When this happens, you come face to face with the feeling that Marilyn French described for one of her characters in the novel *The Bleeding Heart*:

"I discovered you never know yourself until you're tested, and that you don't even know you're being tested until afterwards, and that in fact there isn't anyone giving the test except yourself."

Although dozens of hiring managers will test you, the most important test will be, in fact, personal. That test will involve your reaction to a world that is totally different from the one you've come from.

I've interviewed many thousands of industry scientists over the years. I always ask them what they learned from their first job search. Most talk about how unprepared they were for the transition and express regret about not taking advantage of the opportunities they had to prepare. Here are some gems from my recruiter's notebook:

- "Looking back, I am disappointed that I had my head in the sand throughout most of my grad school and postdoc days. We had a number of intensive industry-orientation and job-search seminars every year, and even a roundtable forum where successful company people would come and present their careers. I rarely attended these events. Some experiment or my PI always interjected to keep me away from career events."
- "I initially knew nothing at all about companies, only that I wanted to work for one. It would have been tremendously useful to have known in advance that I needed a certain amount of resources around me to be happy and that scrapping about in a start-up company wasn't my cup of tea. I grabbed the first offer I had instead of focusing on a larger employer, which would have been a better fit for me."
- "I went into the job market like a babe in the woods! All I knew is that I wanted to get away from the loneliness of bench science and into something with more of a people element. With that fuzzy picture in my mind, I interviewed and had no offers for a year until I finally wised up and came up with some focus and a plan."

## FOCUS, ENERGY, AND A PLAN

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Upon encountering the knowledge gap, some people lose their momentum. Frustration and rejection--and confusion resulting from being out of their element--put the job search into slow motion. They fill out online job applications now and again and scan the journal ads. They send batches of CVs to unsolicited "Dear Sir or Madam" contacts and keep their fingers crossed. What they don't do is stay positive and persistent, energetic and purposeful, as one must to escape a burning building.

In this game, it isn't the best and the brightest who win; it is the people who put themselves into position *to see* the most opportunities and then take advantage of them. Perhaps you are a skilled fisher, and you really know the water and the fish. In fact, you are one of the best in the area. You consistently get in there with the right lure, the hip boots, and all the right gear. And yet, despite being the best at what you do, that yokel up on the bridge with six or eight lines dropped into the water ends up with the better catch.

Sure, he's not the best at what he does, but he plays the numbers game pretty well. Similarly, your competitors for the jobs you are seeking may not have your specific strengths in the area of your expertise, but they are up working their "lines" while you are off doing something else. They're going to job fairs and making networking contacts while you do one more experiment.

### A QUIZ

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Here's a quiz you can take in advance to help you prepare for your test.

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- Are you ready to incorporate new ideas, and make adjustments, as your search progresses?
- Do you attend and participate in networking opportunities and training events related to nonacademic jobs?
- Do you keep a log of contacts and potential contacts who might be able to help you in your search? Do you routinely seek ways to utilize them?
- The best way to make progress is to be persistent, maintaining at least a minimal level of job-search activity (making and maintaining contacts, applying for jobs, researching companies, and so on) every day. Have you decided what that minimum level is for you?
- Are you prepared to follow up telephone interviews with letters expressing continuing interest to the particular person who calls? Will you remember to get his or her address and write them afterward to let them know you're still interested?
- Interviews turn into job offers only when the candidate convincingly converts their experience into the solution for an employer's need. Are you prepared to tell likely employers what you can do for them? Have you learned to express it well and succinctly?

It's not just a numbers game, but numbers do matter. Here are some numbers from recruiters' lore. Compare them with your batting average and figure out how well you're doing--but keep in mind that these are just averages and just conventional wisdom; the numbers are rough and vary from niche to niche.

- Ten CVs mailed to good networking contacts or responses to ads for which there is a good fit should produce two or three telephone interviews.
- Three telephone interviews, on average, should produce one face-to-face interview.
- Three face-to-face interviews (with different employers) should, roughly, generate one employment offer.

So think of it this way: If you've had two interviews but no job offers, statistically speaking the next one should pay off.

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 located in Sedona, Arizona.

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