TECHNICAL CAREERS

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2003-Present
Technician, University of Nottingham School of Biomedical Sciences/School of Life Sciences

2001-2003
Research assistant/Post doc, University of Nottingham School of Medicine (Gastroenterology)

1999-2001
Research assistant/Post doc, University of Nottingham School of Biomedical Sciences

1992-1999
Research assistant/Post doc,University of Nottingham (Department of Human Morphology:- Merged to School of Biomedical Sciences)

1989-1992
Research assistant/Post doc, University of Nottingham (Department of Physiology and Pharmacology)

1985-1988
PhD in *in vitro* Toxicology, University of Nottingham (Department of Physiology and Pharmacology)

1982-1985
BSc in Pharmacology, Portsmouth Polytechnic

WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME A TECHNICIAN?

My path towards being a technician started from my postgraduate days whilst completing my PhD. In many ways, my early skill set was pointing towards a technical destination rather than an academic profession. As an illustration of this, it was clear that I loved designing and doing experiments. I quickly took on a role where "looked after the lab" and took a strong interest in health and safety (my subject area of in vitro toxicology was a good starting point for a safety speciality). Finally, I loved assisting students (both undergraduate and postgraduate). On the negative side my writing skills were laboured. Bluntly I'd much rather do the experiments in preference to writing them up.

One of my papers took 5 years to complete! In an atmosphere of "publish or perish", the research-led academic career was never going to be suited to me. After my PhD, I followed a number of research assistant roles all being on defined-term contracts. As time moved on I applied unsuccessfully for a number of teaching –focussed academic and research assistant posts. However:- I looked on jealously at technical colleagues who had permanent positions with ample time to pursue research interests. Technical posts were rarely advertised, but when they did appear they seemed to represent "a perfect job".

My initial inquiries about following a technical path seemed un-promising. In the mid 1990's when I speculated to a one senior colleague that a technical role would suite me he commented "I think you can do better than that"! This was a reflection of a widespread view of how technicians have been regarded in the past.

My big break came in late 2003 when 2 posts were advertised, one was a close equivalent of TS4 whilst the other was approximately TS3. My supervisor at the time was aware on my future intentions (and supportive of my desired career destination), however he was concerned that the transition from post-doctoral research position to a technical role might be viewed negatively. In response to this I applied initially for the higher grade post, despite the fact that more junior role was closer to my past speciality. I consulted with the academic about the role but unfortunately I encountered a similar attitude to my experience in the 1990's. The response was, why do you want this, you will spend all your time cleaning up after people. The academic gave a strong indication that I would not be called for interview.

At this point, I was furious (as I felt that the response was somewhat insulting to our existing cohort of technicians), as I marched back to my lab I happened to come across the academic who was the contact person for the other (more junior) position. I suggested flippantly to this other academic that he would bin my application if I were to apply. His response was an extremely pleasant surprise (almost shock). He commented:- No, I will not bin your application, I would view your application very positively! At this point my mood changed abruptly as I convinced myself that "I got this job", despite not having put an application in yet!

I was invited to be interviewed and the late Roger Dainty was chair of the interview panel. I was almost flummoxed by the first question that was along the lines of:- "how do you propose to keep 6 academics in order"! HR guidance on the conduct of interviews was much less prescriptive in those days. In any event I managed to respond to the questions posed. I remember the other academic smiled broadly (as if all his Christmas's had come at once), when I expressed my keen interest to be involved in undergraduate research projects. In any event I was appointed to the post, few people could have been quite so happy as to get a 1/3rd salary reduction. Two short gaps in my employment taught me the value of stable employment.

HOW HAS YOUR CAREER PROGRESSED (WHERE ARE YOU NOW)?

At interview It was made clear to me that the job had limited scope for progression. However this tuned out not to be the case. Our technical manager at the time (Mandy Losinski) needed a technician to join a technical development group, this was a group focussed on developing technical skills within the technical community. Mandy soon delegated responsibility, so I came to lead the committee alongside organising technical away days and other ad-hoc training events for technical staff. In parallel with these training activities, I took on radiation protection supervisor responsibilities. In this regard, I was heavily influenced by the Sue Willington who was the technical support for my last research assistant position. My training and RPS activities complemented my laboratory role in supporting undergraduate and postgraduate students to enable me to move from a middle technical to a senior technical position. Apart from these activities, I found that my academic lab colleagues gave me considerable experimental freedom to explore research of mutual interest. This culminated in much research on the actions of hydrogen sulphide; this was unfortunate for the assault on the olfactory senses of anybody brave enough to enter our lab.

WHAT WERE THE MOST USEFUL ACTIVITIES THAT HELPED YOU PROGRESS IN YOUR CAREER?

In no particular order the activities that have helped me progress in my career are as follows:

1. A strong interest in health and safety matters (these roles tend not to be popular).
2. A desire to "teach and pass on skills" in all contexts, this may be through assisting students, academics or technical colleagues. In this regard, the ability of technical staff to gain basic teaching qualifications (AFHEA as an example) is a big change for the better.
3. Belonging to a research group that has shared interests to my own, listens to my contribution and allows me to lead on activities from time to time. In this regards I been especially lucky.

WHAT ARE YOUR CAREER HIGHLIGHTS AND WHAT HAVE YOU ENJOYED THE MOST?

1. Persuading my academic group that hydrogen sulphide is a great molecule to work on (despite the horrible smell).
2. Gaining a commendation for my dissertation with my ATP-course and AFHEA qualification.
3. Managing to lead our school (in collaboration with the safety office) through three Environment Agency inspections of our radiation activities and leading our school on radioprotection.
4. Supporting numerous undergraduate and postgraduate students in completion of degrees and higher degree's noting that my academics trust me enough to offer guidance on scientific matters.
5. Visiting colleagues UNMC in Malaysia to successfully develop some undergraduate practical classes, and using my Imodium tablets in the development of the same practical.
6. (ongoing but will be a highlight of the future). Developing some novel hypothesis related to sepsis and other chronic inflammatory conditions in collaboration with my own group and a colleague based at Sutton Bonington.

DO YOU HAVE ANY FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND IF SO WHAT ARE THEY?

1. To finally get round to sorting my professional registration with the Institute of Science and Technology.
2. In future, I wish to focus more on developing practical classes for the newly established Pharmacology degree and developing some novel concepts outlined in 6 above.

WHAT CAREER ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF?

1. Health and safety is to be enthusiastically embraced, not just treated as a chore.
2. All learning experiences are valuable, be prepared to take an interest in area's outside of your normal area you never know when a new opportunity will arise.
3. View training activities as a networking opportunity.