An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at **caveman@biologists.com**. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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Early birds and night owls

It is interesting to see how different people slice up their time in the lab: early arrival, late start but stay late, (late start and early departure), always start at the same time, working lunches vs social lunches, time to read the newspaper? How do these habits match with personalities, with efficiency, with productivity?

I look around and see the various phenotypes.

'Early bird' science hours. In early and get straight to it. Advantages are a good parking spot, few distractions from colleagues, no problem getting into tissue culture and no need to fight with everyone else to use a piece of equipment. Can apply irritating sneer to late arrivals, "Look what I accomplished already". Tend to leave early though and just as the real fun in the lab is starting.

'Early bird' non-science hours. In early, but performs non-science rituals first (which might normally be done at home). Gets liquid refreshment (coffee) and breakfast, and then catches up on stocks or news in general (a distraction of computers at each desk). I had a graduate student who came in fairly early every morning with a briefcase. The briefcase would be opened, and a newspaper would be taken out (oh how I wished it was a journal) - "Sorry, but I cannot start the day without reading the sports section." They eventually get to experiments and other work of the day.

'Night owl' hours. Usually comes in late in the morning - perhaps a late sleep-in, perhaps did some shopping? - but, no, they sit down to examine the results of the previous nights work! Hmm? A double advantage maybe. They have done their experiment and analyze it while the others are just starting an experiment? Although I am not a night owl, the odd occasion that an experiment took me into the small hours of the night I have found that there is a type of lab camaraderie, a very good one, different from that during the day.

'Civil Service' hours: 9 to 5 every day, half day at the weekend, like clockwork. There are reasons for this. For some it seems that lab work is a job. How can the time not be flexible? But, then many have other commitments that have a more regular schedule than experiments, etc. (for example, day-care!!) that have

to be accommodated with science. In the latter case, I find that many use their time extremely efficiently, do not get distracted by other activities in the lab and carefully plan their work to maximize the hours available.

There seems to be a degree of machismo in the time spent in the lab, as if it equated somehow with the amount of work performed, the quality of the work, the importance of the results, and the overall potential of the investigator. In a non-scientific survey, I find that it is those who are the most organized and focused (and not easily distracted) that accomplish the most. True, the more time they spend in the lab, the more they accomplish, but then those individuals also tend to be more 'balanced' in their approach to science (they have a social/family life).

Me? I am an early riser. Always have been since I was in graduate school. I had a choice of when to do experiments that lasted close to 20 hours: start very early and finish in the late afternoon, or start at a 'normal' time in the morning and go to bed early the next day. My choice was the former. So, we had a cot in the lab that was used for those setting up experiments in the late evening for a 2 or 3 a.m. start, including the head of the lab! Subsequently, I also spent a large amount of time in the lab. In my case, however, I suffered from not being particularly brilliant at bench-work (a problem in idea-to-hand coordination) and was easily distracted (first in line to agree to go for lunch, for a beer, anything) - in other words, I needed the extra time just to get anything accomplished. Early now? Well, no cot, but I try to be in the lab early. It is the best time of the day - really. I can get so much done before anyone arrives: less frequently now, but I can set up an experiment without too many distractions (although completion of the experiment later in the day can be a challenge when distractions are common!), answer some e-mail to the chagrin of colleagues in other time zones ("he's up so early and working, and I've only started and half of the day is gone!"), but best is that this is the clearest time of day for me to think, uncluttered by the day's problems, emergencies, distractions and other fires that arise and need to be put out.

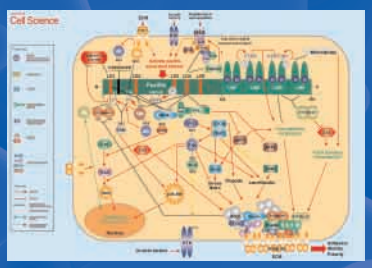
Well, it's time for bed; got an early start tomorrow.

Caveman

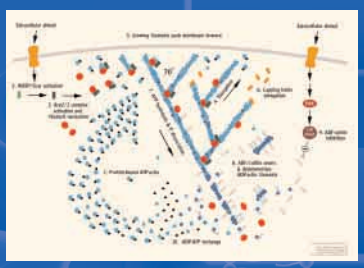
Cell Science at a Glance

Cell Science at a Glance is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several downloadable formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Future contributions to this section will include signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents . . . and much more.

A myosin tree (October 2000)



Paxillin interactions (December 2000)



Actin dynamics (January 2001)

We would like to encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section. Potential Cell Science at a Glance articles should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

Journal of Cell Science, 140 Cowley Rd, Cambridge, CB4 0DL, UK.