

## STICKY WICKET

## The Great Resignation III

Mole

ALL I WANT IS A LAB SOMEWHERE,  
FAR AWAY FROM THE COLD NIGHT AIR...

...AND THEN A 'TEA',  
AT RED FOX'S LAIR !!!

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - [www.peterjeffsart.com](http://www.peterjeffsart.com)

Wait, what time is it? The hours are just flying by, and I still have a long to-do list. Which is why I'm talking to you, because, as the wonderful (and sorely missed) Douglas Adams once said, "I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they go by." Besides, we were talking about something important: the Great Resignation of recent graduates opting not to do a postdoc.

If you are just joining us, we have been talking about very good reasons not to apply for a postdoctoral position, and maybe some equally important reasons why you might consider doing so (recognizing that, ultimately, it is almost entirely your decision, and hey, it is your life after all. So, no pressure).

Regardless of the actual reasons for the Great Resignation, and irregardless (I know that isn't a word, but it is fun to write. Irregardless. Okay, less fun than I remembered) of your choice, I think that the fact of the Great Resignation requires that we take a look at some of the things that might be broken in our system and talk about how to fix them. Some of them are relatively easy, and some of them will be very hard. As usual, I'm going to do this as a

list, because, well, it's what I do. (Not really. I keep planning to make a to-do list, but really, it is just in my head. Hence the whooshing deadlines. Someday I will make a list of what I should make lists of, but I keep putting it off. Where was I? Oh, right, the list. I should have written it down.) So here it is, Mole's 'Ways we should fix the postdoc system'. Many of these are things that the directors of the lab might want to consider, and if you are a trainee (at any level), perhaps just leave a copy lying around where they might read it. But I also have a few things for you, too, so read on.

#### 1. Postdocs are not there to do your research

If you are running a lab and are lucky enough to recruit a postdoc, understand that they are not coming there to work for you. Being a postdoc is not a 'job', it is training. If it were a job, you would be paying them a *lot* more for their expertise, skills and knowledge. But I think that too many of my colleagues somehow think that people are coming to work *for them*. It is easy to fall into that trap; we

struggle to obtain funding and positions, and when we get one, we advertise the position, and pay the person we recruit. How is this not *working for me*? But look around – are people knocking at the door for the opportunity to work for substandard wages and endless long hours, facing frustration almost daily when things don't work, and facing further frustration when things *do* work but papers are not a result of the efforts?

People come to my laboratory to learn to run their own successful research programs and to develop the reputations that allow them a chance to do that. Yes, this entails working on projects that I have been developing over many years, but we *collaborate* on these projects. We develop them together, and I know every question they are trying to answer and every experiment they are doing, but I also understand that these are *their* experiments and *their* project, not *mine*.

Indeed, every Molet in the lab has a distinct (and I hope, exciting) project. If someone else in or outside the lab can contribute, this is up to the Molet, since it is their project. And it often happens that a Molet will come to me with an idea they have, within the scope of the general areas of interest in the lab, and often with a couple of experiments they did on the side to show me that the idea has merit. If I think it is good, we go for it. If I think there are problems with it, we talk about it (and use it as a 'learning moment'). Often the idea is fine, but outside my own expertise, and without my knowing the 'lay of the land', the landscape of the research, there is too much chance that we would be scooped. That doesn't mean that we won't do it, it just means that we have much more to do to decide if we should.

But here is the most important thing. The people who come to train in my lab receive training. They learn how to develop an idea into a project. They learn how several projects can combine to make a unified program of research. They learn how to budget, how to make otherwise expensive reagents (which they will have to do in their own labs, hopefully) and how to get along with other scientists. They learn how to write papers and how to give a talk, and they practice a lot. And we have a lot of fun. That means, when I am feeling pessimistic, or when our papers and grants are annihilated, I don't mope around the lab; I reinforce, almost daily, that we are there to explore. And yes, to be as amazing as we can be.

Why should someone want to work in your lab? Don't think that it is for the money.

## 2. Work-life balance is a real thing

A postdoc in your lab is a person, with a life that does not only exist in the lab. The Molets in my lab have families and friends, and interests that they are passionate about, and I may not know anything about it. And I do not have to, I only have to respect it. I have had Molets who build furniture, sing semi-professionally, and compete in sports (I once had a Molet who announced that he had to take some time off because he had been invited to be the top official at the Pan American Games that year). Some Molets do not see their families for years and then need an extended vacation to do so. I have never said no. But I have also never had to tell anyone in the lab to work harder. Nor have I ever had to tell someone to show up for work at a specified time (except for lab meetings) or work until a specified time. And when they do experiments that go overnight, or over the weekend, the experiments get done without me having to say anything. I like to think (and I have good evidence to support this) that it is because they are sufficiently excited about the work that it becomes part of the 'balance'.

"But Mole," you say, "I have people with no work ethic. They are lazy and don't get their experiments done, they waste my limited resources, and unless I give them strict schedules, they don't even show up. People need structure. And I need data." I hear you. But I also have to ask: how is that working out for you? Maybe they don't feel that they are there to learn, and maybe that's because they aren't being taught. If I felt that I was working on a boring project, with little hope of recognition, and for crummy wages, I suspect that I wouldn't go to work either. I don't know you, your people or your lab, and I don't presume to know why you have trouble getting trainees engaged. But maybe you need to have a conversation with them. How much do you care about what they are doing? How much do they?

## 3. Living as a postdoc is hard

This is probably the harshest reality and the one that is hardest to fix. It has been a very long time since I had to play music in a bar to get a glass of 'tea' and some pocket money. I don't worry about saving enough for rent and groceries, let alone gas for my car (and I have a car that I bought *new*). I don't have to have annoying roommates to afford a place to live (in retrospect, I had fantastic roommates, one of whom I just spoke to in a Kazzoom call). Salaries for postdocs are awful, especially considering that those they went to school with are making two to three times more.

That isn't going to change (at least, not very much). Funding agencies are slow to raise salaries, and if they do, they don't increase the grant amounts. Postdocs are not properly paid. I will say it again, being a postdoc is not a 'job'. If the pay were commensurate with knowledge and skill, it might be, but it isn't. Some of us worry that if it were different, folks would not strive to leave, and leaving is the whole point – to get a real job (which still doesn't pay as much as it should). No wonder people don't want to be postdocs.

But some still do, and we have to recognize that they are making a sacrifice in doing so. Many of us (those who run labs) forget this. What are you doing to make your postdocs' lives a little easier?

Most importantly, what are you doing to make being a postdoc worth more than the salary? If you think that the 'reward' is that they get their name on a paper, you are missing the point. They are sacrificing to be in your lab. What are you sacrificing to have them there?

## 4. All I want

Last night, I went to see a revival of 'My Fair Lady', a Lerner and Loewe musical based on 'Pygmalion' by George Bernard Shaw. In it, Eliza Doolittle sings "All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air," but then solicits Professor Henry Higgins to teach her to speak 'properly'. Shaw's idea was that the quality of speech was the only thing separating a flower girl from royalty (and if you believe the text, proves it). But when Eliza succeeds in speaking so 'properly' that she is indeed mistaken for royalty, and is dismissed, she cries, "What is to become of me?" It works out in the end, of course (sort of), and there was a lot of applause.

Why am I bringing this up? Well, I do see some parallels in what we do. A graduate student works to complete a degree, and might say, "All I want is a lab somewhere, where I can explore my own science, and I'll be happy." They know that it will take a lot of work (Eliza spends months practicing her vowels before she utters, "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain"), and if the environment is excellent and the work successful, what then? What is to become of me?

Academic research is not only competitive, it is ridiculously competitive. If every lab trains two scientists who want labs, say every five years, we need twice as many labs as we currently have to house one of them. And more are right behind them. Despite how hard we work (the mentors and the mentees), there are simply not enough positions for everyone to succeed. Some small percentage will, most will not.

Of those who cannot get a position they want (or any at all), time has gone by. Yes, they are now 'better qualified' for a position in industry (and this is competitive as well, although I think less so), but are they better qualified than if they had opted for a position back when they decided to do a postdoc? Some will find the postdoc experience itself satisfying (if we, who run the labs, do our jobs properly), and maybe that is okay. I hope so; many Molets who started with a desire to be academic scientists are very happy in industry jobs, and none of them regret having been in the lab for a time. But I know others, from other labs, who are not so happy.

We have to think harder about what it means to be a postdoc, and how the training can prepare them, not only for academic research,

but also for a future that is not academic research if this is their path. Here's an idea. In other careers, many do internships to gain a foothold in a particular field. What if we, as academic scientists, were to establish relationships to make such internships feasible? And industry is not the only option. Science writing, publishing, teaching, patent law; I am sure you can think of others. Perhaps our institutions could find a way to fund such internships (or make them viable), and our postdocs might compete for such positions. I bet that if graduates knew that this could be a possibility down the road, they might not be so hesitant to give a postdoc position a try.

So, there we are. We deserve the Great Resignation. And if we do not work to make our lab environments worth the sacrifice and uncertainty of being a postdoc, I think it will continue. So, let's work on that? Don't blame it on society, or Millennials, or funding. If there aren't any very persuasive reasons to be a postdoc in our labs, then the blame is on us. Or, as the Barenaked Ladies sang, "If all else fails, you can blame it on me." See where that gets you.

Now where is my to-do list. Right, I don't have one. 'Tea'?