

Vosmek encourages women to make their way into the ownership structure of the company. For example, scientific advisory board members are often compensated in stock. “You don’t have to be an entrepreneur to benefit from the financial upside of your science,” says Vosmek. But only 6.5% of scientific advisory board members of US life-sciences firms are women. In the United Kingdom, 14.2% of board directors of firms on the London Stock Exchange’s FTSE 100 index are women. That is up almost 2% since 2010, following the February 2011 publication of *Women on Boards*, a report by Mervyn Davies, the former UK trade and industry minister, which called for a minimum of 25% female board representation by 2015.

CULTIVATING CONTACTS

Learning about the entrepreneurial ecosystem is a crucial step towards breaking out of the female niche. One of the most efficient ways for a woman to network may be to join the lab of a principal investigator who has established industry contacts. Villa-Komaroff took a postdoc with Walter Gilbert, a molecular biologist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who would go on to be a co-winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize in Chemistry. Unbeknown to Villa-Komaroff, Gilbert was in the middle of co-founding Biogen, one of the first biotechnology companies. Although she turned down an offer to join Biogen (now Biogen Idec, based in Weston, Massachusetts), Villa-Komaroff’s interest in industry was sparked once she began to attend board meetings as a consultant to the company. She went on to serve on other company boards, until John Gilbert, Walter’s son, approached her to join CytonomeST. Villa-Komaroff served as the company’s chief executive before taking on her current post.

With confidence and mentors in hand, women still face the same challenges as all entrepreneurs: identifying a good idea, coming up with a business plan that gauges a product’s market and attracting investment. Even as she struggles to gain a foothold, Jhaveri is certain that there is a market for the detection and treatment of ovarian cancer. But given the early stage of her work, and with no return in sight, she realizes the risk for investors. So she is turning to her networks, including contacts in philanthropy and entertainment, to see whether fund-raising events involving leading comedians will provide the money she needs. “The best entrepreneurs,” says Vosmek, “are innovating the business model as well as the science.” ■

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TURNING POINT

Tiago Branco

Tiago Branco, a postdoc at University College London (UCL), received the 2011 Eppendorf and Science Prize for Neurobiology on 12 November at the Society for Neuroscience annual meeting in Washington DC.

What do you consider your most pivotal career decision?

I was in my last year of medical school at the University of Lisbon in 2002, and I had to decide whether to go on for two years of residency or do a PhD. Given my interest in research, my adviser at the time encouraged me to apply to UK graduate programmes. I decided to attend UCL. It was all very quick: I had to finish medical school on a Friday and start at UCL on the Monday. I really wanted to do this programme because I didn’t have a background in neuroscience and it offered one year of lectures and experience in different labs.

Describe your PhD research.

Transmission of signals between neurons fails most of the time. My PhD studied how this is regulated — and why some junctions, or synapses, are reliable and others are not. We found that the neuron receiving the connection talks to the neurons sending the transmitter, and regulates the reliability of the synapse, so that it is not too excited or silent — it maintains a balance.

Is there something you would like to have done differently during your PhD?

The PhD is an ideal time to try high-risk research, but I naively didn’t realize how crucial it is to have publications by the end of it. If I were to do things differently, I would conduct experiments that are sure to produce data, as well as try riskier things. I didn’t account for the time to publication, which can be problematic under Britain’s three-year PhD programme. If it takes, on average, a year to get a paper published and a year to get your technique up and running, you basically have one year to generate publishable data. My advice for PhD students, especially in Britain, is that it is important to determine the work that will define your PhD research as early as possible. It will make life much easier.

How did the lack of publications affect your career progression?

I had a paper accepted for publication one year into my postdoc. Luckily, I was able to start a postdoc at UCL without a first-authored paper. But if I hadn’t had that opportunity, I don’t know what I would have done. The lack of publications at the end of my PhD did knock



me out of competition for a postdoc fellowship. I found out that my paper had been accepted by *Neuron* two months after I was declined for the fellowship. Timing can be as narrow as that.

You won the Eppendorf prize with an essay on how dendrites affect neurotransmission. What inspired it?

I wanted to write about why I’m motivated to study neurobiology — why I think that tracking single neurons is a good way to investigate how the brain controls behaviour. I wanted to write about my research without the constraints of a scientific publication or the worry that the paper might be shot down. It was a great exercise.

Do you think the award will help your job search?

It will increase my visibility, and might help me to get past the first round of eliminations. Selection committees are looking for something to make you stand out. I’m hoping that this increases awareness of who I am and what I’ve done.

How would you describe the job scene?

In Britain, the recession is definitely affecting jobs. Most universities have a freeze on hiring — which means that your options for starting a career, or a lab, are limited. The main way of starting a job in academia is to get a lectureship and apply for grants for research money. That’s hardly an option at the moment because so few lectureships are available. My only chance of staying at UCL is to get a fellowship. But the odds of that are minute. And the success rate in terms of grant funding has decreased. It feels as if you have to get every career decision right or you might end up in a bad spot. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN