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Making choices

Two days of Naturejobs career talks at the International Biotech meeting last week in London yielded different career stories — but several common denominators. Some of the speakers had left the lab bench because they didn't want to focus too tightly. Ann Gimalac, Gail Cardew and Ann Van Gysel took communication-based jobs instead — Gimalec for Genset/Serono outside Paris, Cardew for the Royal Institution in London and Van Gysel for the Flanders Interuniversity Institute for Biotechnology. In addition to a broad curiosity, Otello Stampacchia confessed to a short attention span and a difficult time mastering basic lab techniques. So he networked himself into the venture-capital business at NIB Capital, a private company in Geneva, Switzerland.

Their scientific background was the foundation for making the switch. But soft skills made it possible. When scientists are telling other people what they do, says Stampacchia, they should keep it short, sweet and memorable. Scientists should also follow that advice when assembling a resumé, says Hannah Thompson, a manager with the Oxford scientific recruitment agency SRG.

The route from bench to 'alternative' career is considered to be easier in industry than in academia. Jean-Erick Ancel traded in ten years of making molecules at Rhône-Poulenc for a career in marketing. The skills and industry knowledge he had accumulated made the switch a natural one. David Reynolds, a research fellow at Merck Sharpe Dohme, says that having this inside knowledge is a good way to move from the bench into human resources or communications, as well as into marketing.

The hardest choice may be deciding what to do. Claude Feuerstein, former president of Joseph Fourier University in Grenoble, France, says "Do what you want". Getting that right makes obstacles more bearable — and success more satisfying.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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