



## From Bench to the Great Unknown: Career Transition into the World of Scientific Publishing

By Milka Kostic, PhD (AWIS Member since 2009)

It was a sunny Saturday morning in southern California. I was settling down next to a friendly piece of lab equipment hoping to complete an experiment before noon so that I could go out and enjoy the sun. At that time, I was mid-way through the third year of my postdoctoral research, with one project finished and published, and another long-term project just underway. I was enjoying my work, my colleagues, and advisors, as well as the scientific culture of my research institute. I had high expectations for the significance of the new project, and was getting deeper into it with every day, carried by the curiosity and excitement that many of you must have felt when in hot pursuit of deeper insights into how nature works.

Yet, prior to that fateful morning, I had started to question my long-term personal goals and aspirations. For me, this was a very difficult topic since all I thought I had ever wanted to do was science and stay in school. I never really examined the concept of building a non-traditional science career. Since I was not sure what I wanted to be, I found it easier to identify the things that I did not want to do. The first couple of career options that were the immediate victims of my soul searching involved a career in academia; neither research nor teaching appealed to me, as I really had strong feelings against spending the next couple of decades writing grants or teaching students, both of which were a source of frustration to me. Next to go was the bench work, which over the years I was finding less and less stimulating, thus, eliminating the majority of industrial career options. That left me with a lack of clear options and the unsettling feeling that years of rigorous scientific training had not provided me with skills that I could transfer into a satisfying career.

One way in which I decided to tackle the problem was to get out of the lab and into the real world in order to learn more about other career options and to learn more about myself and the things that I enjoyed beyond conducting research. I joined the AWIS San Diego chapter and became actively involved in the Outreach Committee, stepping up to co-chair the Committee, and participated in other initiatives such as co-chairing the Facilities Committee of the 2007 Women in Bioscience conference. This offered me ample opportunities to meet and collaborate with enthusiastic people, learn about their career paths, expand my network, and raise awareness about different options for someone with a PhD in a STEM field. It also helped me improve a number of truly transferable skills such as networking, interpersonal relationship building, event organizing, volunteer management, and science communication to non-scientists. As I started to identify things that I did enjoy away from the bench, an outline of an ideal

career slowly began to emerge. It needed to involve a lot of reading, thinking and learning about a broad range of scientific topics on a daily basis; and opportunities to interact with scientists to hear not only about their research, but also their broader views and overall impressions of not only their field but the scientific enterprise in general. Finally, I wished to communicate scientific ideas to the broader public and help promote and build scientific literacy.

At this point in the story you might start to wonder what that sunny Saturday morning I began with had to do with anything, and why it was fateful. Well, it was on that morning, waiting for the experiment to run its course that I started browsing an issue of *Cell*, one of the leading journals in biology that I kept my eye on, and saw they had posted a classified ad looking for a scientific editor. That was it!

Although I did not know anyone who was a full-time scientific editor, or that careers like that existed, I felt very strongly that this was something I wanted to pursue. Immediately, I forgot about the sunny weather, and spent the weekend putting together my resume and my cover letter. That Monday, I scheduled a meeting with my advisors to let them know I was applying for a position as a scientific editor, and submitted my application the same day.

The rest is a very happy history. I joined *Cell Press* in May 2007, and am currently a senior editor and portfolio manager with primary responsibility for two research journals, one focused on chemical biology (*Chemistry & Biology*) and one focused on structural biology (*Structure*). In my role as a portfolio manager, I am also responsible for four review journals: *Trends in Biotechnology*, *Trends in Biochemical Sciences*, *Trends in Genetics and Trends in Pharmacological Sciences*. I have enjoyed my career since day one, and I find that the initial excitement I felt when I embarked on this adventure is still with me. My work brings me to the cutting edge of science day in and day out, I get to travel to meetings and conferences on different scientific and publishing topics in different parts of the world. At these events, I am fortunate to have interactions with scientists doing amazing research, and with colleagues across the scientific publishing field that are passionate about serving the scientific community and promoting science, things that I care deeply about.

For me the transition from bench to publishing was a smooth one. In retrospect, I think that taking the time to figure out my likes and dislikes, my passions and preferences, and taking a



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career transition



stock of my expertise and skills really made a difference. It helped me come up with an outline of what an ideal career might look like, and have a really good sense of what I wanted to do. This means that once I was given the opportunity to work in my preferred career, I was ready to jump into the deep end with energy and enthusiasm which carried me through over a very steep learning curve facing anyone who changes a career path. What also made a huge difference were my *Cell Press* colleagues, who mentored and supported me throughout the transition and still continue to provide valuable advice and guidance.

As you are facing your own career challenges remember that career transitions, be they incremental or radical, are not an exception any more, and your options are not limited to traditional STEM fields. This is a reality for anyone entering the workforce these days. Making a career switch is both a scary and thrilling prospect and you can do a great deal to prepare yourself for making the right transition at the right time. One powerful way to make sure you are ready for the plunge into the great unknown is to have an honest conversation with yourself and get a good understanding of your own goals and priorities. What are your true interests? What would you like to get out of your job? What do you value the most in terms of the work environment, and how you want your work to fit with your life? Additionally, there are many ways in which you could learn about different career options through networking, informational interviews, internships, volunteering, career resource centers, hiring a career coach, and alumni organizations at your institution. There is also a growing literature on career transitions that can be a valuable source of advice.

My final piece of advice, which is more of a cheerleading shout-out to those of you coming out of a grad school or a postdoc: this time in your career is not the time to be timid. On the contrary, it's probably the best time to be bold and take some risk. Remember your strengths, the acquired knowledge, the reputation you built among your peers and professors, the transferable skills that you have and know that they will serve you well, especially when combined with the passion that you feel in any career you choose be it one that requires transition or one where you stay the course. There are no limitations to the versatility of your STEM degree, especially when combined with desire to learn, self-improve, advance, and make a difference. ■



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