

The Reluctant Postdoc

1. Recruitment

This note refers to a Postdoctoral Assistant, whom I shall refer to only as Geoff.

I have to admit that I am relatively new to the academic system, having spent twelve years in a government research laboratory. In recruiting Geoff, and in his management early on, I made certain mistakes that older university staff would not have made, and which I would hope never to repeat in future.

Since his recruitment, Geoff's work has been both lack-lustre and slow. Part of this can be put down to problems which are 'not his fault' ... 'I didn't have a computer when I started, the workshops aren't co-operative, my workspace is cramped, I cannot sell my flat in Scotland, I'm worried about my financial state'. I think he is too worried by external factors *to do his job to my standards*. My concern is that at the current rate of progress we shall both lose favour with the funding organisation. I feel threatened that this could be a blight on my track record and future career. At 43 years of age, Geoff's future does not look too rosy either.

Q1 List issues that have already been raised

Q2 Note anything that the Research Director should be doing at this stage

2. The Original Interview

Geoff was chosen for interview from a short-list of 30 candidates. Two things went in his favour. Firstly, he had taken the initiative to 'phone me in order to discuss the post. Secondly, his Ph.D. (which he had passed) offered the appropriate combination of experimental and theoretical skills that I was after.

Geoff was interviewed by myself and a Professorial colleague. I formed the opinion that Geoff was a nice enough chap, but did not have the greatest academic mind. I was initially unsure of his suitability, but my colleague (whose opinions I respect) convinced me that he was adequate.

Geoff's references were satisfactory.

Q1 Discuss the selection procedure as described

Q2 List the key qualities you would look for in Postdoc Assistant

3. Early Days

On arrival Geoff was welcomed, introduced to colleagues, and taken around the Department. On his second day, I talked him through the original project proposal, and the work that was expected of him. I pointed out (as had been done at interview) the need to work to time and produce deliverables. I explained what he could expect from me as his co-worker - weekly meetings, help when needed, assistance in planning ...

The first task I set Geoff was to finalise the equipment design suggested in the original proposal. I had no confidence in Geoff's original specification for the test-section (too costly and difficult to manufacture), but was unable to persuade him of the error of his ways. In desperation, I let him discuss his ideas with the workshop supervisor, F (not known for his ready co-operation). F rejected the drawings as inadequate, but offered no constructive suggestions as to how they could be improved.

Q1 List the main features of a good induction procedure

Q2 How should the Research Director contribute to the resolution of the disagreement between Geoff and the workshop supervisor?

4. Setting up the equipment

Luckily, a company donated extra money to the project. Within an afternoon I was able to draw the test section on the back of a fag packet (metaphorically speaking), and commission its construction by a local metal fabricator (which, to be fair, Geoff had suggested we do in the first place). That left the problem of the ancillary plumbing (a fan, some pipes and two rotameters). The workshops were eager to inform us that by Geoff had missed some vital components out of the construction. By the time these had been ordered we were into the start of the academic year, and 'well, student projects take priority'.

Q1 Discuss the current situation

Q2 What should the Research Director be doing at this stage?

5. Working conditions

I had given Geoff full financial and planning details of the project, and asked him to do some ball park costings. 'Then', I told him, 'we can decide how much we can spend on your computer'. I waited, and waited, and waited On receipt of the industrial moneys, I bought the damned computer myself.

Within a few weeks Geoff complained about the open plan workspace that he was obliged to share with other Research Assistants. He felt this was not up to the standard of his previous office, and it was obvious that he was uncomfortable with his younger colleagues. I was unable to get any help from the then Head of Department, but a fellow lecturer did allow Geoff to share a comfortable room with his own Research Assistant. Geoff feels aggrieved that this is about five minutes walk from his laboratory area, and would prefer to have his own office in the main engineering building.

It also became obvious that Geoff was having problems in moving from Glasgow (where his wife remains). He has been unable to sell his flat there, and is obviously in a state of negative equity. After nine months here, he has changed his local residence twice.

Q1 What do you feel about the Research Director's decision to purchase the computer?

Q2 Should the RD be involved in the issues of work space and local residence? If so, how?

6. Work to Date

A lot of Geoff's time has been taken in selecting, pricing and ordering equipment for the rig. At regular weekly meetings, I found myself regularly 'nagging'.

We spent our earlier days discussing design of apparatus. Some of this was done well, some designs were over elaborate (to my mind).

Both Geoff and I have (supposedly) expertise in a certain computational area. Whilst awaiting Geoff's arrival, I set myself the task of learning a new programme.

Within two hours, I learned to use the package. Within a matter of days, I had preliminary solutions to one of the deliverables I had promised the sponsoring body. I would consider my abilities in this area to be average.

Geoff spent considerable time in learning the DOS and WINDOWS operating systems - he had previously been used to VAX systems. I had suggested that he speak to the postgraduates. He moved onto the new computer code in a relatively systematic manner, and within a month or so was moderately competent with its basic operation. From then, it took several sessions with Geoff before he understood the particular feature of the code that allowed him to reproduce my work.

Q1 Discuss the RD's strategy for managing this project and supervising Geoff's contribution

Q2 What would you advise at this stage?

7. Crunch Time

Two months ago, we had both become frustrated by the lack of progress from our workshops (a separate problem, and not discussed here). I suggested to Geoff that he think of ways of 'lashing up' the test-section, so that we could at least do some preliminary work (e.g. testing instrumentation methods). Geoff seemed reluctant.

At this stage, I expressed my concern about the lack of progress. I pointed out that the quality of work done influenced the future careers of both of us, and the importance of delivering good work to a sponsor. We agreed that he would return the next day and discuss the 'lash up' idea.

The meeting was a disaster. Geoff said that he felt his competence was being called into question. He felt that - as someone who held a Ph.D. - he was not respected. He also referred to the poor facilities offered by the University, and complained that he had spent considerable time with nothing to do because his computer had arrived late.

He asked for a six week cooling-off period, in which we would not have pre-arranged weekly meetings, and in which he could formulate and propose a programme of work. In that time , he would continue with the computational work. We would have informal day to day meetings (these were affable enough).

Q1 How should the RD respond to Geoff's suggestion?

Q2 If you accept his suggestion, how should you both prepare for his return?

8. The meeting

At the end of this six week period, Geoff made only minor (and technically inadequate) comments regarding some of the instrumentation. At that stage, I did not challenge his lack of planning.

Two weeks ago, I was handed his computations, which offered some progress from my work. I thanked him for his work, but asked for modifications to be made. We also discussed and agreed an outline for a conference paper.

He has since handed me a hand written copy of the paper, plus the original progress note (not amended).

Geoff is meeting me today to discuss his paper. Before doing that, I shall try to discuss what our mutual expectations are. I shall offer support, hard work, and determination to advance the project (and hence his work) outside the University.

I need to point out the deficiencies the project, the fact that , whilst he is at heart conscientious, I don't think that his full attention is directed to the job, and my own concerns regarding funding. I shall set deadlines for the coming week, the month ahead, and a three month period.

What I shall not tell Geoff at this stage is that I intend to take soundings from our Personnel Office and the Chairman of our Research Advisory Board. Unless his productivity increases significantly, it is likely that some form of disciplinary action will be needed.

Q1 Comment on the RD's actions, in particular his decision to take soundings from the Personnel Office

Q2 List the issues you would raise at this meeting.

Team task

From discussing this case list on the acetates provided

1. the main principles of good leadership of a research project,
2. strategies for managing 'reluctant' colleagues