

Facilitating Research on the European Stage

By [Jonathan Dando](#) | Apr. 2, 2004, 10:00 AM

BACK TO THE FEATURE INDEX

After 11 years in research, some serious self-analysis revealed that I no longer felt well-suited for a laboratory-based career. The time had come for me to find another way to leverage my scientific knowledge, my academic understanding, my industrial insight, and my extensive international experience. As it turned out, European project management would roll all of these strengths into one job.

I graduated from the [University of Portsmouth](#), UK, with a BSc in molecular biology in 1992. Back then I was tired of studying and only a few job opportunities in the UK grabbed my interest. So when I saw an ad for a technician at [Sandoz](#) in Austria while flicking through a copy of *Science*, my adventure started. Three months after graduating from university, and only 21 years old, I packed my bags and moved to Vienna. My contract stipulated that I would be ready to move to the United States when the company decided to relocate us. Given that I'd always wanted to work in the States, it was very much a case of 'show me where to sign'. A year later the whole department was moved to California after Sandoz bought out a small company, Systemix Inc.

Yet after two-and-a-half years in the sun it was time for me to move again. I had decided to do a PhD as I felt I had gone as far as I could as a technician. I was confident I would be able to perform any experiment given the protocol. What I now wanted was to develop my own concept, put it to the test, and interpret the results. So I returned to Europe to work for my PhD in gene therapy at the [Ospedale San Raffaele](#) in Milan, Italy, with the support of a [Marie Curie Fellowship](#).

Tinge of loyalty towards Europe

I had decided against a PhD in the States as I felt the European education system had more to offer while allowing you to get a PhD sooner. With the PhD under my belt, personal reasons, and a tinge of loyalty towards Europe for funding my PhD, meant that I wanted to stay on this side of the Atlantic. Paris beckoned and once more I crossed borders, this time for a postdoc with [INSERM](#).

Please let me squeeze in a few words of warning here: This level of international travel may become addictive. I now find that if you stand still for too long, it becomes claustrophobic. Changing countries and cultures, learning new rules and languages is a constant stimulation. It makes an adventure of everyday life and exposes you to many different people and their beliefs. Integrating into a new culture is never simple, though, and if you are not prepared to adapt, understand, and count to 100 instead of 10 before exploding, this path is not for you.

It was during my postdoc that the seed of doubt I felt towards the end of my PhD started to grow into something much bigger, and 13 months into the job I realised that research was no longer the career for me. Having to fight through a system that does not want to change just to obtain some form of job satisfaction, and having to scrape around for funds? Nuh, not for me—I was not that dedicated to the bench. Yet I surely was dedicated to science.

So a long process of applying for jobs at biotech companies, consulting companies, and even banks ensued, in the hope of getting an interview for a position in consulting or business development. Precisely 134 times, but it did not materialise. And even when it did, the present employment climate means that the questions 'why do you want to change?',

FOLLOW SCIENCE CAREERS



Search Jobs

Enter keywords, locations or job types to start searching for your new science career.



[Register](#) [Advanced Search](#)

Advertisement

Top articles in Careers

Pandemic hit academic mothers especially hard, new data confirm



BY KATIE LANGIN | FEB. 9, 2021

How to (seriously) read a scientific paper



BY ELISABETH PAIN | MAR. 21, 2016

When my mom got sick, I felt torn between work and family. I wish I'd handled it differently



BY JULIA GALA DE PABLO | JAN. 28, 2021

'what can you offer us?', 'why are you here?' are always asked during interview. So if you are serious about changing careers then you should prepare for this type of question, and do some research to find out what skills employers are looking for, and how to obtain them.

In the end my career change turned out to be right on my doorstep. While I was still postdocing I received an e-mail from **INSERM Transfert** addressed to scientists interested in starting a company. A subsidiary of INSERM, INSERM Transfert is a private company which was created in 2001 to facilitate technology transfer between INSERM research units and the private sector. It deals with the transfer and commercialisation of research and discovery at each point of the 'bench to bedside' process: from concept to research, from research to clinic, and from clinic to production and commercialisation.

As I had done before during my job search I cold-called, sending a letter with my CV where I stated my interest, my experience and skills, and how I could bring them to benefit INSERM Transfert. A month later I received a phone call from Lionel Ségard, the director general of INSERM Transfert, to discuss my background and see if I was interested in attending a business development course.

Within 2 weeks I was sent to **Biobiz**, a 3-day entrepreneurial course for life scientists wanting to start a biotech company. As it turned out this was a way of screening potential employees. European projects read like business plans, so they require preliminary training or exposure to understand. INSERM Transfert had connections within the Biobiz course, which gave them an independent opinion of how prospective employees were acting and presenting themselves in such an environment.

The understanding and targeting of every step in the 'bench to bedside' development chain is what distinguishes INSERM Transfert from other technology-transfer companies. INSERM Transfert do not just spin off companies and license innovations, they also raise money themselves from foundations, governments, and the European Commission to facilitate the whole process of clinical translation. European complexity also means that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' business model and they need to be adapted to the different cultures and markets.

After two more interviews at INSERM Transfert I was offered the position of European project manager, a couple of weeks after the Commission opened the 6th Framework Programme priority 1 call--a baptism of fire!

So what does European project management entail then? In my case it involves technology transfer, financial management, the creation of collaborations that brings the best out of scientists, business development, dealing with legal issues, facilitating negotiations between the different stakeholders, organising logistics and resources, and getting involved in science communication, PR, and Web site design within an international setting. And all need to be performed on time, within budget, and to the highest quality.

This is no joke: Our role is to help scientists within the context of the whole project as well as within their own institutional management, from the preparation of a project plan through negotiations to the implementation and execution of the project. The European Commission has stated the tasks project managers are expected to perform, and they are considered as partners in the projects they manage, so receive money accordingly.

Work with ambiguity and fly blind

European project management is a very satisfying job, even though challenging. It requires you to work as part of a team, and to know and understand all that is going on around you. You also have to work well with ambiguity, even fly blind sometimes, making the best decision with the information you've got. You must be able to identify any partner's agenda, both personal and professional and what prompted it. You also have to be able to adapt very quickly, and to identify the times when you should fight, the times to negotiate, and the times to back down.

If you want to see your project progress, then all of these skills are essential. In many cases, you did not even know you had them, but your own professional and international experience carry you through. For me an administrative role within the **Marie Curie Fellowship Association** has been an important stepping stone, in that it gave me good

Overworking tanked my health –until I began to prioritize work-life balance

BY RYOICHI FUJIIWARA | FEB. 11, 2021



Advertisement

Related Jobs

Research Associate I - Molecular Diagnostics & Experimental Therapeutics

City of Hope
Monrovia, California

Assistant Professor, UC Irvine, Department of Developmental and Cell Biology

University of California, Irvine
Irvine, California (US)

Postdoctoral position in neurovirology and neuroscience

University of North Dakota -Yakoub Lab
Grand Forks, North Dakota (US)

[MORE JOBS ►](#)

insight into international management, online communities, and intranets, while satisfying my thirst for international exposure. Still, when you are working with large multisectoral, multidisciplinary and multicultural projects, you have to learn to sometimes count to 1000, not 100, before exploding!

There is no routine to my day. I manage two specifically targeted research projects, one on antibiotic resistance (COBRA) and another on cell signalling (Signalling & Traffic) as well as the Integrated Project on Mesenchymal Stem Cells (GENOSTEM). My tasks evolve alongside each project. I can be facilitating negotiations between two scientists from different small companies over a misunderstanding about a Material Transfer Agreement, and a minute later I'll be developing a work plan or organising a workshop with the partners, if I'm not analysing the market for opportunities or the strategies of other companies.

I work with scientists and their institutions' administrations across Europe as well as the European Commission, covering any issues as they arise. So one morning might find me speaking Italian with a Czech national because it is the only common language we speak--yes, language skills are helpful! How many hours you work can vary hugely from day to day, and you can go through travel-intense weeks when you only visit your apartment, or spend entire weeks in the office.

If the European Union is to develop large, coherent, multisectoral, multidisciplinary, and well-structured international research projects then there needs to be less serendipity and more strategy among the different stakeholders. A more pragmatic approach is needed, and that's where European project managers fit in. This is a new profession that has been created to meet the demands of a European vision that aims to guarantee scientific success.

Posted in: [Job Market](#), [Job Market](#), [Job Market](#), [Europe](#), [Europe](#), [Europe](#)

We use cookies to improve your experience and enable functionality and security of this site. Data may be shared with third parties. Further detail is available in our Privacy Policy. By clicking "OK" you consent to our use of cookies and use of data. You can modify your cookie preferences by clicking "Manage Cookies".

OK **Manage Cookies**