

# **Persistence and Optimism: The Force Multipliers**

by David G. Jensen, CareerTrax Inc., Sedona, Arizona

*“Perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.”* Colin Powell

*“Patience and perseverance have a magical effect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish.”* John Quincy Adams

I’ve just returned from a whirlwind tour of college campuses, where I spent a weekend in each of five major campuses around the country for a seminar known as the “Career Day.” Although this is a new event at some schools, enlightened Universities have been holding career days for a number of years to help their students and postdocs find out what is waiting for them in the real world. Recently, a few of these Universities thought that it may be valuable for their students to have the advice of those who are already working in biotechnology. My fellow speakers included company presidents, sales and marketing executives, licensing and technology transfer specialists, patent lawyers, bioinformatics gurus, and of course, research scientists -- many of whom were returning to their alma mater for the weekend.

After listening to advice boiled down from these dozens of successful managers and scientists, I found that there were two common threads to the counsel they gave the gathered grad students and postdocs.

## **Two Vital Ingredients**

I found it remarkable that all speakers, when asked to share the nuggets of wisdom that they had personally learned the hard way, found some way to incorporate stories highlighting both persistence and optimism. I asked one of my academic colleagues why he felt there was such an emphasis on those qualities:

“Graduate advisors don’t talk to their students about persistence and optimism,” he said. “Typically, the process of finding a job comes secondary to doing good science. Many advisors are from the old school, where they believe that good science will always sell itself. I’m afraid that many of us have found that despite the good science we’ve brought with us along the way, the process of finding a job requires a certain attitude that generally isn’t developed in academia.”

I agreed with this scientist’s comments because throughout my recruiting career I have found numerous examples of people who have persevered through incredible odds to solve a scientific problem -- but who gave up too quickly on a job search.

Dr. Michael Zigmond, professor of neuroscience at the University of Pittsburgh, gave a presentation that encouraged spending more than three to five hours per week on the job search. Zigmond shocked the audience by suggesting that they commit their entire waking hours to the effort of a job search or career change. Although he delivered his presentation with humor, I could tell by the faces of the young people around me that they were indeed wondering whether he was serious. I thought, “Someone, somewhere, must have made a promise to science graduates that they’d be blessed with excellent job prospects upon graduation.”

Then I remembered the cover of *Business Week* (March 10th, 1996 issue) whose headline announced “The Biotech Century.” Magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and most major newspapers have since repeated the same message. No wonder today’s

biotechnology students wonder why the job market requires such a degree of persistence and optimism. It is because the job market often doesn't live up to the hype that surrounds the biotechnology industry.

## **Stories from the Trenches**

*Jon was getting more than a bit frustrated at this “networking” process. The more he spoke with others about his job search, the more the word networking was starting to sound like an over-used catchall phrase -- much easier said than done.*

*Jon's former boss, the one who had delivered the bad news about the downsizing at Jon's company, had suggested that networking was simply calling as many people as possible and asking them for a job. “Just so long as you stay away from personnel departments, your networking will turn up some open positions you weren't aware of before,” he had advised. To his old mentor, the PhD advisor who had helped him find this first job, the networking process involved sending a very complete CV package, including several letters of recommendation, to numerous companies and hiring managers. To make it even more confusing, all of the books he had been reading since he lost his position had seemed to indicate that networking was talking to people he didn't know.*

*It made sense to contact people whom he knew; he had already made a list of those names and was more than halfway through that process. But it was an entirely different matter to make a cold call to a stranger and ask for work. “I am not a salesperson,” Jon thought to himself. “They'll either be interested in what I have to offer, or they won't.”*

I first spoke with Jon six months after he lost his job. I was one of the strangers whom, after months of introspection, he decided to call about job prospects. He had already contacted everyone he

knew and had asked them whether they were hiring. In addition, he had responded to over 150 advertisements, many of which didn't fit him. But by this time he was just mailing resumes en masse. When he spoke with me, it was to vent his anger about what had happened to him. I remember thinking at the time that his black mood overwhelmed any possibility that he would get any value out of my suggestions.

Contrast Jon with an individual who has a similar story but who took a different approach -- developing a job search with all the persistence of the Energizer bunny, and the optimism of the half-full glass:

*Nanette had invested a good deal of her savings into the home she now owned in Oakland, CA. It was a major investment, but it was the kind of commitment she was used to making for a job change. It was her third job change since she had started working in the industry back in the mid-1980s. She loved the work, but the lack of stability was frustrating at times. Most recently, her company had been acquired by a similar-sized biotechnology company in another part of the country. Although she was offered a job with the resulting new venture, it would require her to once again leave a home behind. So, she opted out with a modest severance package and began developing a job search.*

*She started by taking stock of the hours in her day that she would have available to work the project. She decided at the outset that she would handle her job search just as she would manage any fast-track project, starting with an important up-front analysis of the timelines and goalposts she would expect. She then put together a list of everyone she could talk with in her quest for more contacts. Because she knew it wouldn't work to call up and ask "Are you hiring?" she decided to request of her confidants that they share a few contacts of their own with whom she could introduce herself. She would focus on scientists who were just a*

*few years ahead of her, instead of just VP's. In this way, within two weeks she had tripled the size of her contact list. "Why is it," she wondered, "that when you ask for a job you get turned over to Human Resources, but when you ask for guidance people will actually talk with you?" She wrote it off as one of the great mysteries of the job search and dug even deeper into her list of networking calls.*

*At first, Nanette was very uncomfortable talking about herself with people she didn't know. But, by continuing that process and pushing herself further each day, she found that she could capsule her strengths very nicely. Her friendly, informal manner helped her to generate a half-dozen job possibilities, all within the first 30 days. She was on-track with her schedule. Of course, the jobs she had heard about weren't the ideal scenario, but she wanted to take a close look at everything before making a decision. She really needed only one good lead out of the whole lot!*

I've known Nanette for a number of years, and by the time I had gotten to her with an opportunity to consider, she already had an offer on the table. I was pleased that she had made such quick progress, but was disappointed that my client company wouldn't have the opportunity to interview her. I shouldn't have been surprised. People who have the twin faculties of perseverance and optimism tend to be the kind of employees who succeed in just about everything they do.

Contact the author for reprint permission:

Dave Jensen, Managing Director, CareerTrax Inc.  
500 Foothills South, Suite 2  
Sedona, AZ 86336  
davej@commspeed.net  
(928) 282-5366

© Copyright 2000 by David G. Jensen, Sedona, AZ 86336-5085.