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Department – Ophthalmology
Interview Date, December 2007

Title: Lab Manager Research Associate
Institution: UNC Dental Research Center

Describe a typical day. *I began my job with the stated mission to get the research back to full productivity and to prepare the lab for a move to new quarters. Just prior to my arrival, the lab had experienced a nearly complete turnover of personnel due to graduations, new jobs elsewhere etc. I spent a great deal of time at the beginning arranging equipment repairs, refurbishments, setting up accounts and ordering lab materials etc. since no one had had responsibility for these things after the lab technician left. Now I have established a routine, which begins with email and, when they arrive, a quick check with the new post doc and a visiting MD/scientist to determine if they need anything for their projects (materials or help) and to update them on any orders that were placed for them. I am available to help them whether it's checking calculations, finding protocols, helping with experiments and trouble-shooting or whatever is called for. Two days a week I do an extended period of placing orders for the lab and once a week I meet with the PI to update on the lab functioning, my research progress, or anything else that needs addressing. We also have weekly lab meetings and joint-lab journal clubs as well as Department seminars. The afternoons are usually spent doing my own research project, which involves determining the mechanism behind a model system the lab is using for a major project collaborating with another lab. My days are actually very varied and usually pass quickly since I am continually occupied with some task.*

What do you enjoy most? *I really like the variety inherent in my days, as well as the mentoring and trouble-shooting in helping others with their research. I also find I enjoy the managerial aspect of the job while still maintaining my own research productivity. I daily interact with many people from a variety of fields, from PIs to the service reps that have come to fix or service our equipment. In the short time I've been at this job, I've learned so much that has really stretched me to extend my capabilities.*

What are some of the challenges? *The challenges have been solving all of the equipment problems, whether arranging for repairs, doing it myself or finding another lab that will allow us to use their equipment for a particular task/experiment. The other major challenge has been learning to deal with the Department and University systems. Getting the right algorithm of which office or person to approach for help to solve a particular problem has been crucial. However, it has meant I've met many nice and interesting people across campus in a very short period of time.*

What is the biggest misconception about your career field? *I think the 'Research Associate' part of my position is fairly easy for scientists to understand, but the 'Lab Manager' label might suggest some distance from the actual scientific process. However, as I've found, the managerial function is simply another part of the preparatory work necessary for experiments and productivity. I view it simply as prep work for lab productivity and not just my own project.*

How did you find out about your current position? *I learned of my position at a Post Doc alternative careers seminar, but not in the expected manner. I met a colleague at the seminar whom I had previously met at the Leadership Workshop sponsored by the Post Office a few years ago. This person had recently left the lab after completing her degree and, upon finding that I had recently finished my post doc, immediately referred me to the PI. Networking really does pay off!*

What strategies or resources did you find most helpful during your job search? *I found the OPS extremely helpful both in personal job counseling and the various panels, symposia, workshops etc. that the Office sponsors. I now view everything as a networking opportunity. I also found Dara's help developing a revised long-term career plan absolutely essential. This position was not what I was initially seeking, but it does fit with my long-term goals and without a plan I might not have realized this fact.*

How long was your job search? *My serious job search lasted three months with three previous months of work with Sibby and Dara planning and laying the foundations for the search.*

Looking back on your time as a postdoc or your job search, what do you wish you would have done differently? *I wish I had begun my job search the minute I began my post doc. I have advised the new post doc in the lab to do this and she has already met several times with both Sibby and Dara.*

What career planning and/or job search advice do you have for current postdocs interested in your career field? *While I am still in academic science, I am gaining additional managerial skills both through the daily job activities and by taking business-oriented classes outside of work. My plan is to work in start-ups, eventually having my own consulting practice. My advice to post docs is to take advantage of as many informational/career-planning opportunities as they can, both for their own development and for the networking possibilities. However, the best thing I can tell anyone is the same as I told our new post doc – make an appointment to meet with Dara as soon as one begins a post doc and work with her to develop both short-term and long-term career goals.*