



YOUNG

Interview with a team leader - Dr Matthew Blackledge

What is your current position?

I am a team leader at my institution, the Institute of Cancer Research, London, UK.

What was your previous position?

I was a postdoc within the same institution.

How did you know that you were ready for such a step-up?

I felt that I had enough research ideas that I wanted to take forward but did not yet have the research team in order to do so. I had already completed seven years as a postdoc and obtained funding from a variety of sources – I also had a personal funding application in process that had gone through to the final round. I had some experience with management of other members of staff and some teaching experience with PhD students in my previous lab.

Did your previous supervisor/boss encourage you to apply and/or help you prepare to apply?

Yes, they did help me to move on with this step, but I decided to keep my application for the role to myself as I needed to use them as a reference. However, I did get a lot of help from my supervisor to prepare for my fellowship application. I found it really useful to get an alternative view on what should be improved and how well it read.

How does the recruitment process work for your current position? How long did it take from when you found out about the call to the first day in your new position?

I needed to write a six-page plan of my career aspirations over the next six years, including references. This was challenging, as trying to write background and research plans within this short space was difficult. The plan needed a significant amount of re-editing. Once this application was successful, I was required to give a 30-minute public presentation about my previous work to the institution, and I was then invited for a full interview. The interview lasted one hour and involved a panel of approximately eight people, one of whom was external to the institution. For the interview I needed to prepare a 10-minute presentation of my future research aims, and then answer questions from the panel. The entire process probably took around nine months from starting to write my application to starting the job.

What was the biggest change with respect to your previous position?

Probably the need to take ownership of my future research. Although this was expected it really did feel pretty daunting to realise that it was all up to me. In addition, there was a very rapid reduction in the amount of spare time I had. This meant that I found it much more important to choose very carefully what work I was willing to take on and try to judge whether my team had the resources to take on a piece of work.

What are your new responsibilities (besides clinical/academic work)?

A big aspect of my work is the management of my staff and students, not only in their research aspirations and directions, but also in the paperwork that is required. Management is an essential aspect of being a team leader, and so it was necessary to learn quickly how the institution operated in terms of keeping track of employee progress (e.g. when appraisals should be performed, when student meetings should be held, and what essential training students needed to attend). In addition to this, I have found that I am being invited to give numerous talks and help organise committees and conferences. Whilst this is rewarding, it certainly takes some time.

What was the biggest challenge in your new role?

Trying to manage my time among all my new responsibilities. This also meant having to forego some of the research I wanted to do personally and delegate it to others so that I had more time to perform some of the administrative roles. Another thing that I found really important was selecting the right people to join my team. It is important to know how to interview well in order to make sure that the right people are being selected for a role.

If asked five years ago “where do you see yourself in five years”, would your current role have been the answer?

I always wanted to continue a career in research and knew this was the next step, so yes.

What about in another five years? Where do you see yourself then?

I hope to remain as a team leader, so I will hopefully be going for my tenured position at that stage; although there are plenty of things to do in the next five years to reach it.

Any advice for young professionals hoping to work in a role similar to yours in the future?

Publish papers and apply for grants. Even if the grant applications aren't successful, it's important to realise that the success rate is low but the experience you gain from going through the process is highly valuable. Grantsmanship is a real skill and takes practice. Get your peers to read through your grants to help you to make your application crystal clear, and if like me you are lucky enough to know someone who is very successful at it, it is important to get their feedback.

What kind of department head/team leader are you?

I try not to micromanage, and try to let people develop their own research ideas so that they can take ownership of their projects as quickly as possible. However, I have begun to realise that this does not work at all stages and that it's also important to help guide staff progress and make structured aims and objectives that can be achieved within reasonable time-frames. In general I like to make sure that staff can rely on each other for help as well. I try to achieve this through regular coffee mornings with the group where we can all chat to each other about our work in a relaxed setting. I also think it's really important to explore the details of the scientific methods we are using, so we also have regular group discussions where we focus on the theory of a particular methodology.

Which person(s) have played an important role in your career on the way to becoming a department head/team leader?

Foremost, these people would be my previous supervisors and mentors who have helped me along the way. Also, a very understanding partner who supported me during the long nights putting applications and grants together.





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