Salary Survey

EVERY FEW YEARS SINCE 2001, SCIENCE HAS CONDUCTED A SURVEY IN WHICH LIFE scientists in the United States report how well they’re doing financially—and better yet, how they are feeling about their profession and their place in it. This year’s report (p. 842) contains some elements of relief for those who have chosen to do some kind of biology for a living. The relief could hardly come at a better time. Earlier signals have included lowering pay lines for National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants, unionization campaigns among postdoctoral fellows, and the grim prospects for “domestic discretionary” expenditures (which include, of course, research funding). It’s tough when the first NIH grant in one’s career comes after the age of 40.

But the survey shows that life scientists at all levels are doing better than in recent years and better than inflation. Full-time academic life scientists earned 5.4% more this year than in the preceding year, well above the cost-of-living index. Postdoctoral fellows, who once were used to feeling like a disfavored class, did even better, with an average salary increase of 8.1%. Ph.D.s who work in industry continue to earn more than their academic counterparts, by an average of about $40,000 (their salaries are increasing faster, too, up 10% this year). It may not surprise readers that job satisfaction shows a positive relationship with compensation. But the linkage is weaker than one might expect. The job satisfaction of the top group of earners is high all right, but the group earning only one-fifth as much reports only slightly lower satisfaction. It appears that prestige, promotion opportunity, and intellectual challenge are more important determinants. No surprise there.

Underneath all this good news, however, lie some significant submerged inequities. For example, the average salary for academic pharmacologists is about $55,000 more than for developmental biologists. There is a warning signal that accompanies disparities of that kind: Scientists, like most other kinds of workers, compare salaries, and when they are disappointed in the results, morale is likely to decline and complaints are certain to follow. That can spell trouble in an institution. One example is the often-remarked academic salary differential between professors of law and English, which led one of the former to deliver this unsympathetic advice to a plaintive colleague in comparative literature: “Well then, go out and practice English.”

It is also important to note that the improved status of our sample of scientists actually serves to widen an already growing gap in our national economy. We should be worrying about the rewards and satisfactions of our scientific colleagues, but we should also be concerned about the people who clean their labs, run the cafeteria, and work in the accounting office. That brings us to some discomfiting facts about the pattern of wage changes in the contemporary economy. Improvement, often faster than inflation, is seen in the upper range of the wage scale, especially for employees in the service economy. But at the lower end, workers are worse off. This seems paradoxical, because productivity is up: If these workers are doing more, why aren’t their wages keeping pace?

One answer is that, increasingly, full-time workers are being replaced by part-timers. Large employers like Wal-Mart are elevating the proportion of their employees who are part-time, and there and elsewhere, outsourcing strategies are getting more and more popular. The result is that those who remain are having to take less, while their outsourced replacements make a little more but lose their benefits. Organized labor once provided a countervailing force, but unions have lost much of their strength, and management is taking advantage of the weakened opposition.

None of this should take away from our good feeling about the improved prospects for our colleagues in the life sciences. This decade, after all, has seen remarkable progress in biomedical research, and that is surely a very important enterprise for which its practitioners deserve a fair reward. But all of us, scientists included, will benefit from a society that enjoys a stable political economy, and a more equitable income distribution can contribute to making that a more sustainable benefit.

–Donald Kennedy

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