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Navigating technology transfer issues

You’ve got an idea and you think it has business teeth—now what? If you’re a postdoc aiming to focus your career on commercialization, your institution’s Technology Transfer Office is on the front line, providing a wealth of resources and advice to make sure your innovation’s market potential packs the biggest and most impactful punch. By Alaina G. Levine

David Giljohann began contemplating a career in entrepreneurship as he was finishing up his Ph.D. in 2009 at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Together with his principal investigator (PI), he had realized the commercial potential of modifying nanoparticles with nucleic acids to create targeted, personalized medicines for a myriad of diseases. He and his advisor approached the university’s Technology Transfer Office (TTO), which serves to help researchers in all aspects of commercialization.

Northwestern’s TTO team gave him advice, guidance, access to resources, and a sweetheart deal—they arranged for him to do a postdoc in which he would spend half his time in the lab to continue his research and half his time at the university’s incubator to bring his startup plans to fruition. When he finished his postdoc in 2011, his firm had reached a critical milestone and was able to move to permanent headquarters in nearby Skokie, Illinois.

Giljohann now serves as CEO of Exicure, and has a staff of 25 and more than 100 patents and applications to his name. The new enterprise has just completed its first clinical trials in Germany. He shares that his success could not have happened but for the dedicated professionals in the TTO. “A personalized relationship with the TTO allowed me to come up with a unique way to start the company,” he explains. “It took away some of that risk so I would not be left homeless on the street while I was growing the company.”

While Giljohann’s arrangement with Northwestern was somewhat unusual, it is still emblematic of the many resources afforded to postdocs who approach their TTO with their business ideas and seek to craft partnerships to achieve those goals. Indeed, “there is a greater emphasis on proactively approaching the graduate students and postdocs of an institution, as they are often the hands that develop those inventions in conjunction with their PIs,” says Stephen J. Susalka, executive director of the Association of University Technology Managers, the main membership organization for technology commercialization professionals.

Today’s TTOs provide a bevy of benefits for would-be entrepreneurs, including seminars, internships, access to capital, startup space, infrastructure, mentors, and established industry partners, as well as soup-to-nuts assistance with everything from invention disclosures, early-stage commercialization plans, marketing plans, and licensing deals. Since TTOs’ objectives are to spin out innovations developed by researchers, TTO leaders, who often have Ph.D.s in science and engineering, welcome opportunities to converse with postdocs to help them map out their potential startup options.

Postdocs: the MVPs of tech transfer

The postdoc appointment can be the sweet spot in one’s career track for pursuing tech transfer endeavors. First of all, at such an early stage in their research career, postdocs often don’t have preconceived notions of how the tech transfer cont.>

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“Professors are, in general, committed to the mission of impacting society through their research. Sometimes, this mission is best accomplished through commercialization.”

– Alicia Löffler, associate provost for innovation and new ventures at Northwestern University

process works, or unrealistic expectations associated with forming licensing alliances, says Andrew Corris, a licensing associate at Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

One of the bad habits postdocs usually avoid is a problem that Corris and his colleagues sometimes see with veteran inventors—who are more likely to weigh in on terms during licensing than a postdoc who is new to the process. “Sometimes the experience can be a boon in negotiations, but other times those preconceptions can mean a threat to the agreement,” he adds. “Those new to licensing tend to be more willing to accept the validity of reputable third-party benchmarking, which tends to be the only available compromise point anyway.”

Another advantage for postdocs is that since they are just starting out, they risk less by choosing to realize their dreams. “They are at a point in their career where they can easily transition into the startup company to advance their technology,” says Kimberly A. Muller, managing director of innovations at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus in Denver.

Cutting a deal with your mentor

Being transparent with your research mentor is the first and most important step to navigating technology transfer waters. “Have an open dialogue with your PI about where you think the technology could go and where your interests may align in starting a company,” says Giljohann. “Not all PIs realize that their students or postdocs have these ideas or designs on commercialization.”

A mentor’s response can range from giving their blessing to the postdoc and letting them take full responsibility for their ideas, to wanting to structure a binding partnership so they do everything together. Serge van de Pavert, a group leader at the Centre d’Immunologie de Marseille-Luminy, in France, agrees that it’s important to be up front with your mentor: “You cannot go behind their back—it will lead to conflict in the end.”

As a postdoc, van de Pavert recognized that an idea he had nurtured in the lab could be developed into a product. “I came to understand that if you don’t patent your finding, there will never be any medical applications generated from it, and that really shocked me. If possible, I want something I put a lot of effort into to provide benefits to the world.” He broached this subject with his PI; she was not interested in entrepreneurship but was fine with him pursuing it, as long as he kept her in the loop and ensured that she was present during meetings with the TTO.

Tech transfer professionals can aid postdocs in having such potentially delicate discussions with their advisors. Alicia Löffler, associate provost for innovation and new ventures at Northwestern University, recalls a case where a postdoc wanted to delve into commercialization, but the PI was not as “enthused.” She and her team were able to convince the PI it was a worthwhile endeavor, in part by highlighting how the venture in question would expand their influence in their disciplines. “Professors are, in general, committed to the mission of impacting society through their research,” she says. “Sometimes, this mission is best accomplished through commercialization.”

Minefields to mind

Once you have your PI informed and/or on board, “build a coalition of people who will help with the process,” says Giljohann. In fact, it is never too early to start conversing with your friendly neighborhood tech transfer professionals, who can help you traverse the critical hazards you are likely to meet while building your business.

The first such hazard relates to publishing. Muller strongly suggests that if you think your idea is patentable, speak with the TTO as soon as possible—especially before you publish or even think about publishing, which also includes giving oral and poster presentations at conferences. “Once things are published, it changes the landscape,” she says.

Susalka warns, “Intellectual property rights can be lost if you publish before an invention application is filed. You are always in a better place if you file a patent application before you publish the paper. I’ve said to people ‘send me a draft of your paper,’ and that way it can be reviewed with the tech transfer lens.”

However, if you’re concerned you won’t be able to publish at all, don’t worry, says Nisha Narayan, intellectual property and partnerships lead at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research: “You may need to delay the publishing for a few months, but we ultimately want you to disseminate the knowledge and make it available to the public.”

When Mayuresh V. Kothare, chairman of the department of chemical and biomolecular engineering at Lehigh University, his collaborator, adjunct professor Shivaji Sircar, and their postdoc Vemula Rama Rao realized they had a patentable result based on their bench-scale experiments, they immediately filed an invention disclosure with Lehigh’s Office of Technology Transfer (OTT). “Our OTT immediately recommended that we file a provisional patent so as to lock a priority date on the invention,” says Kothare. From this point on, they remained constantly in touch with their OTT to update on their progress in developing the technology. They filed a second provisional patent application soon after, and a nonprovisional, Patent Cooperation Treaty (PCT) application was filed within a year, which provided intellectual property protection across multiple countries.
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simultaneously. Moreover, “the OTT was actively engaged with our team to acquire research grants and advertise our technology at trade conferences and in technical symposiums,” he says. “This was the sort of aggressive support from our OTT team that was crucial in keeping us moving to ensure protection and marketing of our intellectual property.”

Postdocs who receive funding through grants may have to contend with complex conflict-of-interest issues. When your research fellowship is financed by an agency such as the U.S. National Science Foundation or the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH), 100% of your outputs are under that grant or proposal. But if you pursue commercialization, “how do you carve out time?” asks Löffler. “That is the conflict of reporting—you have to do the work that you’re being funded to do.” In response to this challenge, Löffler and her team (as well as other institutions and their TTOs) have come up with creative funding mechanisms, including fellowships supported by private companies and philanthropies, which provide postdocs the freedom to chase entrepreneurial ambitions.

But time management is not the only potential conflict of interest you will face. As you acquire capital from industrial partners, perhaps through a licensing arrangement, you’ll need to communicate this in all of your publications. Furthermore, suppose your research is funded by NIH, then you discover something that can be turned into a product and get it licensed. As Muller explains, “If you are going to continue doing research, you have to disclose on all publications that you have a financial interest in the research. TTOs have experience with this and can advise on navigating these issues and managing the conflict to ensure that the integrity of the research at the university is upheld.”

Tactics for tech transfer triumph

Your local TTO likely has a multitude of resources that will enable your success. It might offer workshops, coaching, and guidance to help you understand and sail through commercialization. It may also give you access to money and partners, serving as a hub for networking with strategic members of the entrepreneurial community, including venture capitalists, attorneys, and marketing and public relations experts. Your TTO can also provide guidance on applying for proof-of-concepts grants offered by state governments, which may be easier to acquire (based on the number of applicants) than typical federal research grants, says Alexandra Hall, intellectual property manager at the University of Denver in Colorado.

Additionally, more and more TTOs are offering postdocs and graduate students internship opportunities to learn the business from the inside out. This type of offering is a “win-win” for the postdoc, TTO, and university, says Susalka, because the intern/postdoc can then serve as an “ambassador” in his or her home department and share their experience to help peers in their own patenting and commercialization pursuits.

Your TTO might offer other unexpected opportunities. For example, CU Anschutz has a partnership with StartUp Health, a for-profit enterprise that offers global-level connections and advancement opportunities for innovators in the health care space. “It provides additional resources to catapult the work we are doing here onto the national scene,” says Muller. “It connects our researchers with venture capitalists and others to accelerate translation of the research from the lab to the public sector.” The university also has a clinical validation program with Children’s Hospital Colorado and the UCHHealth system, in which inventors can test and fine-tune these innovations and “deploy them in the hospital in real time,” she says.

The TTO can lay out all of the different options available, from licensing to outright selling of an invention to launching your own enterprise, and it can facilitate your success in many ways, including teaching you marketing skills, pairing you with mentors and partners, and giving you access to funding. “There are a lot of mechanisms to engage a TTO,” says Narayan. “If a similar idea has already been patented, don’t not come to me because of that.”

It’s crucial to let your TTO get to know you and your needs and goals, and vice versa. “It’s going to be different everywhere, and you’ll see the flavors of technology commercialization differ widely depending on institution,” says Corris. So just because your Ph.D.-granting institution handled tech transfer one way does not mean that your current university will handle it in the same manner. And if your institution does not have its own TTO, Susalka suggests contacting your university’s Office of Sponsored Research.

But as a postdoc, no matter how you engage the realm of tech transfer, you should know that you will find more pluses than minuses there in terms of career opportunities, even if your plans don’t include being a full-time CEO. “People used to think that if you were going to commercialize, you could not be a good academic,” says Löffler. “But now, most faculty know this is not true. If you look at most universities, the scientists who are the best academics are also the best entrepreneurs.”

Alaina G. Levine is a freelance science writer based in Tucson, Arizona.

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• Committed to excellence
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A successful application will involve a co-applicant responsible for setting up the institution and support from local infrastructure. Cooperation with a leading international centre in the field is required.

What you can get:

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June 6 - 26
**Ion Channels in Synaptic and Neural Circuit Physiology**  
June 6 - 26
**Mouse Development, Stem Cells & Cancer**  
June 7 - 26
**Metabolomics**  
June 10 - 26
**Vision: Linking Circuits, Perception and Behavior**  
June 15 - 29
**Single Cell Analysis**  
June 30 - July 13
**Statistical Methods for Functional Genomics**  
June 30 - July 13
**Advanced Techniques in Molecular Neuroscience**  
June 30 - July 15

**Drosophila Neurobiology: Genes, Circuits & Behavior**  
June 30 - July 20
**Frontiers & Techniques in Plant Science**  
June 30 - July 20
**Neural Data Science**  
July 15 - 28
**Synthetic Biology**  
July 25 - Aug 7
**Chromatin, Epigenetics and Gene Expression**  
July 25 - Aug 14
**Imaging Structure & Function in the Nervous System**  
July 25 - Aug 14
**Yeast Genetics & Genomics**  
July 25 - Aug 14
**Workshop on Autism Spectrum Disorders**  
July 31 - Aug 6
**Proteomics**  
Aug 1 - 14
**Cellular Biology of Addiction**  
Aug 8 - 14

**Programming for Biology**  
Oct 16 - 31
**X-Ray Methods in Structural Biology**  
Oct 16 - 31
**Antibody Engineering, Phage Display & Immune Repertoire Analysis**  
Oct 16 - 31
**Advanced Sequencing Technologies & Applications**  
Nov 7 - 18
**The Genome Access Course**  
Nov 13 - 15
**Scientific Writing Retreat**  
Nov 15 - 19
**Foundations of Computational Genomics**  
Nov 29 - Dec 6
**Immersive Approaches to Biological Data Visualization**  
Dec 7 - 16

[www.cshl.edu/meetings](http://www.cshl.edu/meetings)
The newly created Department of Medical Education at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth seeks applicants for a tenure-track position teaching histology and general pathology. This position provides a competitive salary for dedicated teaching within the preclinical UME curriculum. Academic rank awarded commensurate with experience.

The ideal candidate for this position will hold an M.D., Ph.D. and/or equivalent degree and will be a highly experienced medical educator with expertise in curricular design/innovation and in a range of pedagogies in the field of pathology. Substantive scholarship, either discipline-specific or in the field of medical education is required.

Geisel is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer. For additional details and to apply at website: https://apply.interfolio.com/40761

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Department of Immunology & Microbial Disease
Albany Medical College

Faculty Position
Host-Pathogen Interactions

The Department of Immunology & Microbial Disease at Albany Medical College invites applications for a tenure-track, junior or senior faculty position from individuals who have a doctoral degree, postdoctoral experience, and demonstrated research productivity. The Department of Immunology & Microbial Disease has a particular focus on viral and bacterial pathogenesis, and immune defense. The successful candidate will be expected to establish an independent, extramurally-funded research program and participate in the teaching of medical and graduate students. The new faculty recruit will receive a competitive salary, an attractive start-up package, and access to all departmental core services including the Department’s fully-staffed Immunology and ABSL-3/BSL-3 Cores. Albany Medical College is located in a mid-sized city within the upstate New York Capital Region, and has easy access to Boston, New York City, and the Adirondack Mountains.

Applicants should send their curriculum vitae, a statement of research plans, and three letters of reference to:

Faculty Search Committee
Department of Immunology & Microbial Disease
Albany Medical College
47 New Scotland Avenue, MC-151
Albany, NY 12208

For further information about the Center, visit:
www.amc.edu/Academic/Research/imd.htm

An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer.
Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

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Caltech

Executive Director

The Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen Institute for Neuroscience at Caltech is seeking an Executive Director who will use her/his administrative experience in a higher education or scientific research organization to implement the vision and strategic plan of the Institute Director and oversee Chen Institute activities.

The Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen Institute for Neuroscience at Caltech, founded in 2016 with the generous support of philanthropists Tianqiao Chen and Chrissy Luo, brings together a cross disciplinary team of scientists and engineers to investigate one of today’s greatest challenges and opportunities - understanding the brain. The Chen Institute at Caltech is a key component of a new neuroscience initiative that is geared toward deepening our understanding of the brain’s structure and how the brain works at its most basic level, as well as why and how it fails as a result of disease or through the aging process. Ultimately, this work aims to yield such transformational advances as new therapeutics, the reversal of diseases of aging, and an improvement in the human condition.

The Chen Institute at Caltech draws upon Caltech’s strengths across a broad range of disciplines, catalyzing interactions within a diverse community of researchers from neuroscientists and biologists to social scientists, chemists, physicists, computer scientists, and engineers.

The Executive Director will work with the Director, its five connected center directors, and faculty across campus in affiliated divisions as well as Caltech development, administration, and communications offices to oversee the entire Institute operating structure and assist in identifying new opportunities for supporting research and education in neuroscience and communicating Institute scientific advances to the public.

For more detailed information and to apply, please go to:
https://jobs.caltech.edu/postings/5965

EOE of Minorities/Females/Protected Vets/Disability.

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ETH Zürich

Professor of Molecular Plant Sciences

The Department of Biology (www.biol.ethz.ch) at ETH Zurich invites applications for the above-mentioned position in the area of Molecular Plant Biology.

The successful candidate is expected to build a vibrant, world-class research programme that combines cutting-edge approaches in plant molecular biology, cell biology, biochemistry, and genetics using quantitative approaches to generate new knowledge of fundamental molecular mechanisms in plant model systems. Any area of molecular plant science will be considered, but applications in the field of environmental perception, signalling and adaptive developmental responses are especially encouraged. We are especially interested in candidates who will take advantage of the existing expertise in Plant Biology, in the Department of Biology, and the larger Life Science Zurich research environment. The successful applicant is also expected to promote translational research activities and engage with strategic initiatives of ETH Zurich.

The new professor will be a member of the Department of Biology and the newly-founded Institute of Molecular Plant Biology located on the Hönggerberg campus. The Department offers access to state-of-the-art equipment (e.g. the ScopeM Imaging facility and the Functional Genomics Centre) and outstanding scientific opportunities to participate in interdisciplinary research programmes. Integration into existing networks will facilitate interactions with the local research community (e.g. via the Zurich–Basel Plant Science Centre and the World Food System Centre). The new professor will engage in the plant biology teaching programme at both undergraduate and master levels (teaching may be in German or English).

Please apply online at:
www.facultyaffairs.ethz.ch

Applications should include a curriculum vitae, a list of publications, a statement of future research and teaching interests, and a description of the three most important achievements. The letter of application should be addressed to the President of ETH Zurich, Prof. Dr. Lino Guzzella. The closing date for applications is 30 April 2017. ETH Zurich is an equal opportunity and family friendly employer and is responsive to the needs of dual career couples. We specifically encourage women to apply.
Call for application: Bayer-Peking University (PKU) Postdoctoral Fellowship in Biomedical Sciences

This named fellowship is to fulfill Bayer’s long-term interest in supporting Biomedical Sciences in China and to recruit international talent in Biomedical Sciences to PKU. One Bayer-PKU Postdoctoral Fellowship, in the amount of 300K RMB, will be awarded per year. The fellowship can be used as a supplement for postdoctoral stipend.

Qualified candidates must have MD or PhD and has or will be accepted to one of the PKU research laboratory under the Bayer-PKU umbrella agreement. We strongly encourage international candidates to apply for such a position.

Candidates shall send a package to gsmjobs@pku.edu.cn before March 31, 2017, including a CV, 3 recommendation letters (one must from PKU mentor) and a research statement (1 page for previous achievement and 2 pages for future research plan) for search committee evaluation.

For information about School of Life Sciences, Peking University please visit: http://bio.pku.edu.cn/en/index.php

“Due to international compliance requirements, the Bayer-PKU Postdoctoral Fellowship cannot either directly or indirectly be used to the benefit of any healthcare professionals.

I. Brief Introduction

Shandong Agricultural University (SDAU), situated at the foot of the magnificent Mount Tai, was founded in 1906. It is a multi-disciplinary university with agricultural science as its strength and life science as a distinctive feature, covering many areas of both Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. Currently, there are 20 colleges in SDAU, and it has a full-time enrollment of 34,000 students, among whom more than 30,000 are undergraduate students. 3,270 are doctoral and master degree candidates. At present, SDAU has 755 professors and associate professors, 2 academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and 4 academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering. The university has 12 postdoctoral research stations, 10 Ph.D. degree programs in the first-level discipline and 49 in the second-level, 24 master degree programs in the first-level discipline and 99 master degree programs, and 89 undergraduate degree programs. There are 1 national key laboratory, 2 national key disciplines, 2 national engineering laboratories and 2 national engineering and technology research centers.

SDAU covers an area of 3.53 million square meters, among which 1.18 million square meters are building areas. The total value of instruments and equipment for teaching and scientific research amounts to 618 million yuan (RMB). The library has a collection of books of 2.67 million volumes and its e-books amount to 3.79 million volumes.

II. Positions and Numbers

146 professional or technical personnel are recruited openly in 2017. See details: http://rc.sdau.edu.cn/s493/473/c66e/info114738.htm Please send your materials to the corresponding E-mail as required.

III. Salary and Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Scientific/Research Foundation (Ten Thousand RMB)</th>
<th>House Furnishings Supplementary (Ten Thousand RMB)</th>
<th>Professional Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Level</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>50-100</td>
<td>400-600</td>
<td>First Grade Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Level</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>80-120</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>100-150</td>
<td>200-300</td>
<td>Second Grade Professor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>150-200</td>
<td>300-500</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Level</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>200-250</td>
<td>500-150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>250-300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Level</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>300-350</td>
<td>600-800</td>
<td>Professor or University Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>350-400</td>
<td>700-900</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Level</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
<td>400-450</td>
<td>800-1000</td>
<td>Associated Professor or University Associate Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>450-500</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Class B</td>
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<td>500-550</td>
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<td>Class C</td>
<td>Natural Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class D</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>600-650</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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