

By Amir Sheikhi

More than my publications

I should have been celebrating. I had just hit the “submit” button on the online portal for doctoral theses, concluding my Ph.D. studies. And I did feel a sense of satisfaction. I had worked hard and was proud of what I had accomplished. But I was also overwhelmed by depression and anxiety about my future. Almost all my recently graduated friends had several published papers from their Ph.D. work; I had none. I thought my chances at the academic career I so wanted were ruined. I felt lost and alone in an endless desert.

I could point to reasons why I hadn't published. I had changed fields between my master's degree and Ph.D., and it had taken time to get up to speed in my new discipline. I needed to figure out how to work with my new lab's complex custom-built instruments and tune them for my experiments. There were no senior graduate students or postdocs in the lab to train me at the time, which made this task even more challenging. I eventually got my experiments to work, and I learned a tremendous amount along the way, scientifically and personally. But that is not the same as generating publishable results.

As I approached the end of my Ph.D., I was anxious to publish. Yet my Ph.D. scholarship only covered 3 years, with limited support for a fourth year. My time was up. I had enough data to write and defend my thesis, but the results were not ready for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

So there I was: a newly minted Ph.D. hoping to pursue an academic career but without any papers from my primary project. My applications for postdoctoral research positions were either rejected or ignored. I needed to try something different.

A few years earlier, a grad student friend and I had worked on a side project, which we published with the help of one of his advisers. The work was in some ways very different from my scientific training and my primary Ph.D. project (I was a chemical engineer, and my friend's lab was in the chemistry department), but I had enjoyed applying my knowledge and perspective in this new realm. Now, I thought this experience might help me get a position in that lab.

I arranged a meeting with the lab's principal investigator (PI) and another senior PI. They were working on a



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joint project, and we had a lively discussion about it and where they were having trouble. I found that my different scientific background and the fundamental knowledge I had developed during my doctoral studies enabled me to propose plausible solutions and alternative approaches that hadn't occurred to them. They offered me a temporary research associate position, with the possibility of staying on longer if things went well. It wasn't the prestigious postdoc position I had initially been looking for, but I was happy to have found some water in my post-Ph.D. desert.

I thrived in this new position. I finished the project in a few months—the PIs had originally expected that it would take a year—and they invited me to continue as an official postdoctoral fellow. I published some of my new work relatively quickly and initiated and completed a number of new projects. I also eventually published the results of my Ph.D. project. Most important, I enjoyed my work. I've since moved on to another position, and despite my earlier publication drought, I am optimistic about my future career prospects.

Looking back, I wish I could tell my recently graduated self that I shouldn't have defined myself based on my publication record. My list of publications doesn't matter as much as the knowledge I gained in the process and the sense of purpose that kept me going. And I wish I could tell everyone else to try to look past publications, at least a little, when evaluating other scientists. Yes, publications are important. But a lack of publications doesn't mean a lack of intelligence, skills, or worth. ■

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