

## Flexible working works

Today, one of the lead stories on the BBC's flagship radio programme *Today* was the extension of the right to flexible working patterns to almost all employees in the UK. There was nothing particularly remarkable in either the legislative change or in the coverage of it – most good employers have offered flexible working for a long time now and it has pretty much always been a feature of academic life. The discussions did remind me, though, of my own gradual conversion to the view that unusual working patterns are not merely as good as conventional ones but can actually be better.

Some years ago, the USA's National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) generously agreed to fund us, long-term, to curate the database for their GUDMAP project, that is constructing a molecular atlas of urogenital development (see links). This effectively replaced the simple and primitive Kidney Development Database that I had been running since the dawn of the web in the early 1990s. To support curation of the GIDMAP database, NIDDK funded initially two, and later three, positions in my lab. It also funded another laboratory in Edinburgh to develop the underlying computing infrastructure. The senior curator position was filled not by one person, but by two people who wanted to treat it as a 50/50 job-share. Both were already experienced and very effective post-docs, each with at least one first-author *Nature* paper to her name, and both now wanted to work in the curation and management of scientific knowledge rather than generating it at the bench. They are Dr. Jane Armstrong and Dr. Jane Brennan, and these names have been causing amusement to the GUDMAP community for many years. When someone just wants to refer to the position, we speak of “The Janes” while anyone who needs to talk with one of specifically will use the abbreviated surname, so that the individuals become “Jane A.” and “Jane B.” Indeed at once GUDMAP conference The Janes made themselves badges of precisely that form.

Before the Janes, I had never had a job-share position in the lab and I viewed the prospect – I admit all these years later – with some trepidation. I already knew that the individuals were individually excellent but I was worried that, in working together, things might be dropped. It turned out that I need not have been concerned. The reality has been amazing, and the achievements of that position amount to at least 150% of what I could have expected from any one person. This is partly because

part-time work involves less fatigue, partly because each Jane has specialized in two different aspects of the job and has become more expert in their area than one person could be in both, and partly because they are so skilled at operating together seamlessly that many outside users of the database have no idea that they have been communicating with more than one person. Through this experience, I rapidly became a convert to the idea of job sharing, and am still rather in awe of what The Janes continue to achieve.

The other aspect of flexibility that is becoming more common is working from home. This has always been a feature of academic life to some extent, because we all have periods of reading and writing and those of us who teach also have periods of marking. All of these activities are easier to do well far from telephones, e-mails, juddering centrifuges and lab water fights. For wet-lab scientists, home-working usually means an occasional day or half-day in the house, but most of time is still anchored in the lab because it has to be. For computer-based scientists, on the other hand, there is no necessity to be amongst the benches, incubators and bad smells: the option of truly home-based working becomes a real possibility. In recent years, I have experienced a rather extreme version of the home-working that computer-based projects allow. Our other big database, the IUPHAR/ BPS Guide to Pharmacology, employs five people thanks to the generosity of BPS, IUPHAR, and The Wellcome Trust. One of these, the highly skilled curator/ chemoinformatician Dr Chris Southan, works from home and barely visits the lab at all. His infrequent visits are not surprising: my lab is in Edinburgh, Scotland, and Chris' home is in Gothenburg, Sweden, far away across the storm-lashed grey waters of the North Sea. This distance turns out to matter not at all – Chris is a very active member of the team who can always be relied on to go the extra mile and, indeed, is often the first of us to work out the direction in which the extra mile should lead.

The existence of these arrangements in my team mean that colleagues who run other labs in the building often come to me to ask about my experiences with flexible working, usually when a strong candidate for a position requests something unusual. My advice is always the same: appoint the best candidate and, if you give them your trust with flexible working, they will probably give you and the rest of your team far more than you would dare ask from a conventional employee.

There may also be a deeper reason that this works so well. Science is an intensely creative activity that requires imagination above all things. Nobody expects other creative people – artists, composers, playwrights, and poets to name but a few – to live nine-to-five lives tied to desks and

swivel chairs, living for those few weeks marked as 'holiday' on a depressing year chart thumb-tacked to the wall. Why should we expect scientists to live that way? As in so many other aspects of life, ideas thrive best under freedom.

Jamie Davies,  
Edinburgh,  
June 2016

**Links:**

BBC story: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-28078690>

GUGMAP: [www.gudmap.org](http://www.gudmap.org)

Kidney development database: <http://golgi.ana.ed.ac.uk/kidhome.html>

Guide to Pharmacology: [www.guidetopharmacology.org](http://www.guidetopharmacology.org)