EMBO reports

editorial

The downsides of mobility

Being a scientist almost always means that you have to pack up and move at least once—if not several times—during your career. For some, particularly in the USA or other large countries, this relocation takes place within their own country. For many others, however, it involves crossing borders. My own scientific travel itinerary includes Ireland, England, USA, France and Germany. This meant coming to grips with the bureaucracy and setting up home in five different countries. It also meant living not only in five different cultures but also with three different languages. Of course, the standard cliché that travel is enriching holds true; indeed, I would be a different person had I stayed on the west coast of Ireland, and I would have missed many new opportunities and experiences.

EMBO promotes mobility at the heart of most of its actions. This clearly has many advantages, which most scientists appreciate. Still, every move means many changes—not only in laboratory life but even more so outside work: social habits, politics, shopping patterns, school hours, exam systems, tax forms, driving licenses, insurance regulations and so on. These changes range from the important to the trivial, but the fact is that many of them are additional burdens. More significantly, partners and children must also carry these burdens, simply because they are linked to a scientist.

Strangely, the downsides of mobility are rarely addressed. Instead, we constantly hear about the benefits of scientists moving from place to place—particularly in Europe, where the European Union (EU) can only succeed if physical and psychological national barriers are removed. It is true that one success of the EU Framework Programmes is collaboration between scientists across the continent through joint projects, visits and exchanges. However, the extent to which mobility is emphasized as an integral part of a scientific career has reached a point where selection committees—which often comprise people whose careers do not span countries or cultures—could have a negative view of a candidate who has remained in one place for too long. This is not necessarily right or wrong, it is merely the current fashion that regards increased mobility for junior scientists as beneficial.

Including mobility as an invisible criterion for eligibility would benefit from an infusion of realism, because moving from the comfort zone of one's own country has disadvantages. Most scientists looking for an interesting postdoctoral position do not worry about their pension—until it is too late. The years spent studying do not give the same pension benefits as a full-time job, and payments made during the PhD thesis—increasingly undertaken outside the student's home country—or a postdoctoral position often cannot be transferred into a national pension scheme. This works to the particular disadvantage of mobile scientists, as they may end up with a meagre pension once they reach the age of retirement, simply because they were not able to make sufficient contributions to their country's pension scheme. If politicians in Brussels and elsewhere want to attract more young people to science, and if they want to promote mobility in Europe, they should rather quickly solve this and other problems, such as healthcare, social security and vastly differing tax codes.

A similarly invisible disadvantage comes from the necessary postponement of entering the property market. Unlike colleagues who remain in their country of origin, mobile scientists can be unsure of how long they are likely to stay in one location, or sure that they will only stay for a short period. As a result, they often rent property rather than buy. In the meantime, prices in some countries have risen to a point at which it becomes almost impossible to purchase a house or apartment.

What politicians and administrators cannot solve are the very personal difficulties that come with moving. And it is these challenges away from the laboratory that eat into time, tranquility and productivity. In this era of the internet, scientists can easily stay in contact with former colleagues who frequently happen to be their friends as well. But their children lose their buddies and are faced with language and cultural challenges, the negative consequences of which might never be erased. Other family members also lose in the mobility game, because they see less of their children and grandchildren. And partners take the biggest hit of all: they lose their social circle, inevitably have to handle the day-to-day problems at home and often sacrifice their own career to an extent that cannot be recouped. Frequently they become an appendage to the scientist rather than an individual who is successful in their own right.

Although I agree that mobility is good—indeed, I live by this belief—the discussion on the consequences of mobility is in dire need of some balance and realism. Of course, the positive aspects of a new environment might outweigh the negatives I have outlined above: a move to another university or institute to start a position as group leader or assistant professor is usually a step forward. Similarly, research institutes need an influx of new people and fresh ideas to avoid the deathly consequences of rigid stability. But it is important to recognize the sacrifices associated with mobility, and to help mobile scientists by creating and maintaining support structures that alleviate its downsides—both professional and personal.

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