Many pies, one finger

Taking over the responsibility for leading the editorial team of *EMBO reports* from Frank Gannon is a daunting task. In fact, taking over anything from Frank Gannon is a daunting task. Not only is Frank the only person I know who can simultaneously watch three different rugby internationals on different TV channels, with total engagement in the minutiae of each match, but he can also write a policy statement, review a scientific manuscript and eat lunch at the same time as watching the three games, without any detriment to his attention for each. For me, just managing to master the rules of rugby is a major undertaking, let alone judging the validity of their concurrent application in three different arenas.

Frank Gannon is truly a master of the art of multi-tasking, and his proficiency therein has been a major factor in ensuring the success of this journal during its first decade. Building it up from scratch, Frank and the editorial teams have developed *EMBO reports* as a unique asset to the molecular biology community, combining groundbreaking science with incisive comment on issues of social concern to scientists and scientific concern to society, plus his own, inimitably fearless, editorials.

Multi-tasking is a skill that all bench-trained scientists need to develop to a considerable degree. This is certainly one reason why I have only ever ranked myself at the 60th percentile of laboratory competence, and instead learned early on the art of criticizing the experiments of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers who are at the 80th percentile but need to aim higher. The need for multi-tasking is most apparent for those who dabble in research on ageing. "I'm sorry, but I need to wait four months to see if the transgene affects lifespan and then another four months to repeat the experiment before I dream up the next one," is not a recipe for rapid progress.

An inadequate mastery of multi-tasking can also cause problems of its own. Staying in the laboratory till four in the morning

because of that annoying 16-hour time-point, combined with having overlooked booking a weekday slot on the confocal microscope to use while the Westerns were developing, is arguably just as destructive to scientific productivity, and almost certainly to sanity as well. We expect our young scientists to plan and execute their experiments to make the most efficient use of their own short lifespan in science. Somehow they have to include in this planning not only the downtime on the fancy instruments they require, but also the probability that they will leave a key reagent out of the cocktail and thus negate the entire experiment—plus the extra time to dream up an explanation that will convince the supervisor that they are not a complete idiot or that the invisible band really is there.

Working on the skills that are required to run several experiments at once, and to execute all of the required laboratory manipulations faultlessly in tandem, is, in fact, good preparation for an academic career, and one that we should, as supervisors, carefully nurture. Doing so is not at all straightforward, however, especially as many of us were never trained in the art of multi-tasking in the first place. It is also most unlikely to be successfully learned from one of those translational skills courses of dubious relevance to anything in particular, which are now virtually compulsory for all PhD students.

The importance of multi-tasking becomes clearer as one climbs up the academic ladder, since the need for such skills only increases. One has to become adept at sitting in a seemingly interminable faculty meeting, remaining able to contribute materially to the discussion at just the right moment so as to ensure that resources are not quietly redirected to a laboratory in the next building, while discretely composing an angry but witheringly persuasive rebuttal to a recalcitrant reviewer using a craftily concealed laptop. All the while, the remainder of one's central nervous system is taken up with trying desperately to interpret and action a

text message about a consignment of DNA samples that is stuck in Australian Customs because it lacks a certificate from the pesticides and veterinary medicines authority attesting that it is exempt from quarantine restrictions.

Multi-tasking skills are undoubtedly a great bonus in steering the course of a dynamic literary vessel such as *EMBO reports*. However, attempting to emulate Frank Gannon in this department is plainly doomed to failure. Instead, I shall content myself with the thought that the editors of this successful journal have thrust the task upon me because of my multifaceted personality, which somehow reconciles molecular biology with an enthusiasm for punk rock, viticulture, international politics and a curious obsession with all things Polar. Not to mention those four unpublished novels; how I ever found the time to write them remains a mystery. Certainly I will now have even less time to devote to getting them into print—and being Senior Editor of *EMBO reports* is unlikely to cut much ice with literary agents. Yet, in return, I am ready to accept the task of piloting the journal into its second decade. If nothing else, I will at least be forced to develop further my multi-tasking skills.

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