

EDITORIAL

There Are a Lot of Things They Didn't Tell Me When I Signed On: Helping Trainees Land a First Job

Curt Tribble, MD

Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, University of Virginia Health System, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

INTRODUCTION



During my training and my early faculty tenure, there was a picture of a dust-caked, grizzled cowboy that hung between the two primary cardiac operating rooms. Beneath the picture was written, "There are a lot of things about this job they didn't tell me when I signed on." When we moved into our new hospital, the picture did not resur-

face. However, I never forgot the lesson conveyed by that picture.

One of the most important obligations faculty members have is to help their trainees find a job. While their trainees have likely had part-time jobs and, of course, they've held training positions, they usually have not had a 'real' job before. The job that each hopes to land at this point in their lives is vastly different from any that they've had before, and the issues that they need to consider are numerous, substantial, and, generally, unfamiliar to them. Therefore, a brief review of some of these considerations may be useful to those giving advice about the post-residency job search. I will not cover one major issue in choosing a 'first' job: whether to look at academic jobs, non-academic jobs, or jobs that are hybrids of the two. As most know, in academics it's dog eat dog, while in non-academic jobs, it's just the opposite.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

It is hard to get completely away from the notion that location is important. However, in contrast to real estate agents, physicians should consider priorities other than, or at least in addition to, location in choosing a job.

If Mama Ain't Happy, Ain't No One Happy

This old saying is only partly true (and needs to be reworded, depending on the gender of the non-medical spouse, of course). We should encourage our protégés to

Correspondence: Curt Tribble, MD, Professor of Cardiothoracic Surgery, University of Virginia Health System, Division of Thoracic and Cardiovascular Surgery, Box 800679, Charlottesville, VA, 22908; 434-243-9250 (e-mail: CGT2E@hscmail.mcc.virginia.edu).

realize that they should strive to be in professionally satisfying situations or everything else in their lives will likely suffer. Another related admonition is that being within an hour's drive of one's family is a significantly overrated concept. Our trainees should be reminded that one can get almost anywhere in the United States in two flights on an airplane. On a related note, while there are many studies on the negative spillover of job pressures on family life, there are few on how job satisfaction enhances the quality of family life.

Kids Bounce

While this adage is a favorite of pediatric surgeons when regaling their colleagues with how children can tolerate a lot of medical and surgical mayhem, it can also apply to one's own children. While there may very well be places that one would not want one's children to grow up, young people are amazingly adaptive if they have a supportive family. Furthermore, while most would like to avoid moving children frequently, it is widely agreed that most children who have lived in a variety of places end up benefiting socially and educationally from those experiences.

Go Where You Are Needed

One of the best adages when advising residents on the subject of looking for a job fresh out of training is that they should search for a place that is in need of a person with the skills that they will bring to the job. In other words, we should advise residents not to pick a place just because they think it would be an ideal place to live. I recall reading about an orthopedic surgeon who said that he had always wanted to live and work in San Diego, but when he looked at jobs in that area, it turned out that there were already about twice as many pediatric orthopedic surgeons as were warranted trying to work in the area. He wrote that he decided to take a job in a smaller, underserved area, and he ended up working there and having a long and very satisfying career.

A SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

William McDonough, former Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, used the concept of sustainable design throughout his work, applying this principle to everything from architecture to consumer products. This concept can also be applied to creating an environment for one's career that puts as much priority on learning, growth, and satisfaction as on the details of an employment contract.

Mentorship Is Not a Luxury; It's Essential

The steepest learning curve of one's career occurs in the first few years after completing training. Virtually everyone who has experienced the transition from residency training to practice will agree with this observation. However, it's rare for this transition to be successful without a supportive mentor, both in academic and in non-academic environments. The optimal mentor is someone who prioritizes the mentee's needs over his or her own. Therefore, looking for such a person, or several such people, should be a very high priority when looking at potential positions after residency training. One way to judge the mentoring likely to be available in various positions is to discern, one way or another, how those who have held similar positions to those under consideration have fared in that environment in the past. At the end of the day, one will have to assess in some way how reliable the potential mentor seems to be.

You Are Either Growing or You Are Decaying

There must be opportunities for professional growth in any job, whether it's a private practice job or an academic position. In a non-academic environment, one can look for niches that may be relatively unfilled, though it is essential to avoid getting into something for which one is inadequately prepared. In an academic environment, one must sort out the opportunities for academic productivity and advancement. The list of options in an academic position is likely to be fairly long, spanning the spectrum from research to education. Regardless of one's inclinations in this regard, it is essential to understand the history of those who have attempted to follow similar trajectories, the support available at the outset, the potential for alliances in the desired realm, opportunities for additional training, and the financial arrangements that would be required to be successful.

What Is the Coin of the Realm?

It must be clear from the outset what metrics will be used to define success in the position. In some situations, the practitioner will be judged by effort (such as RVU's billed), while in others the metric will be the collections made for the individual practitioner. In academic environments the metrics are more likely to be academic productivity or recognition for one's dedication to, and accomplishments in, the realm of education.

INSURING MUTUAL INTEREST

The 2016 Nobel Prize in Economics was recently awarded to two professors at Harvard and MIT for their work on contracts. Their central thesis is that contracts are necessary in most interactions in life, and these contracts should be created so that the parties to these contracts are bound by mutual interest.

In God We Trust; All Others Must Bring Data

This saying is generally attributed to Edwards Deming, the organizational guru who helped revitalize Japanese industry after the Second World War. In the setting of negotiating a position after residency, it is indeed essential that one not only gain an understanding of the expectations of the position but also the precise details of compensation, including benefits. Still,

it is important to recognize that the overall financial package being offered is generally less important than job satisfaction.

You Should Call the Police

An acquaintance of mine who was thinking of changing jobs was asked by his 10-year-old son why he would be considering a move. My friend explained that in his current position, the most senior members of the group were paid considerably more than their younger colleagues, in spite of the heavier clinical responsibilities of the more junior surgeons. After patiently listening to this explanation, the 10 year old responded, "Dad, you should just call the police!" It is frequently, and accurately, said that you get what you negotiate, not what you deserve. A corollary to that saying is that the kiss at the door is the only kiss you're going to get.

Can I See the Dessert Menu?

This line comes from a Dennis the Menace cartoon, in which Dennis follows that question with his reasoning, which is that he wants to know if it's worth his eating the vegetables he'd rather not eat in order to be allowed to eat desert. The analogous question to ask when negotiating the terms of a new contract is, "what's the long range outlook in this job?" For instance, you need to know the expected time to promotion at the institution or partnership in the group. Other similar issues to be sorted out are benefits, vacation time, call responsibilities, and support for ongoing professional development. There are some resources available to research the current standards in this realm, such as the information available through the MGMA (Medical Group Management Association: www.mgma.com) or the AAMC Faculty Survey Reports (www.aamc.org/publications).

OWN YOUR TOMORROW

While this phrase is the current slogan of a prominent investment company, it is actually an old saying that has continued pertinence in the current day. There are some key financial strategies that one should follow so that even if the compensation offered by a potential employer doesn't precisely match the dreams you had as a student and resident, you can still afford to live comfortably and securely.

Don't Be House Poor

Many trainees making the transition from residency to independent practice think that they should surely buy a house that will meet every need of their families for a generation or two. This strategy is almost certainly inappropriate for most newly minted practitioners. Most will be better served by being willing to move a time or two during their careers if family size or other considerations make this desirable or necessary. It's been said, with considerable validity, that the two most important characteristics for a house are: what do you see when you sit on your front steps and how much privacy will you have when you sit on the back porch. While there are surely some other important or even desirable features for your first abode, this quip is a reminder that one can be comfortable in less than regal surroundings.

Avoid Babysitting in a Remote Location

A concept closely related to not being over-extended by an expensive house is to avoid the pitfall of thinking that fancy and expensive vacations are a necessity. Particularly when one has young children, indulging in expensive vacations in relatively faraway places generally turns out to be more laborious than one might have guessed. Such vacations have been aptly dubbed as baby-sitting in a remote location, and often end up not only being excessively expensive but also end up being more draining than restorative.

Don't Be Bad at Math

Even if you are not a math whiz, you must understand the concepts of debt and compound interest. Your first financial priority should be to pay off any debts you have accumulated during your education and training, as postponing dispensing with these debts or adding new ones will inevitably postpone the achievement of financial security. And, as soon as possible, you should start saving for the future. Most should seek professional advice for the management of their savings and investments. Those in academics, non-profit institutions, research, government, and cultural fields can get financial advice that is completely unbiased from TIAA, while those ineligible to seek help from this organization should find financial advisors that can be relied upon to have a staunch fiduciary commitment to their clients. Regardless of where one seeks advice, one must understand that, with compounded interest, small investments made early in one's career will create substantial return later in life.

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

Red-Shirting

Sometimes an acceptable job is just not available in the year one is finishing training. I have known several colleagues and trainees who have decided not to settle for a barely acceptable position by signing up for another year of training and experience. Not only will one add to one's

credentials and knowledge but one will also have considerably more time to look around to find more options. It is not uncommon that a more desirable position that was not previously open will become available during a period of this sort.

We Gotta Get Out of This Place

One is fairly likely to change jobs at least once or twice in one's career. Therefore, you should plan for this possibility from the outset. And, one needs to understand what, if any, penalties may ensue if one were to leave the position at various points in time. These issues are frequently negotiable and should be considered when negotiating the initial contract for a new position.

Beware of the Insanity of Indecision

There will be times when the available options are clearly not ideal. One must realize that perfection is the enemy of good, as the old saying goes. Therefore, there will be times when one must take the best available option and then do one's best to make that choice work out.

SUMMARY: SO MUCH TO SAY

In summary, mentors in academic environments must not only help their trainees find job opportunities but they should also help these folks navigate the tricky waters of establishing priorities in their initial positions after residency; negotiate fair and appropriate terms and conditions for these jobs; begin to create a secure financial future; and understand their options if an appropriate position does not seem to be immediately available or if the initial position taken turns out to be unsatisfactory. Though there is so much more that could be covered in a treatise of this sort, these general guidelines can be a starting point for the crucial conversations that academic mentors should have with their trainees to help them plan their lives and careers after residency.