

Early Career Researcher session at CAASTRO Annual Retreat, 29 Nov 2016

Panellists: Kate Brooks, Carole Jackson, Tara Murphy, Rachel Webster

- **APPLICATIONS: “What are the secrets to a successful job application – where to find out about jobs, when to mention family, what was your success rate?”**
 - It’s all about getting yourself on the shortlist/to the interview stage, whole different ballgame then.
 - Application has to be concise on first few pages, full conference/publications/etc record ok but only on last pages.
 - Work out your “Nature-equivalent” pitch, i.e. your most significant achievement to highlight, put it up front and make it relevant to this job.
 - The panel can absolutely spot if an application is specifically tailored to the job, and that’s key to making an impression.
 - Personal matters should only be raised once job offer is made; can bias the selection panel’s decision if mention before.
 - Do not fret over career gaps on your CV, people won’t look for a continuous string of dates but more interested in the jobs you have had; only bring them up if asked.
 - Sanity check of chances recommended, e.g. if applying for Harvard fellowship -> chance of success 2% -> need to write 50 such applications.
 - Do not over-estimate the value of MANY publications, rather focus on the high-impact ones or your leadership of papers.
 - Fellowship success demonstrates your ability to design and drive your own research agenda; crucial for more prestigious grant schemes or senior positions.
 - Do not under-estimate the value of smaller grants, e.g. \$10,000 from non-ARC sources; will demonstrate your ability to apply for use funding and sets you up for bigger grant applications (fellowships).
- **PERKS: “What are the most significant perks of a career in astronomy research – and what are the advantages of working in industry (stability)?”**
 - Freedom and flexibility of research certainly attractive; some people love post-doc positions for opportunity to travel.
 - Misperception that chances to score ARC grant or permanent position getting increasingly slimmer; ARC grants have always been ~12% chance; permanent positions dependent on undergraduate enrolments which have been stagnating since the 1990s (astronomy cannibalised on general physics appointments, leading to briefly sky-rocketing new jobs);
 - Stability not necessarily any better outside of academia, some positions in commercial world at 2-weeks’ notice.
 - External validation / feedback often missing or rare in academia, much more frequent / common elsewhere; some people need and enjoy this.
 - Given geographical constraints, non-academic jobs can mean more choice locally, e.g. moving between software companies, whereas academic jobs much more rigidly tied to location of institutes.
- **TIMING: “How do we know it's the right time to move to a different job / institute / country for our research career?”**
 - If you just remotely think about a job outside of academia, it’s probably the right time to move; don’t add more post-docs if you know that you are going to leave.
 - Leaving academia earlier rather than later good, e.g. data analysis companies would much rather hire someone who has 3 years’ experience in THEIR industry than someone who did another postdoc; the later you leave the transition the harder it will be.
 - Some constraints will always govern your choices, e.g. not leaving a particular city or country.

- **SKILLS: “How much should we already think of applicable/lateral skills to boost our CVs in case we decide to move into industry – or is training/internship beforehand recommended?”**
 - Most internships usually of little value as training, not assigned to projects, just tagging along and making coffee; but potentially useful for networking.
 - CAASTRO and universities offer lots of training opportunities, use them!
 - Your supervisors / line managers should not be focused on making you to a mini version of themselves, should always train you for and be open to ***any*** job.
 - Reality in any sector these days is that job specs will change, so need to be adaptable with strong skill set inside ***and*** outside of academia.
- **SWITCHING: “What factors could tilt the scales towards a decision to move into teaching or industry – how much fulfilment do you usually get from it?”**
 - Most science graduates who now work outside of academia genuinely enjoy their jobs; you will always find challenges and problems that you will enjoy facing and solving (just different ones).
 - Leaving academia means “re-inventing yourself”, e.g. how to introduce yourself, which is both challenging and enjoyable.
 - Leaving academia should not be perceived as failure!

If you have any questions regarding this session, please contact cpdc@caastro.org