

NEWS

Spectrum Launch: Pivoting to industry, the importance of outreach, and the optimal number of grad students

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Hello, and welcome to *Spectrum* Launch — the newsletter for early-career autism researchers.

This month, we have a Q&A with **Andrew Jaffe**, head of data sciences at **Neumora Therapeutics**, a Massachusetts-based biotech firm that develops treatments for brain conditions. Before joining Neumora in September 2020, Jaffe led a research group at the Lieber Institute for Brain Development at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. He continues to supervise students there, but he has otherwise made the switch from academia to industry — a change he discussed last month **on Twitter**.

Jaffe explained to *Spectrum* why he decided to make the move to industry, how his current work differs from academia, and what young researchers can do if they would like to take a similar leap.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

***Spectrum*: How did you get your foot in the door to industry research?**

Andrew Jaffe: At the Lieber Institute, we had done some partnerships with different pharmaceutical companies. And through those partnerships, I met a few people who ended up being some of the founding members of Neumora. They approached me, saying, “Hey, we have this cool new thing coming up; we got some funding. And you seem like a really good fit for it.” So that started the conversation.

S: What was the transition like?

AJ: I had some flexibility with Johns Hopkins, where you can do a leave of absence. I went all in,

but you don't necessarily have to. I think most schools do allow for a sabbatical or leave of absence.

And I also still had lingering projects to wrap up. I was able to roll a lot of my grants over to other researchers at the institute. And I stayed on as a committee member for a few Ph.D. students, which helped justify keeping the primary appointments at Johns Hopkins. I didn't want to leave them hanging.

S: Who did you consult before making your decision, and what were some of the questions you asked?

AJ: I knew a few people who had looked at industry as academics — mostly faculty. And so I asked, “You looked and stayed, or you looked and left — how did that go?”

I knew I wanted to have a research-focused position, so I talked to people in industry in those positions. And everyone I talked to was happy with their transition. I probably talked with 15 people over a few weeks, and nobody was sad they had left academia. Nobody said, “I really regret doing that.”

And it was cool, because I'd talk to one person I knew, and we'd have a good conversation, and they'd say, “Oh, you need to talk to this person that I know.” It lets you see the extent of your network. So, especially for early-career people, just leveraging your advisers and your professional networks is really useful.

S: Why did you ultimately decide to take the job?

AJ: My team was great at Lieber. My collaborators were great. And I had pretty good luck with funding, so that wasn't really a concern. I was just hoping to expand my breadth of skills. I had great mentorship at Lieber from the clinical side and the research side, but I kind of hit a ceiling, I felt, with my computational skills.

And, more broadly, I was also hoping to see if all this genomics work that I've done in the past could pan out for therapeutics and make an impact on patients. So, I wanted to see how far we could push genetically driven drug discovery and use genetics for patient selection and things like that.

S: What are some of the biggest differences between academia and industry?

AJ: One difference is that you need to be able to cut things faster in industry. If something doesn't look like it's going to work out, you stop it. That part is a little bit hard — to let go of certain projects that you maybe feel personally invested in.

The other difference is that sometimes the problems are more on the business side — something may be interesting scientifically but just doesn't make sense from a commercial standpoint.

S: What advice do you have for early-career researchers who are interested in industry?

AJ: The thing with biotech is that it's just so broad. There are so many companies doing so much cool stuff. So, boosting your biotech literacy is helpful. Reading biotech news outlets — like **STAT** and **Endpoints News**. I hadn't really heard of them when I was in academia, but I check those a good bit now, just to see what's going on in the biotech world. And I've also been trying to do that through networking and following more people in biotech on Twitter. And also LinkedIn — people use LinkedIn a bit more in industry than they do in academia.

Figuring out which companies match your skill set is the hardest part. But seeing what that company does, and what job postings they have, that kind of tells you where they may be going. And seeing if you know people who work there through something like LinkedIn.

Also, a lot of companies now have internships, which could be a good way to explore — dip your toes in the water a little bit.

Jobs and funds:

- The Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI) is accepting submissions for its **human cognitive and behavioral science grants**. Projects should “produce foundational knowledge about the neurobehavioral differences associated with ASD,” and applications are due 25 April. (SFARI is funded by the Simons Foundation, *Spectrum's* parent organization.)

Recommended reads:

- Speaking of industry jobs, the *Nature Careers* podcast discusses the “**metaphorical membrane**” between academia and industry, and how researchers can **successfully switch between sectors**.
- And some grant-writing advice:

My most succinct grant advice: Hold the reviewer's hand.

My second most succinct grant advice: Write to a non-expert that you expect to be tired, angry, or both.

— Jordan McCall (@jordacular) **February 22, 2022**

- A neuroscientist explains how **science outreach makes her a better researcher** — even when it takes time away from the lab — in an article for *Science*.
- Some lab leaders aren't sure how to mentor students who have an interest in non-academic careers. But **voicing support for alternative careers** and giving students time to explore their interests can make the relationship successful, researchers write in a new career feature from *Nature*.
- How many Ph.D. student mentees is too many? Somewhere between three and four, according to a **Twitter poll** by **Jason He**, a developmental cognitive neuroscientist at King's College London in the United Kingdom.

I made this poll after hearing stories of students feeling under supported/mentored. I don't know whether its common or rare. Limits placed on supervisors by the school seemed sensible. /8

— Jason He (@JasonLHe93) **February 14, 2022**

Yet nearly 15 percent of respondents said principal investigators should have as many students as they want — which He says may reflect researchers' aversion to unnecessary rules. "Perhaps the new question is," He says, "are there enough students with supervisors too busy for them to warrant such a rule to be put in place?"

We'd love to hear what you think! If you have any feedback on this newsletter or recommendations for what topic we should cover next, send them our way: angie@spectrumnews.org.

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