

Don't be misled by citation figures! (9)

## Speed Matters

Chris Collins had just finished his PhD at Penn State in Philadelphia. Structural biology had been his field, and altogether he had been quite successful. Right from the start he had displayed the right instinct when deciding to study the specific foldings of the right protein. By his successful structural analyses he had even contributed considerably to the understanding of protein degradation. Since at that time these topics were really "hot" he could be sure that his publications would be highly cited – just as he had planned.

Now Collins was looking for a postdoc position, preferably in Germany, because his German girlfriend wanted to go back. This wasn't such a big problem for Collins since Germany also had world class structural biologists. However, to whom should he offer his steadily appreciating qualities?

His PhD advisor suggested Schuhmacher. "I'd go to Schuhmacher. He's been hatching something very special for quite a while now." However, he didn't elaborate on what this "special thing" really was.

So, Collins checked Schuhmacher's citation record for the last five years. He wasn't very impressed. What's more, the titles of

Schuhmacher's papers all sounded pretty methodical. Most of them concerned improvements in electron microscopy techniques to obtain three-dimensional information about single cellular structures.

Nah, thought Collins, that all smells rather tedious and vain, miles away from good papers and mega-citations. Instead he preferred joining Böhme's "protein structure factory" which, on a large scale, methodically solved 3D-structures and

protein foldings, one after another. Furthermore, with such perfectly oiled lab machinery, Böhme himself was certainly one of the most highly cited structural biologists worldwide.

Three years later, Schuhmacher received a very prestigious science award. This was how Collins, who in the meantime had been desperately trying to crack the structure of a stubborn protein, learned that Schuhmacher had finally succeeded with his "tedious vain hopes": Schuhmacher and his group could now study single cellular structures three-dimensionally *in situ*. And Collins didn't have to consult the databases to know that Schuhmacher's citation numbers had since been sky-rocketing.

At the award ceremony, Collins heard Schuhmacher's acceptance speech where he found critical words to attack the system's lack of appreciation for methodically oriented research. As Schuhmacher stated, by its nature, this kind of research can only succeed long term. "Therefore it is clear that you will often encounter 'periods of drought' where you can hardly produce a publication". During the development of his new technology, Schuhmacher said, he himself hadn't published a single really substantial paper for almost seven years. And, he added: "You can easily guess what the consequences were! It was hard to get grants, the community didn't appreciate my work, hardly any PhD student or post-doc could be attracted to work on the project."

At this last point, Collins' ears were suddenly seen to blush.

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