

Flexibility

by Renée van Amerongen



©

RENÉE VAN AMERONGEN is MacGillavry fellow and tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam in the section of Molecular Cytology at the Swammerdam Institute for Life Sciences.

→ What do acrobats and scientists have in common? They both bend over backwards to get their job done. Now I must admit that I don't know too many circus performers, but I do know that scientists would give them a run for their money when it comes to being flexible. We don't care about working crazy long hours. We come to the lab on weekends and if necessary we stay well into the night. We often move across the world to follow our intellectual passion, leaving family and friends behind. And yet, when it comes to job security, many of us might just as well have joined the circus.

After jumping through the hoops of getting my PhD and doing a successful postdoc abroad, after showing that I can do science, publish papers and acquire my own funding I am still on a temporary contract, hoping to jump through that last hoop at the end of my tenure track. I am not complaining – I love my work. And I know that I am one of the lucky ones. But would I like to have a steady job by now? Sure, once you're nearing 40 and have about as decent an academic career as you possibly could have built for yourself, it would be nice to know whether you can settle down at a given location and buy a house.

Luckily, politicians and lawmakers have come to our rescue. The so-called 'flex-law' (the Dutch 'flexwet' on flex-workers) aims to protect employees from too many consecutive temporary contracts. It forces employers to offer people a permanent job after working for four years on temporary contracts or after two extensions of a temporary contract – whichever comes first. Well, The Hague, this is your wake-up call: those permanent jobs do not exist! With the current amount of money you are willing to spend on science, universities and research institutions cannot

offer permanent staff positions to most scientists, no matter how brilliant or technically skilled they are. Of course, the politicians don't believe this. After all, the Secretary of State for science, Sander Dekker, is always proud of how much Dutch science can do with so little. In reality, every scientist knows that those permanent contracts will not suddenly appear. And so, paradoxically, the 'flex-law' is especially hurting the most talented researchers: the people who want to have an academic career.

As a junior group leader I spend a lot of my time writing grants. These grants pay the salary of most people in my research team, including a postdoc and a technician. Thanks to the new, stricter flex-law, I now have to let all of them go after four years. So should everybody just get a permanent job? No. A postdoc doesn't need to get a permanent contract. What should be the case, however, is that he or she should be the one in control of his/her own mobility.

Nowadays, it is not uncommon for people to do two postdocs and sometimes even more. In biomedical research, four years is also the minimum amount of time it takes to collect sufficient data for a high-quality paper (one of the aforementioned hoops). Then there is the pressure to obtain independent funding (another hoop), which has the huge upside of being able to fund your own research for a few more years. Thanks to the flex-law, however, I can only hire the same postdoc for a maximum of four years. This implies, that the most talented young scientists are forced out of the lab.

One ungainly option is to let them collect unemployment benefits for a few months, after which they can be re-hired. Since the competition doesn't sit still, it is not too uncommon to hear stories of people who come into the lab

to work while – technically speaking – being unemployed. Under the new law, however, the minimum time required between contracts has been extended from three to six months. It is already too crazy that some of our most highly educated people are working long hours while unemployed, but it is beyond ridiculous if they would have to do this for six months.

Of course no one is forcing them to stay. They are free to pack their bags, take their personal grants and move to a different university, provided this would be a suitable research environment. But someone's scientific trajectory shouldn't be dictated by a law that is clearly not fit for 21st-century science. Sadly, the only thing more worrying than the monstrosity that is the new flex-law, is the clear lack of understanding it reveals in our political leaders as to how science actually works.