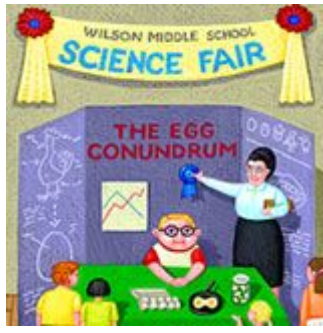


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Lab Management Courses: Becoming a Trainer

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By Lucas Laursen

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[Hilde Janssens](#) currently works as a lab manager in the laboratory of a junior principal investigator (PI) at the Centre for Genomic Regulation in Barcelona, Spain—except when she's teaching other scientists how to manage their own laboratories. In 2009, Janssens participated in her first lab management course, offered by her institution through the Heidelberg, Germany-based training and coaching company [hfp consulting](#). A year later, the company recruited her as a part-time instructor.

"I saw a huge unmet need for this type of training. I thought I had the respectability to address it."
Cohen

Today, Janssens is one of a small but growing number of scientists who train others in their laboratory. Lab management and leadership instruction is a very small niche on the career landscape, with the trainers doing it part-time (like Janssens) or even as volunteers. But the scientists on the receiving end of the training say it offers a satisfying complement to their primary careers.

What it takes

Traditionally, trainers have come into the job from a consulting or management background. For example, the program manager for the European Molecular Biology Organization's (EMBO's) [lab management training](#) is a former consultant. But as more scientists are exposed to formal lab management training, some discover their own aptitude for the job and become trainers themselves, and they feel better prepared for the new activity, Glynn adds.

Becoming a trainer requires a blend of skills. It helps if you're a scientist, familiar with

challenges of running a laboratory. You also need good communication and interpersonal skills because they are at the core of what the courses are teaching. hfp consulting's trainers must teach participants—mainly future and established PIs—to establish two-way communication in the lab, making their needs clear to lab members while also listening to them, Janssens says. The course puts great emphasis on empathizing with team members, balancing supervision with autonomy, and negotiating conflicts.



CREDIT: EMBL Photo Lab/Marietta Schupp
Anne-Marie Glynn

It also takes good communication and interpersonal skills to run the courses. Much of the training is delivered via guided conversations and group exercises, managing personalities and guiding interactions among the participants, Janssens says. Instructors also need to keep track of how each participant is doing, by observing and listening, Janssens says.

Biologist [Carl M. Cohen](#) began teaching workshops on leadership in the 1990s and has co-written a book ([Lab Dynamics: Management and Leadership Skills for Scientists](#)) and [several Science Careers articles](#) on the subject with his wife, psychologist [Suzanne L. Cohen](#). Every workshop, Carl Cohen says, includes a person with a strong personality who could easily dominate the discussion; to be a good facilitator, you need to involve other participants.

Trainers must be prepared to tailor their teaching to varied audiences, taking a group's specific needs and background into account, Glynn says. Courses that were originally offered to all scientists holding or anticipating a leadership or management role are now tailored to thinner slices—e.g. to senior postdocs, specialized lab managers supporting a PI, [women in leadership positions](#), or PIs.

Training to train

Currently there is no official credential you can earn to qualify to work as a lab management trainer. This may change in the future, as hfp consulting (for example) is planning to offer a certificate program, Janssens says. In the meantime, scientists interested in teaching lab management courses should seek out relevant training and experience wherever they can find it.

A good first step is to take a lab leadership or management course, as Janssens did. (See "[Learning to Lead a Lab](#)" for examples of current or recent courses and consultancies in the United States and Europe.) Glynn also refers anyone interested in becoming a trainer to online resources from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute: [Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty](#) and [Training Scientists to Make the Right Moves](#).

Teaching experience can also be very helpful. Janssens picked up a teaching diploma when she was an undergraduate. Before joining hfp consulting, she taught or assisted teaching on a range of topics including genetics, database management, and basic interpersonal communication skills.



CREDIT: Hilde Janssens
Hilde Janssens

If hired, instructors can expect to receive on-the-job training and to attend and observe lab management courses taught by others, Glynn says. In addition to such training, hfp consulting provided Janssens with preplanned exercises, information on moderation methods, and checklists of subjects to cover. Janssens had to master a core curriculum, she says, adding that it takes a year to 18 months to become a "full" trainer at hfp consulting. In her spare time, she also read psychology books.

Making your own way

Like so many nontraditional jobs done by Ph.D.-level scientists, there is no well-marked path to becoming a lab-management trainer. No matter what preparation you have for becoming a leadership trainer, Glynn says, "you need an entrepreneurial spirit."

Carl Cohen began by taking a general management course at Harvard University's extension school to address problems he was encountering in leading his own lab at Tufts University. "I saw a huge unmet need among scientists for this type of training and ... as [a] scientist I thought I had the responsibility and credibility to address this need," he says. He mentioned this to [Alice Sapienza](#), a leadership and research management expert (and the author of *Managing Scientists: Leadership Strategies in Scientific Research*). She encouraged him to run a 90-minute workshop for PIs at his home institution. That first workshop "was so much fun and so interesting," Carl Cohen says, that he began looking for other venues. At first it required persistence and creativity, he recalls. The first professional society he approached, the American Society for Cell Biology, rejected the proposal. The following year, he persuaded the society's Women in Cell Biology Committee to sponsor the proposal. Things have grown from there, and today Carl Cohen runs a consulting company called Science Management Associates as his main professional activity.



Courtesy of Carl M. Cohen

Carl M. Cohen

To find a job in lab management training, Janssens recommends getting to know the people behind existing courses, as she did, and talking to a broad range of potential employers including outfits such as hfp consulting, university career offices, and large labs that need a one-time instructor.

Professional and personal rewards

Those who teach lab management and still run a lab say that teaching the courses is helpful in their own labs. Janssens values in particular the interpersonal skills she picked up as an instructor. For example, she says, she used the course's conflict-management lessons to solve an issue with colleagues regarding flexible working arrangements.

Jobs in lab management training are hard to find. While hfp consulting and EMBO are adding to their course list to meet demand, job opportunities in both Europe and the United States remain scarce. But despite the limited financial opportunities, Carl Cohen says, teaching scientific leadership has been "possibly the most gratifying thing I've done in my life."

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