Meet our Scientific Team

Andrew Smith, PhD

After completing graduate and postdoctoral studies in cancer biology focusing on metastasis and drug resistance, Andrew decided to apply his scientific skills to the nonprofit field. His first job outside of the lab has been as Scientific Grants Manager for Susan G. Komen. Andrew currently manages a diverse portfolio of research grants and manages peer review committees for some of Komen's large grant mechanisms.

Q *Could you describe your current job at Komen (i.e. overall responsibilities, day-to-day)?*

A My primary duties are split into pre-award and post-award. Pre-award responsibilities involve the management of peer review for a particular grant mechanism. This includes administrative review of all applications, recruiting breast cancer experts to serve as peer reviewers and matching applications with the best reviewers.

My post-award responsibilities include reviewing annual progress and financial reports, change requests and generally serving as the grantee's scientific point of contact at Komen. Given the amount of time I spend reviewing the grants, I also assist our Evaluations and Outcomes team to identify grantees and stories to highlight for the larger Komen community.

Q *What part of your job at Komen do you enjoy the most?*

A First, I feel like my work is making a real difference in the fight against breast cancer.

Secondly, being a Science Manager exposes me to a wider range of science than I ever experienced in the lab. I also get to see some of the best breast cancer science before it's even published. As a scientist, that's very exciting.

Last but not least, the team environment at Komen is outstanding.

> *"There are a lot of ways you can use your talents to make a difference in the world.*
>
> *Don't be afraid to try something new, because you may just find something you love doing."*

Q *What skill in your scientist tool box has been most critical for your successful career outside of the lab?*

A If I had to choose one, I would say adaptability. The environment of grants management is fast-paced and requires a great deal of flexibility when working with multiple parties (e.g. researchers, financial offices, etc). In addition, the peer review process requires the coordination of dozens of reviewers' vastly different and constantly changing schedules, so you need to be willing and able to change plans, as needed.

Q *If you could go back in time and advise yourself as a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow, what are three tips that you would give?*

A Focus on your professional development; if you ever end up leaving the bench, this will serve you better than your technical skills. Get involved in activities outside the lab that will help you develop professionally and you enjoy doing—like event planning or creative writing. Finally, don't be afraid to talk to people and network throughout your career, even as a graduate student; you never know which connections will help you years down the road.

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Kari Wojtanik, PhD

After finishing a PhD and a postdoctoral fellowship in cell and molecular physiology, Kari entered into a career as a health research and policy analyst. She is now the Manager of Evaluation and Outcomes at Susan G. Komen where she oversees the planning and implementation of evaluation efforts for Komen's scientific research programs.

Kari on the best career advice she ever received:

> *Never, ever cook fish in the office microwave.*

Q *What was your first job outside of the lab?*

A My first job outside of the lab was as a Science Writer and Health Research Analyst with a small contract company for the National Institutes of Health. Unlike many of my colleagues, who had decided to transition out of the lab, I did not do a Health Policy fellowship. Instead, I choose to work for a smaller company, where I was able to take on tasks and learn skills that I might not have had the opportunity to do at a larger organization.

Q *What skill in your scientist tool box has been most critical for your successful career outside of the lab?*

A I think the most critical 'skill' is the ability to not be afraid to take on any task. Most of the things I do today, I had no idea how to do when I first left the lab. Thanks to my rigorous training on the bench, I was able to learn 'on the job' and adapt quickly to new roles. You will never feel 100 percent ready when an opportunity arises, so just do it.

Another important skill is the ability to work effectively in teams. I found that the concept of 'teamwork' as a lab scientist was completely different when working outside of the lab. Everything I do in my current position involves teamwork – multiple components and players. Organization, coordination and communication are key transferable skills that have been essential in my success.

Q *If you could go back in time and advise yourself as a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow, what are three tips that you would give?*

A Network, network, and network some more. Once I made the decision to move beyond the bench, I followed the career advice of many to network and seek informational interviews. I contacted lots and lots of people for informational interviews and that is how I got my first job opportunity outside the lab. Surmise to say…. 'I knew somebody who knew somebody who was looking for somebody'.

Second, I would also advise students and fellows considering non-lab careers to develop their 'soft skills' through extra-curricular activities; serve on an organizing committee or student council, develop your lay writing skills by writing for a newsletter, volunteer at an organization you might like to work for. Do not focus too much on your 'dream job'. Focus on acquiring different skill sets. Skills are transferable.

Third, continue to network and cultivate relationships even after you have a job. NEVER burn bridges.

Q *Any additional advice you would give to a scientist considering a career in non-profit foundations?*

A Given the fluid nature of most positions in non-profit, you are served well if you have multiple skill sets. Most jobs require lots of interactions with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. You must have strong interpersonal skills, something that does not always come naturally to scientists, or is taught in the lab setting. Seeking out ways to develop these skills while still in the lab will make any transition easier.

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Kimberly Sabelko, PhD

After completing a PhD in Immunology, focused on autoimmune diseases of the nervous system, and a postdoctoral fellowship in developmental neurobiology, Kim transitioned to a career in non-profit administration where she develops and implements programs to accelerate the discovery, translation and dissemination of research findings into advances in cancer prevention and care. Kim is currently the Managing Director of Strategic Partnerships & Programs.

Kim on the best leadership advice she ever received:

*"A former AACR President told me that there are many paths from point A to point B, and the best leaders will **set the vision** and then empower **their team** with the resources and support to do their jobs to achieve that vision."*

Q ***What was your first job outside of the lab?***

A My first job outside of the lab was as a Program Administrator at the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR). I developed and implemented new programs and collaborative initiatives like the AACR-FDA-NCI Cancer Biomarkers Collaborative and Stand Up To Cancer, among many others. I was tasked with a great mix of "science heavy" and more traditional non-profit project administration projects that kept me from being bored.

At AACR, and still in my role at Komen, I have met and worked with some really amazing people, including some of the world's best and brightest cancer researchers and clinicians in academia, government and industry and many truly inspiring patient advocates.

Q ***What do you miss about working in a lab?***

A To my surprise, I haven't missed the lab as much as I thought I would before I left it. But I do really miss the camaraderie of the small labs I was a part of and being surrounded by like-minded science "nerds" like me – things like the quirky humor of my colleagues, group outings and friendships that result from working side by side in a lab.

Q ***What skill in your scientist toolbox has been most critical for your successful career outside of the lab?***

A Problem-solving and trouble-shooting. I use the same logical, thoughtful approach I used to take to plan and conduct experiments to develop and implement programs and projects in the nonprofit setting. Every day I am assessing situations, problems or projects, determining what needs to be done, what resources are needed to do it, identifying the steps to complete the project or solve the problem and evaluating the outcomes and reporting results.

Q ***If you could go back in time and advise yourself as a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow, what are three tips that you would give?***

A There are a lot of options in the nonprofit world – get as much exposure to nonprofit (and other) career choices as you can so that you can figure out what type of setting and work outside of the lab you will thrive in. Employers will be more willing to take the risk of hiring you "fresh out of lab" if they see that you have carefully considered the pros and cons of making this type of career transition.

Identify your transferable skills – what skills you've developed in the lab that will be of value outside of it – and highlight them in your resume (not a CV!). The long list of lab techniques you have mastered are no longer relevant, but your ability to manage and prioritize multiple projects (experiments) at the same time, trouble-shoot and problem-solve, analyze and interpret data, work individually and in a team, and communicate clearly and concisely (especially to a lay audience) will be valuable assets in your post-lab career.

Be humble. You can learn a lot from non-scientist/clinical colleagues about a variety of aspects of working in a nonprofit setting. Be open to that possibility!