

# THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASK

“Do scientists undervalue transferable skills?”



## Lynne Lawrance

Senior Lecturer in Medical Microbiology and Programme Leader for MSc Biomedical Science  
University of the West of England

Academic institutions have been working to include transferable skills in their programmes because they recognise that not all students end up in careers directly linked to their degree, and the skill set expected by employers has expanded.

It is a given that students will have discipline knowledge, but employers will also want to see team-working skills, the ability to work alone and problem-solve, communication skills and reflective practice, among others.

Part of the challenge of answering the question of whether scientists undervalue transferable skills is that there is no universally agreed list of what those skills are, and those of us who run courses make a best guess at what to include, because we cannot include everything.

Is presenting a poster a core scientific skill? Well, yes, if you go in to a research career, but for a laboratory biomedical scientist, probably not.

However, the skill of writing science in a succinct manner (which is core to creating a good poster) is a valuable skill for those moving up through the professional grades, where writing reports or operating procedures becomes a key part of the role.

I see scientists give a whole range of opinions on transferable skills, from full buy-in to refusing to see any merit. All I would ask is that those who don't buy-in also don't undermine the enthusiasm and efforts of those who do.

IMAGE: GETTY/DRAWN IDEAS



## Matthew Smith

Lead Scientist, Immunology  
North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust

Transferable skills are the technical and non-technical abilities we develop during a situation or role that can subsequently be applied to later events. These are core skills that employers value highly, and many are part of the foundation of what I believe makes a good scientist.

We use communication skills to discuss findings, share knowledge and talk with service users. Problem-solving abilities are a prerequisite of being a good scientist, forming part of our inquisitive nature, as we solve common and complex issues on what often feels like an hourly basis!

Those who work in large or small laboratories have team-working skills, becoming ever more important as workloads continue to increase and staff numbers often stay static or reduce. Data skills are ingrained in the role of a scientist, from excellent record-keeping (especially in the brave new world of ISO 15189) through to undertaking complex statistical analyses and developing research skills.

Do scientists undervalue transferable skills? No, they don't. They are built into the very essence of being a scientist and feature heavily during our training, continuing professional development and daily practice.

We are excellent at developing and nurturing these skills within our varying scientific fields, but, in my opinion, we are often poor at showcasing to the outside world that we possess them in spades.



## Gemma Lace-Costigan

Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences  
University of Salford

Developing the transferable skills of students is increasingly important if our graduates are to meet the needs of employers. Science communication and public engagement skills are important, as scientists have the ability to shape the public perception of science. And with successful communication, our scientists can help the public make informed decisions, and generate support.

*With successful communication, scientists can help the public make informed decisions*