



John Tenniel 1865

**THE BENEFITS OF
PLANNED
HAPPENSTANCE &
OTHER CHESHIRE
“CAT-ISMS” IN EARLY
RESEARCH CAREER
DEVELOPMENT.**

**JULIA PITCHER
SCHOOL OF PAEDIATRICS & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE**



A brief & recent history

- 2003 - PhD awarded (Physiology - human motor control)
- 2004 - NH&MRC Peter Doherty Research Fellowship
 - Move to Obstetrics & Gynaecology
 - ~\$100k in strategic initiative and research establishment grants.
 - Begin collaborations with Neonatology & O&G.
 - Intensives in neonatal (Germany) & paediatric (UK) neurology
- 2005 - Developmental Neuromotor Physiology laboratory opens
 - >\$100k in NH&MRC equipment and intramural grants
 - Begin collaborations with FAMAS, WCH Neuroradiology (MRI), & Psychology.
- 2006 - DNP = 5 (3 staff + 2 students)
 - Begin collaboration with Centre for Eye Research Aust.
 - >\$60k intramural grants
 - 2 failed NH&MRC project grants (welcome to reality!)



Indispensable tools for success

1. A plan
2. A willingness to realistically and regularly SWOT yourself.
3. A critical thinker - you ask the right questions
4. A systems thinker - you can see the "big picture"
5. An expert at planned happenstance
6. Your own research niche.
7. A thorough understanding of funding sources & requirements.
8. Become a skilled abstract scanner.
9. Regularly look outside your own field for ideas & answers.
10. Know who your national & international competitors are & what they are doing: Know your environment.

"Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else." - Judy Garland



The Plan

"Cheshire Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider.

"Come, it's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where ..." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"... so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."



The Myth of the Single Plan

- Have a long-term goal & be ambitious with it.
- Need clear short-term objectives & strategies to achieve big goal.
- Weekly, monthly, annual, 3-5 yearly "sub-plans"
- **ALWAYS** be aware of what boxes you need to tick & when you need to tick them by to get to the next level.
- Don't be too rigid or get too anxious if things don't go according to plan
- sometimes the benefit is in recognising the need to change.

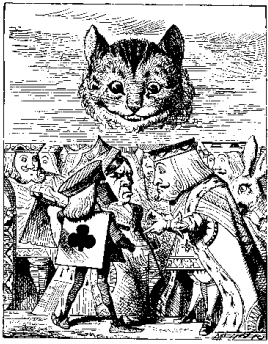


Planned Happenstance

- Creating and transforming unplanned events into research & career opportunities.
- How can I anticipate, find or even generate opportunities rather than leaving it to chance?
- Improve your ability to tolerate ambiguity & change.
- Adopt an attitude of being open-minded rather than indecisive.

"People who are successful at tolerating ambiguity in the workplace often find opportunity where others find frustration. Their comfort with uncertainty enables them to act on possibilities where others experience lack of clarity, indecisiveness, or poor management. Inside an organization, they're often ambitious "intrapreneurs"; outside, they become entrepreneurs or promoters."

(Hagevik, 2000)



"Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls & looks like work."

- Thomas Edison



How to Plan Happenstance

1. Be Curious & Clarify Ideas

Follow your curiosity & identify your interests.

2. Remove The Blocks & Be Flexible

Wonder "how I can" rather than "I can't because..."

3. Expect The Unexpected & Be Optimistic

Be prepared for chance opportunities.

4. Take Action

Develop skills, remain open & follow-up on chance events.

"Chance favours only the prepared mind." - Louis Pasteur.

5. Maximise Your Exposure Probability & Be Willing to Take Risks

Find mentors who exhibit these qualities & environments that facilitate it.



The benefits to young scientists of Unrealistic Optimism

- A reluctance to admit vulnerability because the threat of harm would be too anxiety producing (*Kirscht et al., 1966*).
- Associated with positive mental health (*Taylor & Brown, 1988*)
- Anecdotal evidence that it can protect grant and fellowship applicants from the reality that <20% are successful!





Spotting the Unrealistic Optimist

1. Lack personal experience with the problem
2. Always believe that the problem is preventable by individual action
3. Believe that if the problem has not yet appeared, it will not appear in the future
4. Believe that the problem is infrequent.
5. Most likely to "Do a Bradbury"

(adapted from Weinstein, 1987)



" Obviously, I'm not the fastest skater, but those were my tactics and they worked like a charm. I thought maybe two would go down and I'd get the bronze. I saw 'em all go down and Oh, my God!.... I've won.....I think. "

— Stephen Bradbury



The Personal SWOT

- Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities & threats.
- Identify what will help you succeed & what is preventing you.
- Develop your career plan in a way that takes best advantage of your talents, abilities & opportunities.
- Helps you uncover opportunities that you are well placed to take advantage of.
- By understanding your weaknesses, you can manage & eliminate threats from a position of awareness not surprise!





The Personal SWOT STRENGTHS

- Internal positive aspects you possess
- Under your control
- Can be capitalised on to optimise your success





The Personal SWOT STRENGTHS

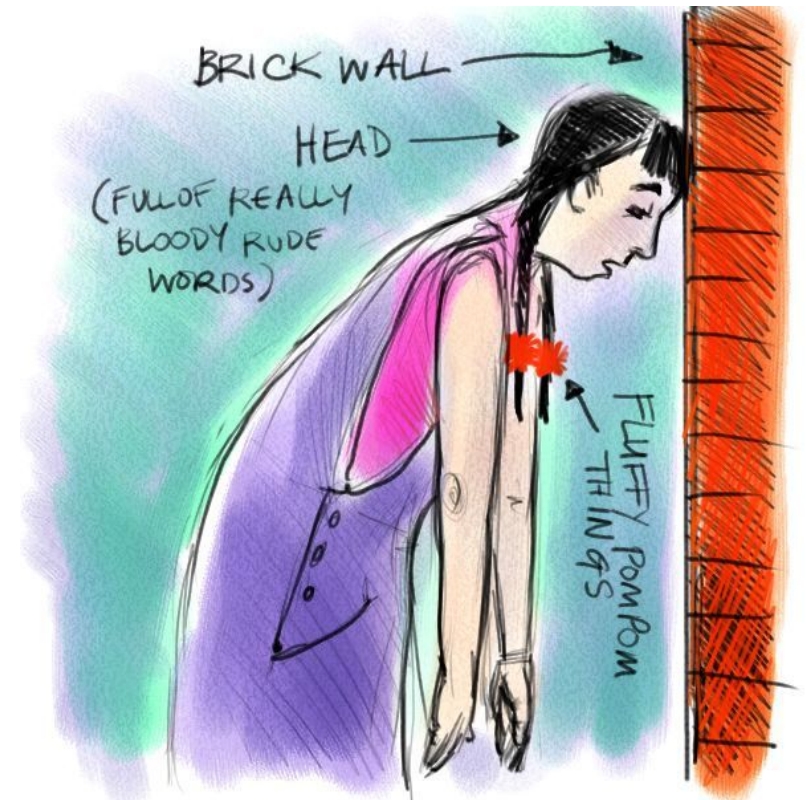
What Questions should you ask?

1. What do I do well?
2. What advantages do I have?
3. Why did I enter this field (motivating & influencing factors)?
4. Do these factors still represent some of my inherent strengths?
5. What are my most notable achievements?
6. To what do I attribute my success?
7. How do I measure my success?
8. What is my greatest asset?
9. What knowledge or expertise have I brought to my field?
10. What are the aspects of the environment I have chosen to be in that contribute to my success?



The Personal SWOT WEAKNESSES

- Internal negative aspects you possess
- Under your control
- Minimising or eliminating them will aid your success





The Personal SWOT WEAKNESSES

What Questions should you ask?

1. What do I do badly?
2. What could I improve?
3. What should I avoid?
4. What is my biggest professional weakness?
5. How does it affect my research performance?
6. What knowledge or expertise do I lack that is impeding my progress?
7. What are the gaps in my CV I have failed to address?
8. What are the aspects of the environment I have chosen to be in that impede my success?



The Personal SWOT OPPORTUNITIES

- Positive external conditions
- You don't necessarily control these, but you can take advantage of them to maximise your success.





The Personal SWOT OPPORTUNITIES

What Questions should you ask?

1. What promising prospects do I have?
2. What is the state of the art in my field?
3. Am I doing everything I can to enhance my exposure to this?
4. What are the priority research areas that I can position myself in?
5. What collaborative opportunities do I have that could enhance my research productivity & profile?
6. What are the unfilled niches in my area of research interest where I could establish myself as an independent researcher?



The Personal SWOT THREATS



- Negative external conditions
- Not under your control, but it would be advantageous if you could lessen their effect on you.





The Personal SWOT THREATS

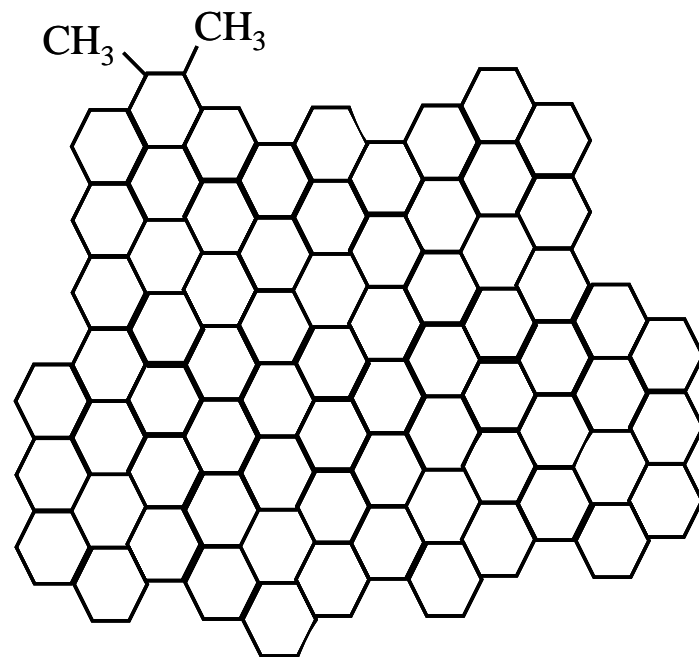
What Questions should you ask?

1. What obstacles do I face?
2. Are the skill & knowledge requirements for my field changing?
3. Am I working in a technological "black hole"?
4. Is my area of research fading in comparison with other fields?
5. Is my research & area vulnerable to negative economics?
6. Is my current environment sufficiently supportive of my career? Is my research field or working environment subject to internal politics that will lead to significant conflict?
7. Is there any way I can reduce my exposure to or involvement in this conflict?
8. Does the resident psychopath know where I live....?



The Early Career Researcher

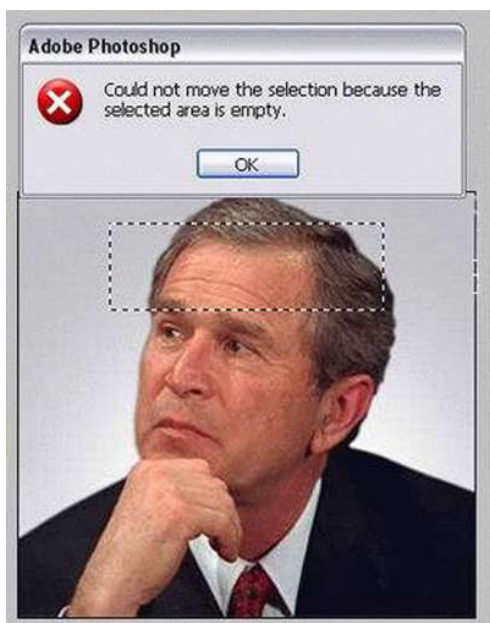
- Find your niche - show how you have become independent in your thinking and approach.
- Be aware of your deficiencies & plan how to deal with them.
- Plan ahead & update your plans regularly
- Know what targets you have to hit & the timeline in which you have to hit them.
- Use every opportunity for grant application previews & practice interviews.
- Be open to new ideas & opportunities.
- Be brave
- Be optimistic
- Choose your mentors carefully.
- Learn everything you can about the environment you operate in.



1,2 dimethyl-chickenwire



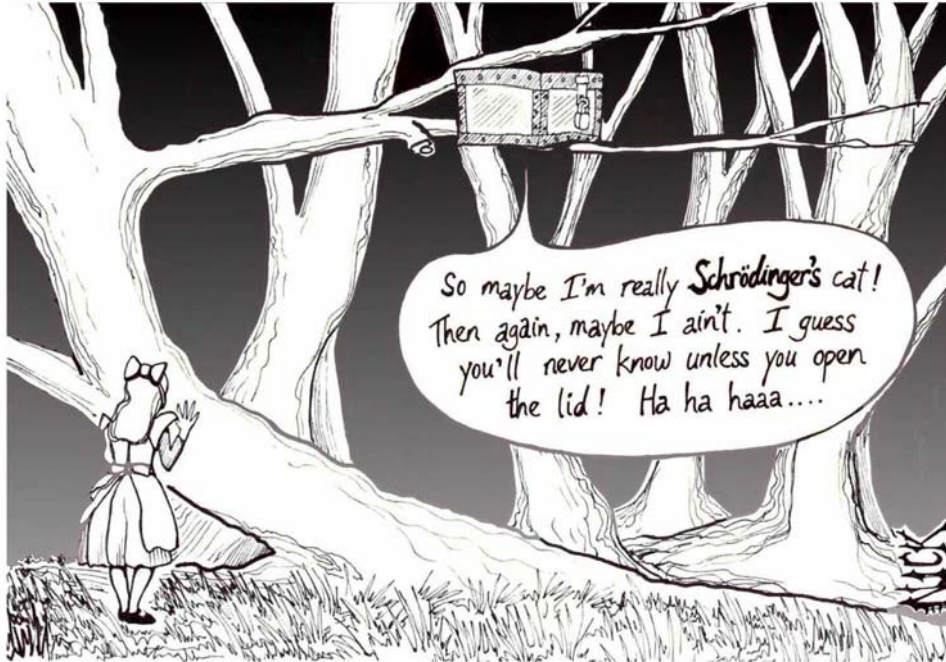
If you have never had an original research idea of your own, or you find coming up with new ideas difficult, think seriously about whether or not attempting to become an independent researcher is the career for you.



"A new idea is born every second" -Oohps 2006

The Cheshire cat's message...

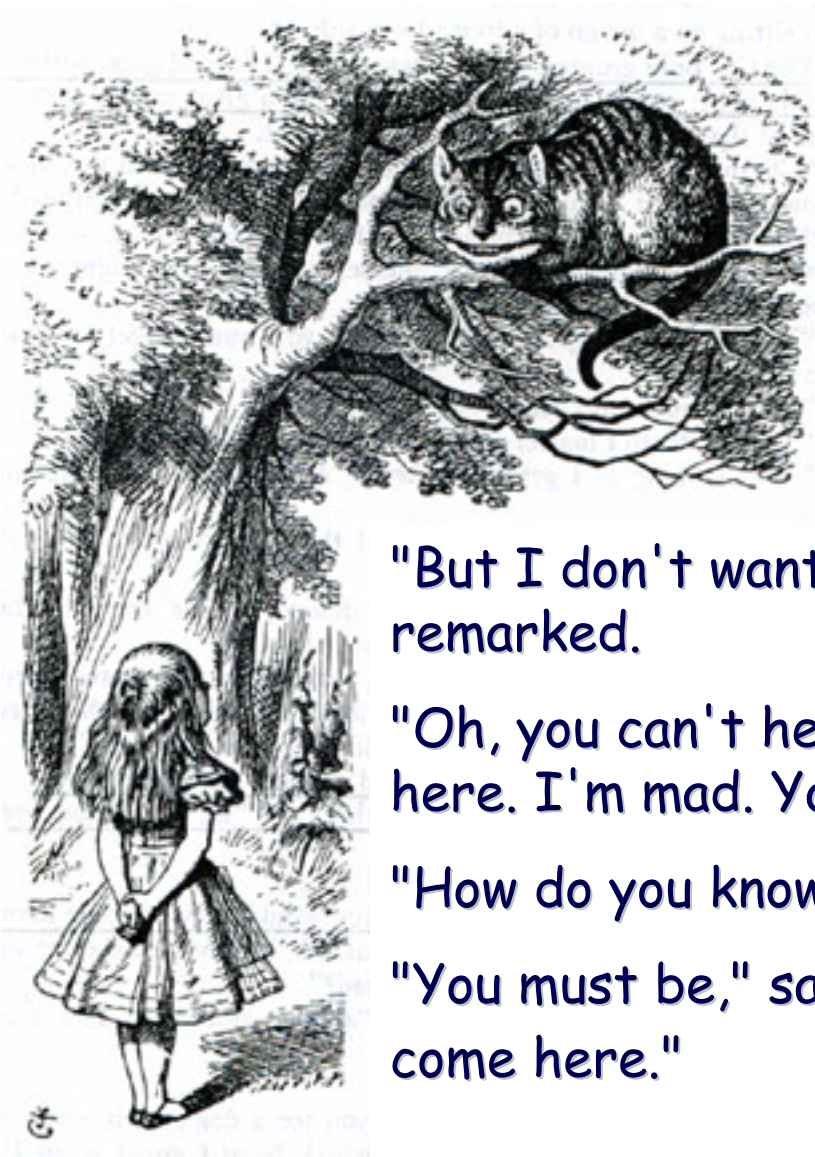
- If you don't know where you're going, it doesn't make any difference how you get there.
- In the absence of a strategy or plan, the road taken is often the line of least resistance.....but not necessarily the best.
- If you won't take the lead, who will?



What does Schrödinger's Cat have to do with planning?....

- You need to have a peek inside the box sometimes to see if the cat is dead or alive!

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Chapter VI:
The Cheshire Cat gets Weirder.



"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."



Picasso's cat
from Nature 2006