Career Profile – Lars Pedersen, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?  
Staff Scientist, Head of the Collaborative Crystallography Group at NIEHS. 11 years

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?  
PhD in Biochemistry from the University of Washington studying protein crystallography on proteins related to coagulation.

Did you do a postdoc?  
University of Wisconsin at Madison and NIEHS, Laboratory of Reproductive and Developmental Toxicology

What are your main daily responsibilities?  
1) Supervise research projects within and outside the lab  
2) Conduct my own bench work projects  
3) Train researchers on equipment/robots related to crystallography  
4) Maintain equipment

What are the keys to success in your career field?  
1) Maintaining strong collaborations with other investigators  
2) Getting advice from others (Science by polling)  
3) Picking multiple targets  
4) Constantly thinking “Is there a better way to do this?”  
5) Being well read (my Achilles heel).

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?  
I knew I enjoyed the “hunt” in solving structures. I chose a path that allows me to do that. I also am a perfectionist and if I had to teach, I would want to do it really well, but I think that would have taken more time than I could manage if I also had to run a lab.

Your job must be satisfying. I really enjoy working with others and helping them solve their problems. Showing collaborators new structures for the first time are always my favorite moments in science!

What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?  
1) My job is very technique based. Become as familiar with as many types of software, analytical equipment and techniques as you can. Not just how to use them, but also how to fix them.  
2) Be sure you are willing to be a worker bee and don’t need to be in charge.  
3) Understand that running a support group you will have less control over projects and direction than you would as a PI and your job description can change. You have to be OK with that.  
4) Take the time to help others. You will gain more experience in different areas and people (references) will present you in a light (knowledgeable and helpful) that the new employer wants to see.