I love the scientific process. I revel in observing the natural world to gain new insights. I treasure time spent among colleagues discussing discoveries being made. Sometimes, I even like running statistics. In short, being a researcher makes me happy. So, it was with a good deal of trepidation that I recently accepted a non-research position after completing my Ph.D. There were many good reasons for me to leave the research life, including an amazing opportunity to focus on the dissemination of plant science knowledge to the public, but I don’t think I would have been able to take my current job without the intent to stay involved in research in some way. However, I am discovering that there are many challenges of being an on-the-side researcher.

I recently learned that I covet the resources of full-time researchers. I just returned from a scientific meeting where I marveled at the wonderful research being conducted by others in my discipline, and I couldn’t help being jealous of those who were able to devote their complete professional energy towards complex and cutting-edge research projects. I’m also jealous of their access to equipment and facilities, daily connection with other researchers, and the small army of students and technicians that they can tap into. I have none of those things, and having completed my graduate work at a large university, I am used to being around an extensive culture of science. Now that I am an on-the-side researcher, I need to learn how to do science all over again under new parameters.

Since the logistics of being an on-the-side researcher have been on my mind since I started looking for jobs about two years ago, I have been reaching out to several friends and colleagues discussing how they find my way forward. I often find that they would be willing to help me find my way forward and actually in a non-research job, these researchers have found ways to comply by consulting with me when designing experiments and allowing me to help with statistical analysis, literature review, and writing. In some of these cases, I turn doing enough work to earn co-authorship, more often, I earn an acknowledgment or verbal “thank you.” Psychologically, it has been difficult to get out of the “publish or perish” mindset. But in reality, the rate of a tenure-track academic is no longer my priority. So I’ve been asking myself, “Why, beyond the love of science, do I want to continue being a researcher?” I have determined that staying in research is actually a professional imperative despite the fact that my job does not require me to do research.

In my new job, I am dedicated to providing high-quality education and visitor experiences at the botanic garden where I work. To do so, I must determine the most appropriate plant science my institution should present for public consumption. I believe that remaining an active researcher helps me make these prioritizations since it keeps me aware of trends in plant science. In addition to providing new ideas that keep me on top of my game, but rather, the actual performance of hypothesis-driven experiments that continuing to peer review has been incredibly helpful in keeping up with the literature. I have found that continuing to peer review has been incredibly helpful in this area as well, and fortunately, some thoughtful colleagues who edit journals have kindly agreed to send me a paper to review every so often. In addition, I am able to stay on top of trends in the science by getting involved at a local institution. I applied for, and received, an unpaid research appointment that allows me to remain aware of seminars, have access to facilities and journal subscriptions, and network with full-time researchers (and some other struggling on-the-siders). Without the support of the many willing colleagues and institutions supporting me, I would not be able to stay involved in science.