



Name: Ian Hands-Portman
Job Title: Imaging Suite Manager
Organisation: University of Warwick
Qualifications: A levels in biology,
chemistry, physics and
general studies
Degree in biochemistry
Salary: Over £35,000

About me and my job:

I've always been interested in biology and science in general – I was that kid with the magnifying glass and jars full of pond water on the windowsill at home. My job involves looking after a lab full of microscopes ranging from basic bench top microscopes to enormous electron microscopes and laser scanning confocal microscopes. I maintain the equipment, train people to use it, help people to design experiments and run experiments for researchers. I've liked microscopes since I was a child and never thought I'd get my hands on millions of pounds worth of them. It's very varied – I genuinely don't know what samples the week will bring me or what experiments I'll be asked to plan. I've had viruses caught from volcanic vents on the ocean floor, ice cream and a (very small) piece of the planet mars to look at before. It's a fantastic for someone who's perpetually curious about the world.

My first job after my degree was crystallising proteins for x-ray crystallography (a technique for working out molecular structures), when my contract ended I took a job here looking after a crystallography lab and started to get more and more involved with the microscopes until a job became available full time.

In my role I'm constantly surprised – I've been the first person to see a new (very tiny) species several times, I've watched simple chemicals self-assemble into nanotechnology and learned that no matter how well you know your sample, you can count on it to misbehave the moment anyone's watching – cells are complicated and temperamental things.

Advice about the sector:

Read around the subject a bit, look at other disciplines that use the same sort of equipment and keep up to date with what's happening in the science news. Always be prepared to compromise a bit and look for job openings that might not be exactly what you want but might be a step in the right direction.

A levels are essential and a degree as well but some places may still let you study as you work. You can start as a general lab assistant and work your way up. I run the lab and

although I could progress further it would mean giving up the lab and moving into management – I'm not prepared to do that even if it does pay more.