

A misfiring experiment, a rejected article: these things are soon labelled as failures in academia. As for talking about it – not done! But that is just what WUR scientists do in this column, because failure has its uses. This time we hear from Leo Nagelkerke, assistant professor and senior researcher in the Aquaculture and Fisheries group.

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'The labour market was really bad when I graduated in the 1990s. Fortunately, I was able to stay on for a PhD. My fellow scientists became academic nomads in a merry-go-round of temporary jobs abroad, which led them to put off important decisions like having a family. My wife and I didn't want that insecurity. I also wanted to carry on working in the same field, so I looked for a job in

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the private sector. I was taken on by a consultancy firm, but I was desperately unhappy there. I felt under so much stress because of the short projects and commercial pressure. Just when it started to get interesting, I had to move on. They aimed for "good enough", which isn't my style. I got migraines, started to hyperventilate and suffered other vague ailments.

I reported in sick more and more often, which is not like me. Even so, they were pleased with my work and gave me a permanent contract. That gave us peace of

mind because we had a baby and wanted a mortgage.

Then one of my former teachers asked me whether I could do an 18-month stint to complete a postdoc project. I confided in an older colleague, who said, 'What's stopping you?' Only the fear of the insecurity of temporary contracts. He said, 'Fear is a bad motive. Do what your heart tells you.' Pretty clichéd really but they became two wise lessons for my life.

I took the job and was open about my concerns and wishes from the start. I did the work as well as I could in the hope they would keep me on. They did and even gave me a permanent contract. My experience with that ex-colleague taught me you're more likely to accept advice from outsiders. Whenever I run into problems now, they're the ones I turn to. It's something I also try to teach my students, as well trusting your intuition and being open about your wishes. Now I have the best job in the world.'

