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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in triplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts. Opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the AAAS or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 138, 496 (26 Oct. 1962).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 1740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. Furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. School year subscriptions: 9 months, \$7.00; 10 months, \$7.50. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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Time and Talent

Shortly after he had settled in the United States, Einstein plaintively commented on the unquiet atmosphere of academe (even in Princeton!) and the deleterious effect this had on scientific productivity. On one occasion, I. I. Rabi recounted his travels during the preceding nine months. It was a schedule that would have stood up against that of an international airline pilot! And Rabi quoted Von Neumann, who had stated that if acceleration in transportation were considered in terms not of distance covered but of work performed we would have to conclude that the new speeds were resulting in people's traveling more slowly, since so much time was now being wasted.

Every week we hear doleful warnings about our precarious manpower position, particularly about the shortage of able people. There is no question about this. There *is* a shortage of able people. But the shortage is aggravated by the continued spinning of the able people we have—a spinning to which there appears to be no end.

The reasons for travel, for too many commitments, for overextension are obvious. A man's reputation, his power, his prestige are very much conditioned by his being "on the inside." Only those who circulate, who circulate in the right circles, who have the right connections are likely to be called on to give advice, to be remembered when funds are distributed, to be elected when an opening occurs.

It is not easy to turn one's back on possible appointments, on other opportunities, and to stay put in a laboratory or library to struggle with one's problems and possibly to fail. Fortunately, however, some men are not suited to the life of the academic "operator." And a few others are able to withstand the temptations.

The size of our country adds to the difficulties. It is not easy to know the good people in a field where this requires an overview of 60 or 160 institutions scattered over an area of 6 million square miles. And so the good men who are identified are sought out again and again, until their scientific careers become a part of the past. As a consequence, many younger men who could help share the load—for we do need many to serve on committees and to do the other chores that need doing—remain unrecognized and are unable to enjoy opportunities that could add an important dimension to their development.

Many years ago, Wesley Clair Mitchell, great empiricist that he was, took out his appointment book to review what had happened to him during the preceding ten months. He calculated that he had been able to devote only about 30 percent of his total time to his research. And Mitchell was a most disciplined scholar.

We chew up the best people in this country. We do it for good or bad reasons, but we do it. The most important lesson that we have to learn is the importance of one word—*no*. For creative work requires time and repose. The nation is not suffering from a shortage of talent. It is suffering from a shortage of talented people who know how to preserve and protect their time.—ELI GINZBERG, *Director, Conservation of Human Resources, Columbia University*