Dear Professor Nescio,

I left academic mathematics in December 1993 after working part-time for two years. I had positions at Wake Forest College and the University of North Texas, ending in 1991. I published five papers, three of which are in the Journal of Approximation Theory. After working for an investment management firm in Atlanta, I accepted a job with a wireless engineering firm in Maryland, and wound up working on Wall Street starting in 2000. At present I’m working in one of those evil hedge funds as a quantitative analyst. And, before we go any further, I just haven’t earned the kinds of bonuses you read about in the newspapers—mine have always been much lower than average.

I have excellent references for teaching and research. I also have a few ideas for math papers, and have pursued these as time permits, but don’t have anything ready to submit.

I am forty-nine years old, and I would like to know if you think it’s feasible to transition back to the academy. This is where I wanted to be in the first place. There are a few universities recruiting in Hong Kong, and my family and I are interested in moving there (my wife is from Hong Kong), so I would like to know just how feasible it is to be hired for an overseas position at my age and with a limited publication record.

Sincerely,
—Seeking Work

Dear Seeking,

Yours is a perplexing case and one where Professor Nescio fears to tread without an appropriate caveat. While I can and will speak about your prospects in the U.S., you should take whatever I have to say about the market in Hong Kong with a certain degree of skepticism; I know nothing about the academic marketplace there. Nevertheless, I'll try to help, but my comments must be of a general and abstract nature. I will rely on my knowledge of human nature, but, as we all know, some of what we perceive as the nature of human beings is actually a consequence of the culture in which we ourselves are raised.

My suspicion is that your chances of success, even if you seek a position in the U.S., will be less if you go after a job where research in approximation theory is the prime requirement for the position. Why do I think this? First, from what you said, you received your Ph.D. in 1989. In 1990 there began one of those cyclical drops in the number of available academic positions. You may have suffered from this while on the market the year before. In any case, your research does not seem to have been sufficiently strong to overcome this drawback. (I hope this is not too brutal. Professor Nescio prefers a tactful course, but it strikes me that your situation demands total frankness. There are many good mathematicians, and publishing in a journal with the stature of the one you cited is a good recommendation. In and of itself, however, it does not make you rise above the pack. On the other hand, perhaps there were other reasons you did not secure a full-time position. Nevertheless I am forced to respond only on the basis of what I read and my experience.) In seeking a research position, you will compete against people who have less known about them—but the reference letters will portray them as full of promise. With most mathematicians I know this will be believed more readily and optimistically than whatever is said about the research of a 1989 degree recipient. So you would be better advised to seek a position that values research but emphasizes teaching. In such an endeavor I think you should underline something that makes you unique, or at least rare in the pool of applicants. On that score your experience on Wall Street rather than your knowledge of approximation theory should be a major asset.
Dear Professor Nescio,

I have a difficult issue with one of my papers, which is based on my Ph.D. thesis. This paper was submitted to a well-established journal in September of 2005, and received (after several demands) a positive but somewhat unofficial answer in early 2007. I therefore recorded it as accepted in my resume and got a permanent position in a good university in September 2007.

Shortly thereafter I met the editor at a conference. He explained to me the problems he had with the referees and with the journal’s page limit, and confirmed to me I was correct to put the paper in my CV.

In the middle of 2008 the editor informed me he had sent the definitive acceptance letter to the editor-in-chief. But, after that, I still got no news of the paper, and at the beginning of 2009 I started to contact the editor-in-chief directly. It appeared that he had no information on my paper.

I submitted this paper more than four years ago, and I still have no official acceptance letter or clear hope to see it published. I start to be tempted to withdraw it and submit it to another journal, but that would make my previous resume false and I am reluctant to give up an acceptance, even unofficial. What would you advise me to do in this situation?

Sincerely,

—Wants to Get Published

Dear Wants To Get Published,

Your story is not one I have ever encountered. I certainly know of papers where the refereeing process was abysmally long; indeed I have been the victim of such irresponsibility. I have also taken on the role of someone called and asked to rescue the editor after a paper has languished for well over a year. But four years with the nod from a referee and an editor and to still have the paper languishing? Unprecedented! Professor Nescio feels outrage rising inside him. It is impossible for me to fathom what is happening in the minds of the editors; there must be an untold story here.

What to advise? First, a phone conversation with the editor-in-chief is called for. Explain that promotion and tenure considerations have entered the picture. (You did not mention this in the letter but the timing leads Professor Nescio to assume it does. I hope you have other papers that have appeared.) How a mathematician can ignore this situation I do not know. Bluntly ask whether the editor wants you to withdraw the paper. If possible I would locate the publisher of the journal and assert that what has happened is a mark against the company or university—it is. Also solicit the help of your adviser. Get him/her to call the editor-in-chief. You might even ask your department chair or some senior mathematician at your current university who acts as your mentor and/or confidant to contact the editor-in-chief on your behalf. (I leave it to you to decide if this might complicate your tenure consideration more than leaving the paper in limbo.)

In short, I would advise pulling out all the stops. Nevertheless you should be aware of one of the less attractive facets of human nature that will be in play here: When you are in trouble, you are usually there all by yourself. True, most will give up their seat in a crowded bus to an older person or make a contribution to a worthy and noble cause; frankly, they have little at stake in doing so. But asking someone to dramatically inconvenience themselves, put their reputation on the line, or jeopardize their relationship with another in the profession may not go over well no matter how righteous the cause. Indeed, how someone responds to such a request is the true test of friendship. You should never confuse cordiality or collegiality with friendship, a mistake Professor Nescio has committed on more than one occasion. Most advisers maintain warm feelings about their thesis students and, moreover, your thesis reflects no matter how righteous the cause. Indeed, how someone responds to such a request is the true test of friendship. You should never confuse cordiality or collegiality with friendship, a mistake Professor Nescio has committed on more than one occasion. Most advisers maintain warm feelings about their thesis students and, moreover, your thesis reflects the financial sector as adjuncts. The financial programs employ several people from the financial sector as adjuncts.

In the U.S. a person in your situation would have difficulty securing an academic position, especially given the state of the economy and its documented effects on universities. My suspicion is that this will hold as well in Hong Kong. I would suggest you cast a wide net and do not discount the Middle East.

Please inform Professor Nescio what happens in your mid-course correction.

—Good luck,
Professor Nescio

Many universities in the U.S. seek to provide their students with grounding in financial mathematics; perhaps this holds in Hong Kong as well. If you apply to such an institution, your competition may be able to discuss their background in stochastic processes, but, I suspect, few will have had your financial experience. Indeed it is Professor Nescio’s observation that the more successful academic financial programs employ several people from the financial sector as adjuncts.

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Dear Professor Nescio,

I am in a tenure-track position in a community college, but I am planning to move on to a four-year college later. I am concerned that, once I get tenure here, it would be hard for me to get a position elsewhere. I heard that you can make a deal to reduce years to get tenure. Could you please give me some advice on how to change schools? Thank you very much.

—Searching for a Better Life

Dear Searcher for a Better Life,

There are several issues here that are worth commenting on. To be sure, Professor Nescio is empathetic with your situation. Indeed, though the circumstances differ, there are many others who seek to improve their academic situation.

First there is the issue of searching for a job. There is much to write about here, so much that Professor Nescio will not start. Many sources exist, and a good place to start is at the Young Mathematicians Network [http://concerns.youngmath.net/]. Another that I stumbled across while counseling a student and that seems very thorough is http://www.gwu.edu/~math/graduate/jobweb.html. I am sure there are many others.

There is also the issue of trying to find a job at a four-year college while at a community college. I am afraid that the flow of mathematicians in academia is analogous to the flow of water; it easily flows downward, frequently spreads sideways, and only with some extra help can it flow upwards. It happens that mathematics faculty at community colleges get positions at four-year institutions, but usually something that will push them up the incline is required. Outstanding teaching evaluations and/or involvement in student-oriented activities will be most helpful. Here is a point about getting a job to always remember, whether that job is at a four-year college or a research university: there has to be something that makes you stand out as a candidate.

When a research university searches for an analyst, for example, after an initial screening of the applicants that eliminates those whose specialty is not what the search committee seeks and those whose credentials do not match the institution’s self-image and expectations, there may be as few as a dozen applicants on the short list. Already we see at work the principle I just stated, but it is highly unlikely that a dozen people will be invited for an interview on the campus. How does the committee get down to the three to five candidates they invite to campus? There is no unique answer to this, but whatever the explanation is, one can be certain that there was something going for the interviewees that singled them out in the eyes of the committee. It might be the existence of a grant, the personal acquaintance of a committee member, involvement of the candidate in highly specialized and desirable activities, or something else from an extremely long list that parallels the list of all the things departments and mathematicians do.

Now the process for filling a position at a four-year institution is similar even if the specific considerations differ radically. For example, a four-year place might emphasize that nebulous quality “collegiality”: how easy is it to imagine having this person at a faculty meeting; will they contribute to a committee’s work? Research departments that I know seldom consider these things, even though it might sow future problems. In some ways this makes the competition at a four-year institution stiffer. The number of applicants who can theoretically make the short list is a lot higher.

So what is it that is going to make your application stand out? What is it about your time at the community college that makes you a better candidate than someone with a newly minted degree? Don’t discount personal contacts. They can be extremely helpful unless you are a total bore.

Regarding your reference to making a deal to reduce the time to tenure, I would not make this a central theme in your approach. You are already asking for a variance in the normal recruiting procedure, which is to look at fresh doctoral recipients; this itself presents a nontrivial task, especially in these times. To add to the hurdles, for the department to overcome any insistence on a shorter time to tenure will complicate things further. Professor Nescio does not want to take on the role of moralizer, but spending more years before you get tenure may just be the price you pay for changing your career path. In addition, an institution that pays careful attention to teaching and collegiality will frequently want to see you in action on their home turf for the full probationary period. So politely ask the question, but don’t push the issue.

The conclusion is that your task is not impossible but it is daunting, especially in today’s market. Nevertheless, the longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to be successful.

—Good luck,
Professor Nescio