to some random committee that you have no passion for,” says Cech. Once they have chosen committees for themselves, scientists can use those service obligations as reasons to decline less-desirable assignments.

After committing to a group, scientists should execute their duties diligently — it is always possible that the committee chair will evaluate them for a promotion later.

If the committee’s goal is vague or discussions are unfocused, researchers can ask the chair to clarify the mission with administrators or to provide agendas in advance. During meetings, members should avoid making comments that do not directly serve the committee’s purpose. For instance, when developing policy, people often tell anecdotes to show why the regulation is necessary, says Boss. “All it does is waste time,” he says. Instead, the team should concentrate on the wording of the policy and ensure that it covers the necessary scenarios.

Researchers outside traditional universities may encounter a wide variety of expectations and styles. Scientists at the Janelia Research Campus have minimal service obligations so that they can focus on research, whereas those at the Wilderness Society, a conservation organization in Washington DC, are encouraged to serve on committees that influence policy and management decisions. At the Champalimaud Centre, a small group of neuroscientists has been shaping the direction of the budding programme. Faculty members are involved in more types of service than are those in academia, and their meetings can be more intense and efficient. For example, they all participate in hiring decisions, but rather than interviewing candidates over several months, they gather for a one- or two-day symposium to see applicants give talks.

Scientists should discuss committee-service expectations during their job-offer negotiations. A supervisor might even be able to provide precise requirements. Molina expects junior researchers in her department to spend no more than 5% of their time on committee work; mid-level researchers are expected to spend 10–15%.

Ultimately, science cannot run without service. Researchers need to review each other’s proposals, contribute to professional organizations and help universities to foster strong research and student development. Faculty members who avoid all committees risk isolating themselves from the community or being perceived as slackers. “In science, people are expected to be givers and sharers,” says Molina. Still, that is no reason to feel guilty for setting boundaries. “I believe in participating and volunteering,” she says, “but there’s a limit.”

Roberta Kwok is a freelance writer in Seattle, Washington.