Career Outlook

The inside story on landing a top job in the pharmaceutical industry.

Getting a Start in Pharma

By David Schoonmaker

You don’t have to look far into the statistics to realize that careers in the pharmaceutical industry are hot. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ranks it as one of the fastest growing manufacturing sectors. Employment is expected to grow 26% from 2004 to 2014, compared with an average of only 14% for other industries. Altogether about 2500 firms in the U.S. are involved in producing medications, employing 291,000 workers in 2004. Big pharma, however, is aptly named; 59% of those jobs are with companies employing more than 500 people. What’s more, earnings and benefits are much better than in other fields, with pharmaceutical workers making about 35% more than the industry average.

The question is: How do you break into the business? The jobs most in demand and most desirable also happen to be filled by people who are highly qualified. Almost 60% of those 291,000 pharmaceutical employees have bachelor degrees or higher, and nearly a third have advanced degrees. Let’s look in more detail at where the jobs are in pharmaceutical research and development, what’s required to land one, and how you can put your best foot forward.

Who’s Hiring Whom?

The pharmaceutical business is highly competitive and that goes for human resources (HR) as well as products. Recruitment is ongoing, and some jobs are particularly challenging to fill. According to Marcie Geremakis, director of HR, research, for Roche, Nutley, NJ, “Scientific disciplines in high demand have been medicinal chemists, pathologists, toxicologists, and in vivo biologists.” Patricia Rice, recruiting manager for Johnson & Johnson, New Brunswick, NJ, agrees: “I specialize in late development clinical employment and drug safety, and M.D.s have been in strong demand. Expertise in certain therapeutic areas is especially difficult to find.”

M.D.s may be most in demand, but other specialties are also highly valued. Brad Smith, director of human resources, staffing, at Roche notes that people with expertise in regulatory affairs are difficult to find, as are those with experience in clinical drug development. Smith continues, “It’s also worth noting the ongoing demand for medical liaisons.” These are people with expertise in specific therapeutic areas who can educate and inform physicians and other healthcare practitioners.

Marc Mascolo, recruitment sourcing manager at Johnson & Johnson, says he also hires individuals with bachelor or masters degrees as long as they have experience and proven success in the laboratory. “A successful track record is very important,” he says.
How Are They Looking?

There’s no set way that HR managers search for qualified candidates, but most firms have at least the first step in common: they look internally. Johnson & Johnson encourages employees as well as outsiders to create profiles on its web site, and that database is where Rice and Mascolo look first.

Because each company has a subtly distinct culture, people who have experience at the firm have a built-in advantage in getting up to speed in a new position. Bristol-Myers Squibb, New York, NY, for example, has specific behavioral characteristics they look for in employees. Lorraine Parker-Clegg, director of staffing at the company’s Pharmaceutical Research Institute, says that experience is the only way to learn the dynamics of working in a particular organization.

That doesn’t mean that they aren’t looking externally, though. Many recruiters attend career fairs, some purchase print advertising, most advertise on web sites—a few on large, general sites, but many at niche sites for professional associations or journals—and most use recruitment firms at least on occasion.

Networking is also vital. Brad Smith says “Roche uses a three-tiered approach: first we try to develop our own talent, then our recruiters look externally for talent. If the first two fail to turn up a sufficient number of qualified candidates, we may go to a recruitment firm.” He notes that these are almost always niche firms that have developed expertise in finding very particular kinds of candidates.

Where the Jobs Are

There are three obvious locations where the pharmaceutical industry is highly concentrated: the New York metropolitan area, the Northeast, particularly along Boston’s Route 128, and the San Francisco Bay Area. As Brad Smith observes, “Pharma locates where the talent is, and talent goes where the work is. This is one reason why we have such a high concentration of pharma companies in New Jersey.” That doesn’t mean that other locations are off the map, though. Marc Mascolo says that Seattle is experiencing a lot of growth, and others mention the Midwest. Also, North Carolina actually ranks third nationwide in the number of biotechnology companies, and a number of those are large pharmaceutical firms.

Furthermore, every recruiter casts as wide a net as possible when searching for candidates. They may focus on job fairs in the most talent-rich regions, but they will use the internet to reach wherever they can, including overseas.

Who Qualifies?

Most of the candidates will have a Ph.D. or M.D. or both, although some bench-work positions are available to candidates with bachelor or masters degrees. Among those with a science background, the chief specialties are biology (particularly molecular and cellular), chemistry, and engineering.

Parker-Clegg says that more degrees aren’t necessarily better, though. “We look for candidates who are appropriately qualified. We want them to be satisfied in the position.” Her colleagues at other firms echo that sentiment. Because pharmaceutical firms make a large investment when they hire, they want employees who like their work and will stay with the company. Thus a candidate with Ph.D. and M.D. qualifications may be just the person for a particular job, say in early stage drug development, but an M.D. would be better suited to late-stage clinical trials.

Experience matters as well, particularly in the clinical-trial area. Brad Smith says some positions are suitably filled by scientists straight out of academia, but “often, we are looking for individuals with industry experience in drug development.” Nonetheless, there are ways to develop expertise outside the pharmaceutical business. Smith mentioned that one source of such talent is research-based hospitals.

Nearly every HR person mentions leadership skills as important areas of expertise that they seek. Lorraine Parker-Clegg says that “the ability to operate smoothly and effectively in a matrix organization with internal and external stakeholders may be as important as academic degrees.” Brad Smith concurs, noting that a person can earn a Ph.D. without learning to lead people, run a project, or work within a budget. Patricia Rice looks for candidates who lead “through relationships and influence.” Further, most big pharmaceutical companies are multinational, so employees work with a very diverse group. People skills matter—a lot.
Rice says there's not a specific way that leadership skills can be identified. Success in a previous job speaks volumes, but it may come from projects you've run in school or even an extracurricular activity, such as a charity. Marcie Geremakis offers two examples of recent hires that had unusual backgrounds. “Both had Ph.D.s in cellular biology,” she says, “but one also had an M.S. in statistics, which was of value to Roche, and the other had an executive M.B.A., which suggested leadership skill and business drive.”

Does it matter whether you move laterally within one company or from one firm to another? Most HR managers say that there are advantages to both approaches. As noted above, understanding the culture of a business is almost universally considered to be an attribute, yet experience in a different organization may bring perspective and new ideas. Lorraine Parker-Clegg says that loyalty and longevity are generally a good thing, but lateral moves within the company may be as valuable as vertical ones. Broader experience makes you more valuable.

### Putting Together Your Package

When it comes to applying for science jobs in pharma, your curriculum vitae or CV is your calling card. Unlike a résumé, a CV should document all your scientific research including all publications. Whereas a typical business résumé might run two or at most three pages, a CV gets as many as it takes. Recruiters don't balk at CVs exceeding 30 pages.

A CV, though, is much more than a scientific laundry list. Parker-Clegg reminds us that “this is also a marketing document. The first two pages are critical in summarizing your experiences. Supplementary pages establish your scientific credibility.” Organization, writing skills, and the ability to communicate are all vital to job performance in the industry, and your CV should demonstrate them. Marc Mascolo warns against embellishment, but says to be sure to make any publications or awards very clear.

In the United States, CVs are fairly standardized, but expectations may be different elsewhere, observes Lorraine Park-Clegg, who has worked extensively throughout Europe. “In France, a CV might include a picture, for which example, would never happen in the U.S.” Be sure you understand your audience.

Nearly every HR manager says that the number one red flag on a CV is an unexplained gap. If, for example, you took time to care for a loved one—a description that wouldn't fit well into a CV—you would be wise to build that into a cover letter. Companies are looking for a steady progression in your career. Each step should be a logical move from the previous one. Likewise, “job hopping”—frequent moves without an obvious progression—raise eyebrows.

Once you’ve assembled a draft of your CV, step back for a minute. Brad Smith says that most people have a difficult time writing about themselves and can easily lose perspective on their document. He advises asking someone else with similar or greater qualifications to read and critique your CV. After all, that’s what advisors are for.

### Time to Talk

A CV may get you through the door, but the interview is where your future in research and development can be won or lost. Even HR people who are seasoned by hundreds of interviews say that first impressions are important.

Your work at succeeding during an interview starts well before you step through the door. Marcie Geremakis advises, “Do your homework. Know everything you can about the company and its culture, the people, and the position you’re applying for.” The more knowledgeable you are about the job you’re applying for, the more likely you are to seem well suited to the job—and it to you.

Brad Smith recommends against trying to control the interview: “Be candid and open.” You will likely be asked how you would handle certain hypothetical situations—what recruiters call behavioral questions. Patricia Rice advises answering from your experience, not theoretically. “We want to know what your actual experiences and solutions have been, not what you think you might do.” Also, don’t be afraid to ask for clarification if you’re not certain you completely understand a question. Parker-Clegg thinks this shows thoroughness on a candidate’s part, not necessarily lack of focus. She adds, “When you answer, try to focus on how you have handled such situations, not just what you have done.”

Make no mistake about it, the interview is crucial. But recruiters know and expect candidates to be nervous during interviews. It’s the substance of what you say that they’re interested in, and if you prepare thoroughly, you have the best chance of delivering it.

### Off to Work

From the foregoing, you might get the impression that something close to a Catch-22 operates in pharma hiring. Recruiters want experience at least as much as academic credentials, but how do you get experience without a job? In reality, much of academia is addressing this issue quite well by working more closely with industry to transfer research into products. If you’re a student now who hopes for a career in a life sciences company, pharma, or otherwise, you would be well served to seek out such opportunities. Your pharma career can never start too soon.

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