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Aerospace meets biotech

In California, scores of laid-off aerospace workers are looking for jobs. Meanwhile, life-science companies in the region are canvassing for entry-level employees. The needs of both these unlikely bedfellows have been met by a state-sponsored programme that has, in effect, played matchmaker.

The demand for technical employees in areas such as biomanufacturing has increased. This is especially true in California, where many biotech companies are becoming more product-oriented, and so need people with manufacturing and quality-control skills, says Caz Pereira, a Bay Area consultant who specializes in California workforce issues. Such companies tend to be successful at attracting young scientists into their technical ranks — but they are often unable to keep them. Many youngsters do stints in industry to fill the gap between undergraduate and PhD work, to get an introduction to the industry before pursuing a business angle, or as a means to pay off student loans before doing graduate work. So there are often vacancies at the lower levels that need filling.

This insatiable need is now being met by the \$1.5-million programme, which is retraining workers to move into the biotech sector. The participating companies are free to interview and select the programme participants as they see fit, but they are encouraged by a partial wage subsidy to employ them. The programme aims to have trained and placed more than 400 workers in the life-sciences sector by the end of 2005.

The programme has broad implications. Other local companies are already enquiring about the scheme, and it comes at a time when Britain is investigating ways to help prepare its undergraduates for industry careers. Starting similar programmes in other countries might be one way to combat an anticipated skills shortage in both academia and industry.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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