

The inside track from academia and industry

Great expectations

You know what you want from a job. But how do you convince an employer that your skills are relevant?



Jens-Peter Mayer

Working in the field of human resources has given me first-hand experience of the problems faced by both academics seeking jobs and employers seeking skilled workers. One of the most significant issues in the scientific sector is a mismatch in expectations. Often, a single vacancy in industry can generate hundreds of applications from academic scientists. Yet, despite this apparent wealth of choice for the prospective employer, none of the initial applicants will secure the job — leaving both sides disappointed.

This happens because industry often expects its candidates to have a set of specific attributes — it wants them to be highly motivated, to have a sound background in research, such as a good academic postdoc, and to have done at least one internship in industry.

Meanwhile, what most academic candidates offer is a good research background, management experience and a host of 'soft' skills, such as writing and presenting data. But they often fail to explain how these skills will help

them meet a company's needs. Sometimes they don't even realize that simply by virtue of their research they have gained highly relevant qualifications, such as a working knowledge of the requirements for 'good practice' in the drug industry.

As a human-resource professional, it is my job to try to balance the aspirations of academics aiming to leave university for a job in industry with the expectations of their prospective employers. To help bridge this gap, I have created a hypothetical candidate and a prospective employer, based on countless job hunts that my company has helped to facilitate.

THE CANDIDATE Jane has recently completed her PhD in chemistry. She has worked in a university laboratory, supervised students and supported her adviser. She is highly motivated and has a specialized knowledge of natural-product synthesis. As a result, she has several transferable skills. Conducting her own research is equivalent to industrial work experience, her teaching experience reveals that she has leadership skills, and managing a laboratory demonstrates that she can look after budgets.

But she doesn't realize that she needs to describe her skills in terms that make this clear to a prospective employer. So far, several job applications have failed to secure Jane a single interview, leaving her feeling dejected and questioning the value of her academic training — at least for the industrial market. So she continues to answer every industrial job advert she comes across, regardless of whether or not she meets the qualifications for the post on offer.

THE EMPLOYER But what of the prospective employers? In this hypothetical situation, let's consider just one, who advertised a position for someone to install and run a research laboratory to find target molecules for the development of a drug against cancer. The advert asked for several years' working experience under standardized research and production practices. The successful candidate would be responsible for strategic planning and management with regard to staffing and budget. The position demanded industry experience and management training.

But few, if any, applicants met the full profile. As a result, the employer was confused. Why did so many people send applications even though they did not meet the company's specific criteria? In fact, the whole experience

has left the employer wondering whether the right candidate is out there at all.

Both the employer and the applicant had needs, but neither quite made the match. Why was this? Jane has failed, so far, because she does not really understand the demands of the industrial market and how to communicate her ability to fit into it. She feels helpless and frustrated and wonders whether her university training has perhaps failed her. The employer is frustrated, too. He does not know how to react to applications or how to cope with the hiring administrative process, and he fails to understand the candidate market. Both fail because they are not fully informed, and also because they feel pressed for time.

To connect the two communities — and to help real-life natural scientists and life-science companies overcome the barriers faced by Jane and her prospective employers — I will use this monthly column to create a platform for them. This will aim to help scientists from both academic and industrial backgrounds to improve their understanding of the market by providing tips on job search strategies, applications and industrial hiring trends.

I also aim to address employer issues — such as strategies for finding the ideal candidate and some alternate staffing approaches. Whatever the origin of the question, I aim to address possible solutions from both the employer's and jobseeker's perspectives. As a mediator, I aim to tackle hot topics in industrial staffing from both sides of the recruiter's door. I appreciate input, whether comments and questions or additional advice, at: naturejobs@kellyservices.de. ■

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"Academic skills can be transferable. Conducting research is equivalent to industrial work experience, and teaching reveals leadership skills."