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The skills hunt

Earlier this summer, the New York Academy of Sciences and *Naturejobs* brought together potential employers and employees at a symposium called 'Where the jobs are'. During the various question-and-answer sessions, several young scientists asked separate panels representing academia, biotechnology and drug discovery how they could guarantee a clear career path for themselves. Although the questioners, panellists and disciplines were different at each session, the answers were surprisingly similar: do the best science you can, identify the key 'soft' or non-scientific skills associated with your ideal career path, and then find ways to obtain them.

But that's not the whole picture. Both employers and their prospective employees also have more immediate responsibilities to discharge. Students and postdocs, for example, first need to learn more about what their options are. Several of the 500-strong audience did not seem to know what is entailed by many of the leading non-bench scientific careers, let alone what skills they would need to do such jobs.

And several of the panellists noted that students often have difficulty telling the difference between drug discovery and development, or between business development and regulatory affairs. They admitted that each of their respective sectors could and should try harder to articulate just what these jobs entail and what skills and training young scientists need to do them.

As for stability and security, the panellists all agreed that hard work and the ability to adapt to change helped them to secure their current posts. Understanding specific trends can provide a starting place for the current crop of students and postdocs (see www.nyas.org), but a greater knowledge about what skills are lacking beyond academia or industry will move them closer to their career goals.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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