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Capturing competencies

Discerning how many discrete skills are involved in drug discovery is a bit like trying to guess how many licks it takes to finish a lollipop. But this month the Science, Technology and Mathematics Council, a nonprofit organization that advises the UK government on science policy, began a project to determine the former, with the kind of resolve required to complete the latter.

The council is surveying 35 of Britain's drug-discovery firms to see what tasks each member of their drug-discovery teams performs, decide what skills are involved, and then set standards for each task. The hope is that the survey, which is likely to take several years, can guide companies on how to judge the competencies of employees working in different parts of the drug-discovery pipeline. It could also help universities to tailor their curricula to industry's needs.

The challenge is that, unlike a lollipop, the drug-discovery pipeline is a moving target. Too much focus on specific skills could make the surveyors lose track of the bigger picture. "What we don't want to do is develop something that will be redundant in six months," says Richard Smith, the council's director of science and technology.

But recommending competencies doesn't necessarily mean that they will be adapted or adhered to. The council conducted a similar exercise in 1995 for forensics, which is now increasingly attractive to life scientists who want to apply DNA technology to crime-solving (see page 872). The resulting competencies were taken seriously by some programmes, says Smith, but others merely paid lip service to them. Nevertheless, discerning students soon learned which courses delivered the skills they needed. Hopefully, the council's latest survey will similarly empower students if they choose to take an industrial path.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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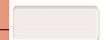
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