Contacts

Publisher: Fabien Savenay

Editor: Paul Smaglik

Sales Director: Ben Crowe

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Senior European Sales Manager:
Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Matt Powell (4953)

Andy Douglas (4975)

Laura Pearson (4977)

Netherlands/ Italy/ Iberia:

Evelina Rubio Hakansson (4973)

Scandinavia: Silje Opstrup (4994)

Production Manager: Billie Franklin

To send materials use London
address above.

Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814

Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996

e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

International

Advertising Coordinator:

Hind Berrada (4935)

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:

Ben Lund

European Satellite Offices

France/ Belgium:

Christine Niox-Chateau

Tel + 33 (0) 1 43 20 16 51

Fax + 33 (0) 1 43 20 51 52

e-mail: c.nioxchateau@nature.com

Germany/ Austria/ Switzerland:

Patrick Phelan

Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11/2

Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20

e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@natureny.com

US Sales Director: Ben Crowe

US Sales Manager: Peyton Mason

US Advertising Coordinator:

Ashly de Leon

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
19-1 Haraikatamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746
e-mail: k.johnson@naturejp.com

Asia-Pacific Advertising Manager:

Kevyn Johnson

naturejobs

Landing the egos

In helping to start three biotech companies in the Seattle area (see pages 4–5), Chris Henney has had to be a good judge of scientific talent. But he calls himself “a pretty bad interviewer”. So how has he managed to recruit scientists for Immunex — which is in the process of being acquired by Amgen of Thousand Oaks, California — Icos, which hopes to market its first drug in a year; and Dendrion, which is still developing? “I usually just say: ‘Tell me what you’ve been doing,’” he says.

This open-ended question usually reveals more than people intend. “I look for high-energy, open-minded people,” Henney says. What does he want to avoid? “Guys who want to spend their life repeating their PhD thesis,” he says. Shaking his head, he adds in his staccato mantra: “It’s probably not going to work.”

The other thing he watches for — both in interviews and once a new recruit has started — is ego. “We all have well-developed egos in the biotech world,” Henney says. But he emphasizes that a little goes a long way, and that the line between confidence and arrogance can be relatively blurred.

So what are some ego-related disqualifiers? People who worry about other people going into their office. “It’s probably not going to work,” says Henney. People who want their own private parking space. “It’s not gonna work,” says Henney. A desk with a name embossed in metal or some exotic polymer. “Not gonna work,” he says.

The best kind of confidence, according to Henney, is the kind that has to do with honest intellectual pursuit, rather than the trappings of success or status. “You’re looking for people who don’t have to win every argument,” Henney says. That qualification is desirable in any scientific setting, academic or industrial.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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