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: Silke 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 Harakatemachi,
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

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A sign of the times?

The careers fair at the Biotechnology Industry Organization's annual meeting in Toronto last week played host to twice as many jobseekers — about 5,000 — as its predecessor in San Diego last year. But does this mean that there are twice as many people unemployed in biotechnology this year? There are no easy answers or indicators, says Ian King, who helped to organize both meetings. In fact, there are several confounding factors.

First is the meeting's location. Although the conference is international, Toronto managed to draw a disproportionate number of Canadian scientists, King says. And those scientists might have had a ready appetite for such fairs, which are *de rigueur* in the United States, but still novel to the north.

The second factor is political circumstances. Last year's meeting occurred in the midst of a series of protests against the World Trade Organization, which also encompassed biotechnology and genetically modified organisms. As a result, the venue for last year's careers fair was changed, and attendees had to be bussed in — which must have reduced the number of attendees in San Diego.

Finally, there are the employers. Although Toronto saw about the same number of organizations represented compared to last year, their composition was different. The San Diego meeting boasted more companies, whereas Toronto drew more government organizations.

If there is any trend to be identified, it might be that of seeking stability — people this year queued up for more established companies and for government positions, rather than for riskier young companies, says King. To that extent, at least, the fair may be a sign of the times.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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