

Working your way into industry

Charles Adkins:

In academia, you have your project and it's your idea, your baby. Coming to industry, you have to work as part of a team.



What is the best way to get into the private sector? For most postdocs, it has been to apply directly for an advertised job. For a few others, undergraduate internships, summer work-study and even some postdoctorates have led to permanent jobs. But whether these forms of entry are a good way to land a long-term position depends on the company.

At drug firm Merck, most of the internships are for students working on a bachelor's degree, says Ruth McKernan, director of neuroscience research at the company's Terlings Park facility in Essex, UK. She feels this works better at Merck than having postdoc interns because the younger students have more realistic expectations. Postdocs are often angling for a permanent position, but at Merck "there may not be an opportunity for them", McKernan says.

Robert Young, vice-president of medicinal chemistry at Merck Frosst Canada in Montreal, says that his facility generally has a limited number of postdoc fellowships in both chemistry and biology. Although he agrees that industry postdocs are a potentially valuable experience for early-career scientists, "by no means would I call it an optimal way for them to find the best position in industry", he says.

POSTDOCS IN DEMAND

On the other hand, drug firm AstraZeneca actively seeks postdocs as permanent employees, bringing them into general programmes as well as specialized ventures such as its G-coupled protein-receptor research project. Five postdoc positions were created in Europe and North America for that programme, though not all have led to permanent jobs.

"We do encourage a portion of people to join us," notes Simon King, human-resources director for global discovery function at AstraZeneca's US headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware. "But some people find out they prefer to be back in academia." Still, he says about a third of their postdocs later take on permanent positions.

Why is the outlook on keeping interns so different from lab to lab? "I guess it depends on the individual," says King. For AstraZeneca, he says it is a way to bring in new ideas and simply "another of our diverse ways

of finding individuals to join the company".

Wolfgang Jarolimek, a research fellow at Terlings Park, joined Merck after an academic postdoc at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and an assistant professorship at the University of Heidelberg. He arrived there on a fellowship four years ago and took a permanent position a year later. The temporary stint gave him the chance to investigate drug discovery and see if he liked working in industry. Although this strategy worked for him, he cautions that his path is more the exception than the rule: taking a postdoc position can be a hindrance to future employment in the same company, just as taking a permanent academic position at the same institution as your last postdoc is seen as limiting.

LEARNING ABOUT THE CULTURE

Govindaswamy Panchamoorthy, a former postdoc and now a scientist in the AstraZeneca Enabling Science and Technology Biology group, also had a good foundation in academia — postdocs at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Brigham and Women's Hospital, both in Boston, Massachusetts. Wanting to take a different direction, he went to AstraZeneca's Wilmington site in 1997. After three years as a postdoc he took a permanent position and recently moved to the facility in Waltham, Massachusetts, where he develops novel drug-discovery technologies. He says that doing an industry postdoc is the best way to get introduced to the culture of research and development in the private sector.

A common thread of advice from industry postdocs is that they could not have learned if they were suited for the pharmaceutical industry unless they did a stint in it. Charles Adkins, a senior research biologist at Terlings Park, spent several summers there as an intern during his undergraduate and PhD studies. He says it gave him a valuable insight into the different cultures. "In academia, you have your project and it's your idea, your baby. That's very exciting, but it's also quite solitary. Coming to industry I've found that the main difference is that you have to work as part of a team." But for most who test the waters of private-sector research, that is the big draw. ■

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