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Eastern promises

It's a simple case of supply and demand. Denmark has had difficulty recruiting researchers into the country, whereas China has an abundance of skilled postgraduates. Novo Nordisk, the Copenhagen-based drug company, has taken measures to balance this discrepancy by opening a research division in Beijing.

Many Western recruiters have long recognized that there is a pool of potential talent in China. But historically they have had difficulty evaluating Chinese scientists who haven't studied at Western universities or published in English-language journals.

Peter Kurtzhals, senior vice-president of research at Novo Nordisk, solved this problem by bringing in someone he describes as "truly bicultural" — Bao Ping Wang, a Chinese scientist who spent 14 years in the United States, most of them at Harvard. That appointment was crucial to making Novo's Chinese office work, says Kurtzhals. "Wang understands Western culture and has his network back in China and can evaluate local talent." As a result, the office has already grown to about 20 research scientists.

Kurtzhals notes that at the moment growth isn't an issue. Novo, like most drug companies, is biding its time, waiting for the global economy to improve before it undergoes any massive recruitment initiative. But establishing an outpost in China now could offer dividends in the future. When the company feels like growing again, it will already have a system in place to evaluate China's scientific talent. And its Beijing base may provide a way to expand its market into China.

Given those opportunities, it won't be surprising to hear about other companies establishing similar outposts. Nor will it be a shock to hear Western scientists worrying about jobs in their home country being sent east.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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