

Academia is no longer the only game in town. Frustrated by clogged tenure tracks and never ending grantsmanship, an increasing number of postdocs and mid-career scientists are turning to the biotechnology industry. The pay, the facilities, and the resources are often better. The science can be every bit as cutting edge. There's also a sense of excitement and focused creativity in biotech companies that newcomers find a welcome relief after the stuffiness of some ivy-covered labs.

How do you make the jump into biotech? You've been taught how to shop around for a postdoctoral fellowship or an assistant professorship but how do you make yourself known to biotechs? Leslie Holsinger is a Research Scientist with Sugen Inc., a biotechnology subsidiary of the Pharmacia Corporation, and served as a discussion leader for the Women in Cell Biology Careers Lunch. The WICB asked Holsinger for a few tips on landing a scientist level position in the biotechnology industry.

WICB: What qualifications are they looking for in biotech? Do you need to have a biotech internship or postdoctoral experience first?

Holsinger: For a scientist level position, most biotech companies want someone with either a PhD or an MD, and at least three years of postdoctoral experience. You don't need previous experience in industry such as an internship. Some companies do offer postdoctoral positions. This can be a wonderful avenue into a company and can lead to a permanent position as a staff scientist after a few years. However, some companies have specific protocols about permanent hiring of internal postdoctoral fellows. You need to ask about the company's policies before taking a postdoctoral position.

WICB: When is a good time to apply for jobs in biotech?

Holsinger: Job openings can occur at any time, but many biotech companies do their annual review and budgeting in December. New positions are often created then and hiring begins in January. A few companies also do budgeting in July, with subsequent hiring cycles in the fall.

WICB: How many jobs should a candidate apply for simultaneously?

Holsinger: As many as interest you! It's important to mount a wide job search that lets you interview at a number of places in parallel within a short period of time. That way, you can compare positions and compare companies. Equally important, biotech companies move fast, much faster than your average university. You can expect a hiring decision within a few weeks. However, if you are offered a position, they'll expect an acceptance from you within two or three weeks or sometimes even within 48 hours. You need to be prepared to make your decision fairly rapidly. That's why you want all the offers on the table within a short period of time.

WICB: Where should job candidates send their CVs and applications once they identify a job?

Holsinger: Send them to “HR”—Human Resources. However, personal contacts are extremely important in biotech. So send your CV to HR but send a copy to a contact within the company as well. This could be a personal acquaintance or just a friend of a friend but find a name if you can. Be creative. The important thing is to bring your CV to the attention of the hiring manager, the person you’ll be working for, and nothing helps like a referral from someone already in the company.

WICB: How do you make contacts in the biotech industry?

Holsinger: Conferences are an excellent place to make biotech contacts. Look for poster abstracts and presentations by scientists from particular companies. Approach them with comments and questions, and leave them a CV.

WICB: Where are other good places to look?

Holsinger: Go to the web sites of interesting companies. Most biotech companies put a lot of effort into their sites. They’ll tell you a lot about what the company does plus there will be up-to-date job listings. At the very least, you can get the HR department address. There are also biotech job web sites such as www.biospace.com. Read the ads in scientific journals. If you find a company that interests you that isn’t hiring, it’s still a good idea to send a CV to HR. Biotech is dynamic and new openings can appear at any time.

WICB: Is it true that companies are looking for candidates with highly specialized skills and areas of interest?

Holsinger: To a certain extent. Companies are more focused now, and often look for someone with specific qualifications. If you are a graduate student now but planning on a career in biotech, it might be a good idea to see what specific skills are in demand in biotech and consider widening your skill set. However, the nature of the biotech industry is that things change quickly.

Projects and priorities can be restructured overnight. The best candidate is still a well rounded scientist with a wide breadth of skills and experiences that can be applied to many problems. You also need to be someone who likes change.

WICB: What’s it like to interview for a biotech job?

Holsinger: Candidates are typically invited to spend a day at a company, usually at the company’s expense. You’ll be asked to give a seminar, and then to meet with the hiring manager for that position. You’ll meet the other researchers with whom you would be working. Be prepared for a long, exhausting day, from early in the morning and on through dinner. You’ll probably meet with someone from Human Resources who will discuss salary and benefits. Salary should not be a focus of an interview, but come prepared with a range for an acceptable salary. This is important. A company wants to

know if your expectations are in line with that particular position. Job candidates are only invited back for a second interview if it's close between candidates.

WICB: How should a candidate prepare for a biotech interview?

Holsinger: There are four components of a successful interview.

First: **communication.** You have to be able to communicate your scientific knowledge and interests. Biotech puts a big emphasis on teamwork and interviewers are looking for someone who communicates effectively within the team. Get a colleague to give you a mock interview and pretend she doesn't know anything about your work. Prepare and practice clear and concise answers to common interview questions ahead of time, such as "what is the most significant thing you have done in your scientific career?" or "what is the reason you have chosen to look for a career in biotech?"

Second: **plan a good seminar.** Your presentation should be well-prepared and executed but also tailored to your audience. Don't assume they know your patch of science. Find out from the hiring manager prior to your interview who the audience will be, and try to assess their interests. Make sure you give them a good introduction to your subject and don't bog down in details or side issues. In addition, try to relate your work to the company's objectives. This is a different kind of seminar than you might be used to. You are the real subject and your audience wants to know how you and your work relate to them.

That's the third thing: **research the company before your interview.** Find out who will be at your seminar and look up their publications. Read about the company in the business and scientific press. Find out if they have competitors and research them. Outside the seminar, be prepared to ask questions about the day-to-day operations of the division where you would be working. Ask about the culture at the company, and whether you will be encouraged to publish your work and attend conferences.

In addition, you need to **have your career goals in mind.** Your interviewers will want to know where you see yourself going at the company. Are you strictly a researcher or does the business or management side of biotech interest you? Fourth: Follow-up. After the interview, send thank you notes to everyone with whom you interviewed. Thank them for having given you the opportunity to speak and for the chance to interview. Good follow-up shows you have it all: communication, planning, research and enthusiasm.