



## Careers at Biotech Companies

*Editor's Note: At each ASCB Annual Meeting, WICB sponsors a Career Lunch, masterfully organized in recent years by WICB and ASCB Council member Sandy Masur and ASCB Executive Assistant Cheryl Lehr. Table Leaders (female and male) volunteer to lead discussions according to their expertise; meeting attendees (male and female) sign up for a topic of interest. Leaders at one of the 2005 Biotechnology tables were Linda Cahill, CEO of the instrumentation company Cell Biosciences, and Wendy Fantl, Director of Cancer Biology at the biotech company Chiron. This column summarizes what was, by all reports, a lively and productive conversation.*

Our Biotech table included an interesting mix of postdocs, grad students, experienced academics, and pharma researchers. Discussions centered on the similarities of both worlds and the differences that someone moving from academia into the biotech/pharma arena might encounter. We presented general guidelines that had helped us in our own career transitions, with emphasis on issues that we wish we had paid attention to earlier than we did.

**The mantra: Publications for Academia, Products for Biotech/BioPharma.**

### Do What You Love

Passion is key to any successful career. Find a company and a position where you can do things that you love since, for the foreseeable future, you will be spending more time with your job than with anything else in your life.

### Communication

In any academic or industrial setting, communication skills include knowing your audience, figuring out what they need to know to become enthusiastic about your project, and telling a story that is short, compelling, easy to understand, and memorable. For those trained in cell biology, the most important people in your company are likely to have a much lower level of technical knowledge than you. If no one

remembers what you've said, or doesn't understand why they should care, you've wasted a lot of time and money.

### Being Smart, Working Hard, and Being Effective

Most scientists in an organization are smart and work hard, but being effective is different from these and far more difficult to achieve.

It can be hard for all of us in our first industrial jobs to understand, particularly if we've just left academia, the importance of getting something done that advances a project within a company. Although scientific discovery and publication are very important in a university setting, in a company setting publications are usually viewed as the byproduct of a program whose focus is product development. The mantra: Publications for Academia, Products for Biotech/BioPharma.

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### The Importance of Time

Several books by management gurus, including Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*, stress the importance of knowing where time goes and what is accomplished each day. They also underscore the need to apply ruthless judgment about what's absolutely necessary and what would be "nice to know" but not critical to the product. As a senior scientist or postdoc you spend years searching down every possible piece of information in your quest to be fully rigorous. It can be a difficult transition to industry where you might only be able to "afford" doing 80% of the experiments that you might have mapped out if you were still at the academic bench. This idea of "good enough" allows a product to be developed before the project runs out of money. This isn't to say that you don't make the best product possible; rather it recognizes the limits of time and money that are inherent in industry.

## Applying for the Right Industrial Job

It's important to align your interests with the requirements of any new job. Understand the vision, mission, and product of the company and how your own project and job would fit into it. Is there a good fit between your skill sets and those of the position that you're applying for?

## Obtaining an Industrial Job

Hundreds of resumés cross people's desks; it's important to figure out ways to make yours stand out. Be proactive: Follow up after sending in resumés, call back after interviews, and learn from each interaction. If you don't get the job, call to understand what the successful candidate looked like to guide your self-presentation better at your next interview. Before an interview, learn as much as you can (website, publications) about the company's goals, products, and personnel. Find out all you can about the people who will be interviewing you so you can optimize their first impression of you. At interviews, engage in "drill down" discussions to understand not only what you would be doing every day but also why the company would be spending money to have you do it.

## Finding and Keeping a Mentor

Great companies can have crummy bosses; mediocre companies can have good bosses. In this job and your future jobs, your resumé is your passport, so pay close attention to the "stamps" that you collect. Your job history will become as important as your academic credentials; and you need to evaluate carefully what each company, boss, and position will add to your future marketability. Maintain networks with people you admire and have learned from in the past. Interact continually with others in your field to learn from their career "scar tissue."

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## Don't Get Stuck

Learn leadership and management skills as you go so that you can rise in an organization rather than be a one man/woman show. ■

—Linda Cabill and Wendy Fantl



**Important Deadlines**  
Abstract: May 12  
Travel Award: May 12  
Registration: May 31

# BOSTON

## Stem Cell Niches

**Boston University**  
Boston, Massachusetts  
July 15-18, 2006

**Organizer:**  
Sean Morrison, *University of Michigan/Howard Hughes Medical Institute*

**Meeting Objectives:**

- Focus on recent advances in our understanding of stem cell niches
- Integrate advances from multiple mammalian tissues
- Integrate advances from mammalian and invertebrate systems

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