Ask the experts: how to get hired

Grace H W Wong

Experts in academia and industry offer practical advice for job-hunting scientists.

The right skills will get you a job interview, but only a successful interview will get you the right job. I asked more than 77 experts from academia and the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries to tell me: (1) what they look for in a candidate and what criteria they use for hiring scientists; (2) what mistakes scientists commonly make during job interviews; and (3) what key advice they would offer to the job-hunting scientist. Some of their answers are below. The experts provided practical advice from diverse perspectives, as the cultural environment and needs of academia are different from those of industry. Academic scientists have a degree of freedom, but need to support themselves through grant writing in a very competitive environment. Scientists in big pharma have the security generated from existing product revenues, but they may be subject to layoffs if a project fails or the company changes direction. Biotech scientists have the excitement and promise of great financial rewards, but work very hard and have little security. Each of these experts has a different point of view and emphasis, and their advice is valuable for all job seekers.

Academia

David Baltimore, president, California Institute of Technology (Pasadena, CA).

1. Scientific excellence and the ability to work effectively with others.
2. Not being prepared to intelligently discuss with the interviewer the full range of implications of the work of both the interviewee and the interviewer.
3. Acquire laboratory skills, but more importantly, gain a wide-ranging understanding of the issues in the field and the approaches that can be used to make progress.

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Jordan Pober, professor of pathology, dermatology and immunobiology, Yale University (New Haven, CT).

1. We seek faculty who we believe will run a lab that will make a difference, and we look for candidates with novel ideas and/or approaches. For junior faculty recruits, one-on-one interviews are generally less helpful and important than seminars; in particular, second-visit chalk talks focused on plans for the first several years as a lab head.
2. Showing a lack of interest in the interviewer's work.
3. Do some homework on other members of the department or program so that the interview can be used to effectively demonstrate the possibilities of potential interactions.

Bruce Stillman, president and CEO, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (Cold Spring Harbor, NY).

1. Individuals who have a vision of what they want to accomplish and know how they will go about achieving their goals. Broad thinkers with interests outside their own work.
2. Failure to appreciate the existing science at Cold Spring Harbor and inability to define how they will fit in with potential colleagues.
3. Carefully think about your choice for postdoctoral research as it will affect your early career, and choose to solve a problem that will have broad impact in many fields.

Thomas J. Kindt, director, division of intramural research, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (Bethesda, MD).

1. Skills and accomplishments with a reasonable fit to our needs, but if one has been successful in previous positions, that usually signals that they will be good for the new job.
2. Making judgmental statements about a program before they have complete information about it. For example, saying that the system is broken and they would make major changes to fix it is not well received. Also, making a list of things they would never do. If they don't want the job, they shouldn't accept it, but they should never try to limit the scope of the position by saying something like "I will never touch a dangerous pathogen or never work with animals."
3. Do a review of the organization and the key players in it and comment positively about this if the opportunity arises.

Charles M. Vest, outgoing president, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, MA).

1. Excellent taste in selecting problems and areas of inquiry, demonstrated scientific talent, intellectual independence, passion and persistence.
2. Not communicating clearly what they have done, how they have done it and why it is important, implying a greater contribution to team efforts than may be the case.
3. Communicate clearly and concisely. Demonstrate scientific insight and curiosity, and an appropriate understanding of how you could contribute to the mission of the organization to which you are applying.

Big pharma

Robert Allen Lewis, senior vice president and site head, Aventis (Bridgewater, NJ).

1. Scientists who have enough in-depth knowledge in their field to be able to think aloud through a complex problem during the interview.
2. Shifting the agenda to anything other than science—especially to exploration of negative feelings about elements in the applicant's personal or employment history.
3. Learn to be succinct in answering questions. If asked to consider a complex scenario, build the description in a way that is structured so that the interviewer can follow the line of thought easily.

Lex Van der Ploeg, vice president and site head, Merck Research Institute (Boston, MA).

1. Great intellect; proven accomplishments; willingness to work with others and collaborate efficiently; excellent communication and interpersonal skills. Do not get distracted by irrelevant details; continuously learn and develop skills in any area needed to advance the projects.
2. Being unclear on career goals; Lack of thought about motivation to join organization or how candidate an organization are likely to provide an excellent and productive long-term match; failing to match accomplishments to job-requirements to assure a likely fit; a badly prepared seminar with poor data; being defensive in response to questions or issues in data; being unclear about assumptions and issues in hypothesis; and forgetting that an interview goes both ways.
3. Provide a well-organized CV without errors and omissions; a short and to the point personal statement facilitates making it through an initial triage.

Lee Babiss, vice president of preclinical R&D, Hoffmann-La Roche (Nutley, NJ).

1. Technical expertise, a proven track record of success, understanding of all facets of drug discovery, the ability to work on multidisciplinary teams, the ability to lead and to be a team member.
2. Taking too much credit for the work they have done as members of a team; not being articulate about what their top career successes have been; not understanding that they are assessing us as much as we are assessing them.
3. Present a balanced view of yourself and identify key strengths and areas for development.

Ted Johnson, associate director, Pfizer (San Diego, CA).

1. Candidates should present evidence that they are willing and eager to learn new skills and concepts and that they follow good scientific methods to solve problems.
2. Pretending they know something that they don't. Trying to sell themselves as an expert. Arrogance.
3. Be friendly and warm, yet persistent. Make sure you show what you know without coming across as arrogant.

Martyn Banks, group director of lead discovery and profiling, Bristol-Myers Squibb (Princeton, NJ).

1. Read the job description carefully and have the right qualifications and experience. I review applications from individuals who are either overqualified or who do not have the requisite industrial experience. Invariably, we look for scientific and technological prowess coupled with important behaviors (e.g., leadership skills, an ability to work in diverse teams, an ability to motivate others).
2. Candidates may give the answer they think I want to hear. Normally we have a series of people conducting interviews, and some candidates tell a slightly different story to the same question from different interviewers. We do compare notes.
3. Build a goal-oriented career plan for yourself, research the area of interest and find what skills are required for the job.

Biotech

Kenneth Carter, CEO, Avalon Pharmaceuticals (Germantown, MD).

1. Good publications not only indicate a person's scientific prowess, but also give a strong indication of whether they can finish a project, which many smart scientists struggle with. Also, I always look for people who work well with others. Therefore we rely heavily on checking references.
2. There are many things that candidates cannot control about the interview process, but you can completely control your actions. The little things can make a big difference; candidates should show up on time, act interested, pursue aggressive but polite follow up. In a competitive job search, the small things can make a difference.
3. Figure out what you want to do and go do it. It is much better to work hard in a scientific area that you are interested in and follow your nose through good work, good relationships and good networking.

Gordon Vehar, vice president of research, Raven Biotechnologies (S. San Francisco, CA).

1. A broad set of skills combined with a strong technological basis in at least one area. The ability to speak clearly and get your thoughts across.
2. Being unable to make eye contact when talking with someone.
3. For young scientists, first go on job interviews at places that are not of the highest interest. This allow you to become familiar with the interview process, pace yourself through a day of talking, get over the nervousness of spending a day with strangers, practice the scientific presentation and handle questions. Consequently, you will be much more comfortable when on an important interview.

Alex Harris, vice president, Applied Biochemistry, Chiron (Emeryville, CA).

1. The potential for being a 'drug discovery scientist'—someone who understands the drug discovery process and why we are here. A well-organized and planned seminar.
2. A poorly organized and rambling seminar, including poor time management of that presentation. Making 'demands' during the first interview.
3. Design a seminar/presentation that demonstrates your scientific, organization and judgmental skills.

Steven R. Gullans, CEO, RXGen (New Haven, CT).

1. Showing a passion for research, very strong recommendations, the ability to communicate.
2. Indicating that they plan to work for only 6 to 12 months before returning to school. Showing very little interest in our area of research.
3. The best candidates have read our papers and know a lot about our work before they arrive.

Craig S. Gibbs, senior director, corporate development, Gilead Sciences (Foster City, CA).

1. Intelligence, technical skill and knowledge relevant to the job description, but what is more difficult to find is passion, creativity, leadership and communication skills.
2. Not doing enough homework on the company and the background of the managers who will be interviewing them. Not practicing their seminars enough so that the delivery is flawless, and not tailoring it to suit their audience. Giving long-winded answers to questions and not letting the interviewer ask follow-up questions.
3. Find a position where there will be an opportunity to expand your skills and responsibility (that is, a new position where 50% of the work is already familiar to you but 50% will involve new challenges and learning).

Conclusions

People approach the hiring process in different ways, so there is no single right way to succeed in getting hired. During your job hunt, do not expect to get the perfect job, and if you do not get an offer, do not get discouraged. Unfortunately, the interview process can be very subjective. Learn from each interview and get better and wiser from the experience.

The full responses from all the experts can be seen at http://www.studentvision.org/.