

Working the Network

MARK CRAWFORD

Landing a job through networking is more than talking science over cocktails.

It's been a rough couple of years for the bioscience industry, but jobs are coming back—and there are plenty of qualified candidates to compete for them.

“One or two years ago the number of nonmedical biology postings was scant because of the down economy,” says Ross Petras, senior recruiter for biotech and life science at BiotechHeadhunter.com, a division of Priority Sales Recruiting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “Since then job openings have increased by 20 to 35 percent, in part due to the rebound in the market, increased venture capital, and more grants.”

Some of the hottest jobs in the private sector are in operations, microbiology, genomics, proteomics, biomarkers, and personalized medicine. The abundance of new research under way, combined with software advances, is increasing the demand for bioinformaticians. More biology jobs are also available in federal and state government agencies, as well as at nonprofits such as the Nature Conservancy.

The need for biologists is on the rise in the industrial biotech and biofuel sectors, especially in regions with high concentrations of biofuel companies, such as southern California. High-demand positions include those in biomass production, microbiological crop management, and biological labs.

Julie Hertzberg, account manager for Aerotek Scientific LLC, a scientific staffing firm in Denver, says “in Colorado, biologists, specifically molecular biologists, are in high demand in the renewable energy and biotech and pharmaceutical industries, especially candidates who have specific skills such as DNA sequencing and quantitative polymerase chain reaction techniques.”

Rob Michitsch, an assistant professor of soil and waste resources at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point and chair of the Early Career Members Committee for the Soil Science Society of America in Madison, is pleased to see more jobs available for his graduating students.

“I’m a PhD soil scientist (chemistry, microbiology), waste management specialist (particularly agricultural resources), and biological engineer (agricultural waste aspects),” he says. “The global economy in the last five years has made these fields highly competitive on the job front; I’m happy to report there are many more opportunities in these fields so far in 2011.”

Getting a job through networking

Building relationships through networking is very effective for landing a job in the bioscience industry. “In the 14 years I have been involved in professional executive search, 60 percent of my placements have come from networking, 30 percent from cold



Molecular biologists are in high demand, particularly in the biotech and pharmaceutical industries. Here, Jill Livengood is shown working in her lab at Inviragen. Photograph: Tina Wood Photography.

calling and related activities, and 10 percent from job postings,” indicates Don Alexander, vice president of life sciences development and commercialization for Carlyle & Conlan, an executive recruiting firm in Morrisville, North Carolina.

“Networking is a powerful tool,” agrees Lauren Celano, chief executive officer (CEO) of Propel Careers, a life science search and career development firm in Boston, Massachusetts.

"It allows relationships to be built over time that can lead to new positions, partnerships, and possibilities. Networking is a skill that gets better with time. The more you practice, the more skilled and comfortable you will become with networking."

To find your dream job in a competitive field such as biology, it helps to stand out from the crowd. Decision-makers need to know your strengths and specialties. A commitment to networking, especially early in a career, provides an edge over the competition. It gives potential advisers, employers, and coworkers the opportunity to learn more about you at a personal level—and if you impress them, they will remember you.

As much as you may want to impress and please the potential employers with whom you network, it's important to "be receptive, approachable, and neutral, yet still maintain your own opinions," advises Michitsch. "Different people have different ideals and values. Making the effort to understand different viewpoints will pay dividends in your job search."

Maryrose Franko adds, "It's not so much who you know, but who knows you." Franko is a senior program officer for graduate science education for the Office of Grants and Special Programs at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland. "When your CV [curriculum vitae] crosses someone's desk along with a hundred others, if he or she has heard you give a talk or met you at a meeting (and you gave a favorable impression), that person is much more likely to put your CV into the follow-up pile, rather than someone they don't know."

Methods of networking

When it comes to networking, go "all in." Use both traditional and newer approaches—they are each effective in different situations, from a phone call to having lunch to social media. "Recent trends in networking include heavier use of social media and professional Web sites such as LinkedIn, which allow people to reach an increasingly



Make an impression at meetings, advises Maryrose Franko, senior program officer at Howard Hughes Medical Institute. "It's not so much who you know, but who knows you," she says. Photograph: Courtesy of Maryrose Franko.

wide audience," Alexander says. "These trends, however, are not a surrogate for personal contact."

Petras agrees. "Social media hasn't replaced a handshake and a cup of coffee. It can't create the same kind of personal bond. Instead it creates an awareness that hopefully leads to personal interaction. It's hard to get a job without going out and meeting someone."

An effective way to start networking is partnering with a staffing company or recruiter that specializes in placing biologists. They know the market, have a wide range of clients, and are in constant contact with human resources (HR) directors and chief science officers across the country. There are also no fees for candidates to work through these firms.

Consider joining professional organizations and trade groups specific to your field. Many of these groups are placing more emphasis on job networking, including online bulletin boards. For example, BIOCOM, a life sciences trade association in San Diego, hosts more than 75 events annually, from small networking events for contract research organizations to quarterly breakfast meetings to

a global partnering conference—all of which provide outstanding networking opportunities.

Industry trade associations can often be a resource for training for job seekers. "For example, not only does Massachusetts Biotechnology Industry Association provide networking opportunities, it has also recently launched a series of career development seminars through a partnership with Propel Careers to assist grad students, postdoctoral fellows, and medical residents with knowledge about career opportunities," Celano says.

Networking events don't have to be formal or intimidating—take, for example, the Colorado BioScience Association's highly popular "Bio-Beers" event. The association partners with the local science community to put together this event, which is hosted at facilities such as Colorado University, Colorado State University, or the Fitzsimons Life Science District. The first half of the meeting consists of networking; during the second half several companies present 5- to 10-minute pitches on the technologies they are developing, to an audience that's drinking microbrews.

"The audience gives honest and open feedback," says Holli Baumunk, president and CEO of the Colorado BioScience Association. "The networking is fantastic, and because it takes place in a laid-back atmosphere, there is good attendance. The microbeers don't hurt either."

Another excellent method for meeting influential people is through volunteering. Biologists can select community volunteer events that are sponsored by their industries or volunteer at professional meetings and get-togethers, such as by joining a committee. Not only does volunteering look good on a CV but it also creates close proximity with professionals who may be instrumental in helping your career.

This approach is rarely talked about and often underestimated in its overall value. "Volunteering was one of the best pieces of advice I received early in my career," shares Deanna Dawn, a wildlife biologist with Garcia and Associates in Auburn, California. "Not only does it give you real-world experience in your field of interest, it shows potential employers you have great initiative and dedication to your field. Volunteering also has great networking capabilities—you get to know and interact with individuals already established in your field. If you approach your volunteer position with passion, people notice."

"Speed networking" is a new approach in which people have only a few minutes to introduce themselves, share information, and learn about the person they are speaking with before moving on to the next person in line. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) is especially adept at speed networking. "AAAS is really into promoting networking for scientists and organizing these speed-networking events," Franko says. "We recently had them run one of these for our awardees at a meeting, and it was great."

Jim Austin, editor for AAAS's *Science Careers* magazine, is a master speed-networking planner. "You basically get a long table, gather a bunch

of scientists together, and have them bring their business cards, a pen, and maybe a small notebook. Then split them into groups. Place one-half in chairs on one side of the table and put the remaining half on the other side. In the front of the room set up a bell and a timer. Then decide how much time they'll have together; three to four minutes is typical. Set your timer and ring the bell. They will have only that short time to tell each other about what they do, what their scientific interests are, and maybe what they're looking for."

Austin indicates most of the interactions fall flat, but a significant minority ("more than you would expect," he says) begin to see a glimmer of a collaboration possibility, and then the bell rings. They quickly exchange business cards, and the people on one side of the table get up and move one chair to the left or right.

Toward the end of this kind of event the organized structure may break down. "We did this in August at a career-development meeting with HHMI and several other organizations," Austin says. "Instead of a long table with two sides, they had 8 or 10 big round tables. About two-thirds of the way through order began to deteriorate and people became uncertain about where to go or with whom to speak. They started to hunt down those individuals who interested them earlier in the event. By the end of a speed-networking session new scientific relationships are typically formed and new collaborations established. In 90 minutes you may even come away with three new research partners."

AAAS is happy to conduct speed networking for any organization or institution that asks, if schedules fit. "All we'll ask is that they provide the venue and cover our costs—we'll even bring the bell," Austin says.

The art (and science) of networking

Some tips: Have your personal materials (CV, business cards) updated and ready to go. Contact everyone you know in your field of interest. "If I lost

my job I'd start with the phone and e-mail," says Majid Moridani, assistant professor in the School of Pharmacy at Texas Tech University's Health Sciences Center in Amarillo. "I would update my LinkedIn profile and send the link to everyone. Uploading my CV to some online recruitment agency Web sites and posting it on some job boards would also be a good idea. E-mail can be an excellent way to introduce yourself, but you must be very careful how you use it. The subject line and content must be individualized to the recipient and really stand out. Spend a few hours getting to know the person's work, laboratory, and organization. *Do not* do an e-mail blast where you send one generic e-mail to multiple contacts."

Job boards are another easy place to start. Post your CV or résumé on Monster.com or CareerBuilder.com. "Also definitely check out Indeed.com," urges Petras. "It scours the entire Internet and even pulls job positions advertised on corporate Web sites. It is putting a real squeeze on Monster.com and CareerBuilder.com because it is free."

Although e-mails, telephone calls, and written letters are good methods of pursuit, the most effective approach is working through professional groups and associations—not just for meeting connected professionals but also to take advantage of high-level career-based training. Trade organizations often bring in professional HR consultants or professional recruiters who understand the market and the bioscience community. For example, the Colorado BioScience Association provides more than 60 education and networking programs a year that allow job seekers to participate to help them integrate into the bioscience community, at very little or no cost.

"We work closely with the universities and research institutions to allow their undergrad and graduate students to attend functions to network, as well as learn more about the industry," Baumunk says. "It is critical that we keep the industry vibrant by growing a skilled workforce, and we find

networking is a very effective way to do this.”

When attending industry events, trade shows, and job fairs, be prepared to meet and build relationships with decisionmakers in the industry. Identify the people you wish to contact at scientific meetings and research their work beforehand. Also learn who else will be attending the conference and do a bit of research on people in your field—even if it is as simple as reading their profiles on the corporate Web site or pulling up their LinkedIn profiles.

“The ‘prepared approach’ is critical, whether you are looking for graduate or professional work,” Dawn says. “You must make it convenient for the individuals you are pursuing—don’t just approach them as they walk by. Send them a brief e-mail before the conference asking if you could chat with them briefly during the conference. Alternatively, you might even try leaving a message for them in their hotel room asking them for a few minutes of their time. I have done this on several occasions and always found people to be very gracious and receptive.”

Be sure to ask for business cards. “After speaking with someone, write notes about your conversation on the back of the card—and by all means follow up,” urges Grover. “Not next week, but that very evening or the next day. I can’t tell you how many people drop the ball after meeting someone by never following up.”

Moridani notes with some disdain that graduate students often attend scientific conferences for fun and drinks—a big mistake. “This is the time to network,” he stresses. “Go to the poster sessions and hand out business cards or a short CV. Meet the speakers in your area of interest. If you do this every time you go, within a few years they will start to notice you. Then refine your target—what do you want to specialize in? What are you looking for? Be ready for the kinds of questions you might be asked. Most graduate students think about this approach a few months before they graduate, thereby losing any advantage they could have had going into the job market.”



Holli Baumunk (second from right), president and chief executive officer of Colorado BioScience Association, networks at a BioBreakfast event at The Children’s Hospital. “It is critical that we keep the industry vibrant by growing a skilled work force, and we find networking is a very effective way to do this.”

Photograph: Colorado BioScience Association.

Social media

According to a Challenger, Gray & Christmas survey in August 2009 that asked HR executives to rate the effectiveness of job search methods, “networking online and offline ranked as the most effective methods,” Hertzberg says. “The average rating of traditional (offline) networking was a 3.98 out of 5; the average rating of online networking was a 3.3 out of 5.”

More than 25 percent of Colorado BioScience Association’s member companies reported using social media and the Internet to locate jobs, and another 25 percent relied on word of mouth. Many companies and employees also use employment agencies to help in their job searches.

“On average, 10 bioscience jobs and about 15 résumés are posted to our Web site each month,” Baumunk says. “Member companies of our association may post without a fee; non-members are charged \$100 to post. We frequently hear positive feedback regarding these postings and plan to enhance the feature in the future. Our



Jim Austin, editor of AAAS’s Science Careers magazine, promotes speed networking as a way to build connections at scientific meetings.

Photograph: Jim Austin.

community actively uses social media to network: In 2010 we saw a 49 percent increase in activity for LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.”

LinkedIn is a highly effective site for staying in touch with the professional

community and keeping your information “out there” for anyone to see. “If you are looking for a position and are still employed, LinkedIn is a great way to post your information and direct potential employers to it without alarming your current employer, because LinkedIn is recommended across all industries as the best way to stay in touch with your scientific peers,” Petras says. “For every 10 placements I make, about one-third come from LinkedIn—that’s a huge number.”

Austin, who is about as old-fashioned as they come yet admittedly spends most of his life online (including a Twitter stream), continues to hear how the Internet and social media will make the old ways of recruiting—and hence the old way of finding jobs—obsolete.

“I haven’t seen it yet,” Austin says. “Science itself is becoming more networked as connections between fields become more obviously important—as

science becomes more ecological, you might say. New communications tools can assist in the formation and maintenance of scientific relationships; for example, low-cost video conferencing strikes me as an important development because it enhances face time.”

In all its variations, networking pays off over the long term rather than the short term. Just because you have a job now, don’t stop networking.

“People tend to think about networking when they need something,” Alexander says. “Where possible, do the opposite. It is much easier to build relationships when you do not need anything. Therefore, make it a habit to continue to network and build your list of contacts whether you are employed or not.”

Dawn agrees that networking is extremely important. “Networking is a great tool and can often mean the difference between a dead-end

or mediocre job and the job of your dreams. It gives you an edge by giving you a leg up on the crowd; it gives you a name and then gets that name out on the playing field. It is not, however, a substitute for hard work and a strong work ethic. Be persistent, positive, creative, and passionate about networking, but above all be sincere and professional. Believe in yourself and your goals. When one of your networking tactics pays off and someone helps you out—no matter how small their effort—be grateful. Send a short, handwritten, sincere note of thank you (not an e-mail or a text). Believe me, in this digital age, that simple gesture will not be forgotten and may eventually help lead you to the very dream job you seek.”

Mark Crawford (mark.crawford@charter.net) is a freelance writer based in Madison, Wisconsin.

*Integrating
Development,
Evolution,
and Cognition*



Biological Theory

Werner Callebaut, Editor-in-Chief

Biological Theory is devoted to theoretical advances in the fields of evolution and cognition with an emphasis on the conceptual integration afforded by evolutionary and developmental approaches. The journal appeals to a wide audience of scientists, social scientists, and scholars from the humanities, particularly philosophers and historians of biology.

Published by the MIT Press and the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research.

MIT Press Journals ■ ■ ■ <http://mitpressjournals.org/biot>