The ABC’s of industry: a postdoc program provides a sneak peek into industry careers

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An innovative partnership allows local companies to educate postdocs about careers in industry.

Initially the MGPA hosted programs for postdocs covering topics from grant writing to mentor development programs. Seeking to leverage the full resources of the greater Boston-Cambridge area, one of us, MGPA co-chair A.O.A., conceived the Industry Exploration Program to establish a connection between MGH postdocs and the many R&D companies in the area. Local organizations such as the Massachusetts Biotechnology Education Foundation (MassBioEd; http://www.massbioed.org/) and the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council (MassBio) created many important programs for high school and college students, but had not yet delved into providing PhD level trainees with exposure to the culture and opportunities that exist in industry. When approached, Lance Hartford, executive director of MassBioEd, saw a great opportunity to work together to achieve the common goal of educating young PhD level scientists.

Creating the program

The objective was simple: create a program that provides opportunities for postdocs to learn about industry careers by visiting local companies and interacting with industry scientists. As part of the experience, postdocs...
We solicited postdoc applications in the fall, which were completed and submitted to AstraZeneca, New England Biolabs and EMD-Serono. Companies evaluated the applications and selected program participants based on interest and expertise. Once matched, we worked with the postdocs and companies to coordinate a single visit for each participating organization.

Site visits were planned at the sole discretion of the company and varied by location. Participants benefitted from a myriad of opportunities with industry scientists and associates during one-on-one meetings, site tours and panel discussions (Box 2).

Surveys distributed immediately after the site visits revealed that postdocs enjoyed these personal interactions with industry scientists and learning about the structure of the organization. In fact, 70% of participants indicated an increased level of interest in the company after their visit.

One participant, Ulysses Sallum, secured a collaboration with Barton Slatko, scientist at New England Biolabs, as a direct result of his participation in the Industry Exploration Program. "It was a coincidence of similar scientific interests that sparked a natural conversation," said Sallum. "The Industry Exploration Program gives participants an opportunity to see inside the black box of industry and allows participants to experience a broad range of philosophies and opportunities available within industry, which is too frequently considered a single alternative to academia."

The program has been well received by the research community and had one of the three award-winning posters at the 8th Annual National Postdoc Association Meeting in Philadelphia (http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/). Feedback from participating companies has also been positive. When asked, industry scientists indicated that they enjoyed the experience and said they wished the program had been available to them when they were making their transition from academia to industry.

With the help of MassBioEd the program will expand to include additional companies this fall to match the broad range of interests that are represented in the MGH postdoc community. These include additional pharmaceutical R&D companies as well as biomedical engineering, patent law firms and medical science liaisons. Ultimately, our goal is to bridge the gap between academia and industry, expanding the long-term benefit to both parties (Box 3). For example, at MGH, the relationships have extended beyond the Industry Exploration program to the Annual Postdoc Poster Day, which has been transformed into a Career Day. The session will include a career option panel featuring many representatives from our industry partners.

Time will tell how many participants of the industry exploration program will pursue careers outside academia, but their experience left all with a better understanding of how to answer the academia or industry question for themselves. Looking forward we can see programs like the one described here leading to many exciting scientific opportunities for academia and industry to work together on pressing issues, and creating more comprehensive programs that train postdocs for successful careers upon the completion of their training.

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