

What to expect at your biotech job interview

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An expert look at planning for a biotech job interview, from both sides.

Right now, one popular biotech job posting board in the San Francisco Bay Area is running 45% more postings than this same time last year. In addition, a recent Milken Institute report predicts that over the next decade, the number of people employed in the US biotech industry will increase by 32% (ref. 1). However, depending on your background and career aspirations, what may be surprising are some of the new kinds of biotech positions emerging. As more and more companies prepare to commercialize their products, they are strengthening and adding staff to product development, manufacturing, regulatory and quality assurance functions, as well as establishing sales and marketing capabilities². But whatever the position, here are some useful tips for those interviewing for a biotech position and for those interviewing candidates.

Do your homework

If you are interviewing for a job at a biotech company, learn everything you can about the company, its business strategy and its science and/or technology. Some of this information is on the company's web site. Remember that the interview is an opportunity for you and the company to get acquainted, and to explore to what extent there is a match between your professional skills and interests and the company's business needs. The more relaxed and prepared you can be during the interview process, the more essential information you will both give and get, the more engaged you will be in understanding the open position and its potential.

You can expect questions about the details of your technical know-how and your work

experience, including your problem-solving abilities and creativity. Expect to be asked about your level of mastery of laboratory techniques and equipment. Be prepared to explain any changes you have made moving from company to company. You will likely be asked what your career aspirations are. Make sure to seize any opportunity during the interview to highlight your achievements. Take the time to be clear and specific in your answers.

Remember that the interview is as much for you as for the company, so it is important to both answer questions asked of you and to ask questions as well. Some questions you may want to ask are: What attracts you (the interviewer) and others to working with the company? How are company and individual goals established? How is performance measured? How are decisions made and communicated? If the company is in the process of seeking Food and Drug Administration approval for one or more drugs, what are the prospects for getting Drug X to market and what might that mean for the company? What is the company's burn rate or cash position?

The match game

If you are interviewing candidates for a biotech position, be prepared to establish rapport, that is, help to put the candidate at ease with a little small talk. Make certain that you understand the position being filled. Review the candidate's resume before the interview begins. When possible, bring a list of questions to ask. For those candidates with no experience working in a company, you may want to ask them what ideas they have about what the candidate believes it would be like to work on a project team in a company.

Keep the interview simple by focusing on three things: (i) know-how, both technical and nontechnical that is essential to performing the job; (ii) bias to action, the motivation to operate with some or limited supervision;

(iii) interpersonal skills, defined as the ability to get and give information and share ideas collaboratively. In shorthand, *can-do*, *will-do* and *fit*. Remember *will-do* without *can-do* can be disastrous, *can-do* without the *will-do* is a recipe for frustration, *can-do* and *will-do* without *fit* will bring with it difficult challenges to effective teamwork. All three are essential success factors.

Use open-ended questions in probing the candidate's knowledge and experience, such as "Help me understand your experience with" If an answer is vague or incomplete, try "Please be more specific" or "Please say more about...." Be prepared to talk about things like company culture, project team and company decision-making processes and the company's hopes for the future. If you are the hiring manager, give the candidate some sense of the next steps in the hiring process and the timing for getting back to her or him.

Every hire counts

Finally, remember that the process doesn't end with establishing the start date for the successful candidate. In fact, the process begins on that start date. It is important to anticipate what each new employee will need from you and others in the company to be successful. If he or she is very outgoing and people oriented, you will want to ensure that he or she is appropriately focused and clear about the outcomes you expect.

Likewise, if he or she is very serious and focused, you will want to ensure that he or she establishes sufficient relationships with team members. Providing direct, accurate and regular performance feedback is an important leadership action that enhances both employees' contribution to the team and employees' job satisfaction.

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1. DeVol, R. *et al.* Biopharmaceutical industry contributions to state and US economics (<http://www.milkeninstitute.org/publications>)
2. Rafferty, M.A. *Nat. Biotechnol.* **22**, 1327 (2004).