

A Day in the Life of...A Scientist in Big Pharma

(10/21)

12:01

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:01 Melanie Sinche

Melanie Sinche:

Hello, and welcome to the 2nd installment of "A Day in the Life of..."
our series highlighting career options in science.

12:01

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:01 Melanie
Sinche

Melanie Sinche:

Today's chat will feature Dr. Philip Mayer, currently a Vice President with
the Pfizer Corporation.

12:02

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:02 Phil

Phil:

Only an Asst VP---but Melanie can
get me promoted!

12:03

Thursday October
21,
2010 12:03 Melanie
Sinche

Melanie Sinche:

Ha! Sorry about that Phil!

Dr. Mayer is in the unique position of being able to give us a broad
view of the pharmaceutical sciences landscape, as he serves as the
President-Elect of the American Association of Pharmaceutical
Scientists. Welcome, Dr. Mayer!

12:04

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:04 Phil

Phil:

tk, Melanie! Happy to provide
my perspective.

12:04

Melanie Sinche:

To our readers: Please feel free to submit questions at any time, and Dr. Mayer will answer them in the order in which they are received.

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:04 Melanie
Sinche

12:05

Melanie Sinche:

To kick us off, what can you say about the job market right now in general within big pharma for MS/PhD-level job candidates?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:05 Melanie Sinche

12:06

Phil:

I wish it were better-tough times in our industry. More jobs due to attrition than adding new staff. Most companies have been more downsizing than adding new staff, but still opportunities exist in specialized areas.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:06 Phil

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[Comment From patrick :]

What are the qualifications of an average entry level position for Pfizer?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:06 patrick

12:08

Phil:

Very hard to get in without a PhD and need scientific skills such that you are valuable from day 1. Postdoc helps, but if relevant to needs.

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:08 Phil

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Melanie Sinche:

And what are some of those particular needs, Dr. Mayer?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:09 Melanie Sinche

12:10

Thursday
October 21,

2010 12:10 Phil

Phil:

Much more effort now into proteins. Not just the biotech industry, but big pharma has invested lots into monoclonals, vaccines. We now target mechanisms much more specifically, for a disease which may be an enzyme, receptor antagonist.

12:11

Thursday October
21, 2010 12:11 Guest

[Comment From Guest :]

Hi Dr. Mayer, could you please describe how job availability and day-to-day work varies from big pharma (like Pfizer) vs. smaller start-up companies?

12:12

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:12 Phi
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Phil:

Probably more jobs available in smaller and mid-size companies. Big pharma does more outsourcing of discovery efforts. Your job in a smaller company is very good training as it would go across research areas. And you're not caught up in the bureaucracy in a smaller comp either.

12:13

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:13 patric
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[Comment From patrick :]

I have a question about level of jobs: Teva Biopharm recently posted an opening looking for 1-2 yrs ELISA and culture experience to develop drug assays. That doesn't seem quite PhD level. Can you say anything about how that compares to bench positions at Pfizer?

12:15

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:15 Phi
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Phil:

A posting should tell you what educ. level is needed. For a routine lab job, processing samples, you shouldn't need a PhD. But to give broader scientific perspective and project experience, a PhD would be better. A PhD shouldn't be doing more than 1/3 lab work, in my opinion.

12:15

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:15 Guest

[Comment From Guest :]

Dr. Mayer, What about applying through the

web? Is it worth it at all?

12:17

Phil:

That's about the only way to get in anymore. I have forwarded CVs to friends, but usually making that contact is difficult. The HR folks all say to apply via the web, but for a specific job posting and it will get into the hiring mgrs hands.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:17 Phil

12:18

[Comment From Liana :]

Is the research you are allowed to do in big pharma strictly regimented? Or is there a good deal of intellectual freedom?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:18 Liana

12:20

Phil:

I'd say the work is intellectually challenging, but it is directed toward the research areas----products, profits--that the company wants. You still are the problem solver, and some is quite basic research, but it is in the area the company wants.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:20 Phil

12:29

[Comment From Guest :]

I've heard from a few people that there is actually a better market for Master's applicants than for PhD ones in pharma, as PhDs tend to want more money and more independent projects... comments?

Thursday October
21,
2010 12:29 Guest

12:31

Phil:

Maybe more positions for BS/MS, don't know for sure. There is still a lot of work to do, and many of these jobs will be technician level. Maybe even due to economy and PhD salary. But there are very different responsibilities for both and both are needed.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:31 Phil

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[Comment From Guest :]

Since big pharma does more outsourcing of discovery effort, as a PhD how can we prepare ourselves to be competitive in the job

Thursday October
21, 2010 12:31 Guest

market at big pharma?

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Phil:

I think the best path may now be to get the drug discovery training in a smaller company. Very hard for chemist/p'cology to be hired without direct experience. Even in academia, there are good places to do drug discovery on a smaller scale.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:33 Phil

12:34

[Comment From Guest :]

What are the most important factors when you consider hiring a PhD-level scientist?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:34 Guest

12:36

Phil:

At entry level, being a good problem solver, being trained in a well-respected lab. A few publications. Working with a team, with deadlines. Good communication skills.

Thursday October
21,
2010 12:36 Phil

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[Comment From Elizabeth :]

Aa leader in a large pharmaceutical company, what do you think you can do, or what do you do, to address the issue of bias in research at Pfizer? Is this an issue that you face often?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:36 Elizabeth

12:38

Phil:

I don't think there is much true bias. Certainly not all is black/white, but I think science still is rigorous in industry. What you do see is people are champions for their research area or project--someone has to be skeptical and let the good drugs become obvious.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:38 Phil

12:38

[Comment From w:]

Hi Dr. Mayer. Are there many people with MD/PhD degrees in pharma, and what kind of positions/roles/responsibilities are associated with MD/PhDs? Thanks

Thursday October
21, 2010 12:38 w

12:40

Phil:

Quite a few MD/PhDs. You would have to decide which is the primary focus--if more PhD, then work in early development with p'col targets and first clinical studies. If more an MD direction, then stay in later, more clinical development in patients.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:40 Phil

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[Comment From Hana :]

You mentioned that big pharma outsources a lot of discovery. How do you choose which areas to pursue and which to leave to the smaller, contracted researchers?

Thursday October
21,
2010 12:41 Hana

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Phil:

I think the "outsourcing" is a little different. We probably wouldn't tell a company to focus on cardiovasc. res. for example, but find the company that is doing that work and purchase their compounds and/or company. we have a lg group of people just looking at business development opportunities.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:43 Ph
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[Comment From Jeremy :]

From where does the funding for the research done in industry usually come? Has that ever biased how the research is done?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:43 Jeremy

12:45

Phil:

Funding really comes from sales of existing products, at least in big pharma. so we want our drugs to be big sellers--for the companies future, but certainly also for the patients that need them. We do focus on areas of higher medical need, but where we think we can get to market sooner or be better than competition.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:45 Ph
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[Comment From Brian :]

Could you please comment on how the necessity of keeping trade secrets and intellectual property rights play into the entire

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:45 Brian

research experience?

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Phil:

Certainly in discovery, we do not publish until our patents have issued. but after that, I find more companies are happy for you to publish. In fact, I'd say most people have more data than they have time to write up. And I've never seen a company refuse to publish something valuable.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:47 Phi
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[Comment From Carrie :]

Are there many opportunities at a big pharma company such as Pfizer for PharmD/MBA or other dual PharmD candidates?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:48 Carrie

12:49

Phil:

I've had PharmDs work for me in clinical pharmacology. They are also routinely hired into clinical supplies, or more likely labeling.

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:49 Phil

12:49

[Comment From Guest :]

I've heard from some people that working in pharma gives you more flexibility and a better work-life balance than doing basic research in, say, an academic setting. What do you think?

Thursday October
21,
2010 12:49 Guest

12:52

Phil:

The working world expects a lot of you now, regardless of the position. I work late and weekends, just like most people. I did the same in my time in academia. We're all deadline driven, from projects to your April 15 tax date. Having a supportive boss helps, and I encourage staff to have a life--I certainly want to, but I want them to give me everything when we have a crunch too.

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October 21,
2010 12:52 P
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[Comment From Brian :]

The NIH's mission statement is to: "enhance health, lengthen life, and

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October 21,
2010 12:52 Bria
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reduce the burdens of illness and disability." While decisions in industry are often driven by profit, could you please tell us the common ground you see in the NIH's mission and Pfizer's business strategy?

12:55

Phil:

I have hired 2 MDs from NIH, who were wonderful clinicians and basic scientists, so they stayed in early development. I think they both fit in here very well and saw the same objectives. Maybe NIH is more basic research, but it is high quality---maybe just takes a larger company to run the larger clinical trials to test your research hypotheses.

Thursday
October 21,
2010 12:55 P
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12:55

[Comment From Grant :]

What's the industry's take on the place of genomics and other 'omics' in target discovery and other parts of the drug discovery pipeline?

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:55 Grant

12:57

Phil:

We want to do more of this, absolutely. I think we struggle with the volume, processes, etc. We pull samples all the time to assess metabolism for genetic differences, but haven't moved as effectively into the efficacy/safety side. But every company wants to do more of this, just hurdles.

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October 21,
2010 12:57 Phi
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Melanie Sinche:

We'll take just one more question and then wrap up today's conversation.

Thursday October 21,
2010 12:58 Melanie Sinche

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[Comment From Guest :]

You mentioned earlier there are a group of people in big pharma looking at business development opportunities. What's the position title for this kind of work and what criteria are needed to be qualified for this work? What degree(s) is required?

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October 21,
2010 12:58 Gues
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Thursday

Phil:

October 21,
2010 1:01 P
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Usually a dept of "Business Development," maybe director level as you couldn't hire directly into this kind of spot. Let me describe a friend in this group--a PhD with 15 years of experience running a p'col. lab in industry. He had looked at many licensing opportunities probably every year and finally decided he liked that end of the business more than the lab. It is more patents, etc, but understanding what unique cmpds another company has.

1:03

Melanie Sinche:

Thursday October 21,
2010 1:03 Melanie
Sinche

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Mayer for sharing his insights on big pharma with us today. Thank you!

Also, Dr. Mayer has graciously agreed to take any unanswered questions offline. Please send them to me directly, and I will forward a list on to Dr. Mayer:msinche@gmail.com.

1:04

Phil:

Thursday October 21,
2010 1:04 Phil

I enjoyed this--very good questions that made me think!

1:05

Melanie Sinche:

Take care, Dr. Mayer and today's readers, and stay tuned for our next LIVE chat on "A Day in the Life of..." which takes place on Nov. 18th at 12noon!