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Hiring Slows in Biotech

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This year's biotech career fair at the University of California, San Francisco saw the smallest turnout of potential employers ever, according to Bill Lindstaedt, director of the university's office of career and professional development.

Five firms sent recruiters. Last year eight companies came, but in a normal year—UCSF's had the fair for 12 years – 20 or more life sciences employers came to UCSF to woo some of the nation's top researchers.

The cutbacks at the fair reflect a regional slowdown in Biotech hiring, according to numbers from the Bay Area's biotech trade organization, BayBio. The recession and a series of mergers, sell-offs, and drug failures are to blame, according to industry sources. Some 130,000 professionals work in biotech in Northern California – a significant chunk of the industry nationally - and while the region is still adding jobs at the rate of 2,000 a year, it's no longer growing at the 6,000 a year pace it experienced from 2002 to 2008, according to Travis Blaschek-Miller, the spokesman for BayBio.

While Mission Bay hiring runs at a quick and slower pace depending on new buildings going up, (See SideBar) others are suffering. In South San Francisco, home to bigger companies with more problems, hundreds of professionals, mostly scientists, have been laid off in the last two years.

How bad is it?

No one seems to be able to say how much harder it is in today's job-poor economic climate for young scientists – or old ones – to find work in the industry.

“We have no concrete data on this question. It's everyone's impression, however, that jobs are harder to come by,” wrote Mark Schlissel, the Dean of Biological Sciences at UC Berkeley, in an email to Mission Loc@l.

“For example, Genentech used to hire people with BAs and masters degrees to serve as senior technicians in their various research. Now, it's sought after by PhDs and post-docs,” he wrote.

“I can unequivocally say it's more difficult for doctorates,” said Sahar Azarabadi, director of sales for BioSpace, an information portal for biotech and pharma industry that hosts a popular job board.

Azarabadi said that jobs have stagnated or even contracted in Northern California. The Biospace job board currently lists around 4,500 jobs nationally. Normally it has around 7,000 jobs, according to Azarabadi.

She pointed to mergers nationally like Pfizer Inc. with Wyeth in October – and workforce reductions at Roche, Oscient Pharmaceutical Corp., Exilexis, Dynamix Pharmaceuticals, and Elan. “Part of this is compounded by the market,” she said.

Azarabadi said it's always been hard for academics to get jobs in industry. Postdocs will have trouble during a normal year, she said. “They're really considered entry level,” she said. “Now, it's become more difficult because there are more people with industry experience” competing in the market.

In March, South San Francisco-based Exilexis laid off 270 employees, about 40 percent of its workforce. One of them was Jason Grillo, who worked in strategic marketing for Exilexis since 2007.

“I'm more concerned than I was three years ago,” Grillo said. He's in his 30s and has an MBA from Duke University. He's not panicked yet, but he said that he's open to working in another field, maybe energy, if it's necessary. “I am looking at other sectors, I'm casting my net as wide as I can.”

Recent Grads Find Fewer Opportunities

“I would say I was looking for a job consistently throughout senior year,” said recent life sciences grad Melissa Schirmer. “There was no one hiring anyone without years of experience.”

Schirmer, 23, has an undergraduate degree and a master's in science management and engineering, both from Stanford University. After graduating, she spent three months

looking for a job full time, including attending job fairs and sending out her resume over and over again.

“You’re definitely doubting yourself walking through the door,” Schirmer said about the experience of going to so many job interviews. More experience is supposed to increase your confidence, but the rejection starts to unsettle a candidate, even someone as capable as Schirmer.

She looked everywhere, in multiple fields. “That is draining,” she said. “You’re fitting so many different molds, and you’ve written so many cover letters, it’s sort of like, who am I anymore?”

Her ideal job would have been organizing a clinical trial, but she settled for a lab manager position at UCSF, a job she accepted without knowing the salary in advance. Recent numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that 4.9 percent of Americans 25 and over who have a college degree are unemployed. It’s almost 7 percent for college graduates 24 and under.

Tracking Invisible Unemployment

Jobs listings aren’t the only way life scientists find jobs, and science unemployment and hiring often occurs under the radar.

Some PhD students and postdoctoral researchers who’d otherwise leave academia for industry may be lingering a little longer than expected, waiting the downturn out. Others turn to networking to find their jobs.

Noah Helman, 33, found a job at a synthetic biology event last year, when he was a postdoctoral researcher at UCSF.

“I met the head of R&D at LS9 at an event, started a conversation, and that led to an interview and an offer,” Helman wrote in an email. “I didn’t send out any resumes at all.”