

Recruiter Rapport

About eight years ago, Josh Albert, managing director of the life sciences recruiting firm Klein Hersh International, started phoning Jason Newcom to ask whether he was ready to make a job change.

At that point, the Ph.D. medicinal chemist turned Albert away, explaining that he was happily employed as a senior research scientist at Bayer HealthCare in West Haven, Conn., where he was managing a medicinal chemistry lab supporting oncology discovery research. But as Albert made periodic follow-up calls to Newcom, they forged a professional relationship that would later pay off.

Newcom's employment odyssey began when Bayer closed its West Haven site in 2007. At that point, Newcom moved to emerging biotech Cara Therapeutics. But the financial crisis struck Cara hard, and the company began closing down its research facilities, so Newcom was forced to move on. In 2009, he enlisted Albert's help to find a new job. The search was successful, and Newcom became a research scientist and project leader at Cambridge, Mass.-based biopharmaceutical company Galenea.



Then, late last year, Galenea "began to transition the focus of its research, and it wasn't clear how I was going to fit in," Newcom says. He decided to be proactive and once again enlisted Albert's help. In May, Albert placed him at Sunovion Pharmaceuticals, where Newcom is enjoying his role as associate director of medicinal chemistry, leading a project focused on central nervous system (CNS) disorders.

Primarily by building a rapport with Albert, Newcom has been able to successfully navigate through the rough seas of a turbulent job market. In particular, he benefited from Albert's knowledge of the medicinal chemistry marketplace and his sizable database of professional and personal information for thousands of contacts. "He really knows his candidates and his clients and thus can match them up exceptionally well. At both Galenea and now at Sunovion, the chemistry was perfect," Newcom says.

Focused on a specific field or area of expertise, headhunters have the potential to provide a wealth of benefits and services, including job search advice and access to positions a candidate might not otherwise find or consider. In addition, they often coach a candidate through the interview process and handle salary negotiations with prospective employers.

To tap into these benefits, however, candidates need to know how to success-

fully start and nurture relationships with headhunters, who are ultimately working to serve their employer clients rather than the job seeker. "Client companies pay recruiters to find them top talent for their open positions," says Kerry Boehner, an executive recruiter at KOB Solutions, a recruiting firm focused on the pharma and biotech industries. "We don't sign a contract with the candidates, and they don't owe us anything."

Working with a headhunter may be more critical than ever as chemists, chemical engineers, and other scientists are forced to make more frequent job changes in the midst of a recovering, but still challenging, job market.

The overall employment climate in the pharma and biotech industries has improved over the past year, Boehner observes. "The job market for medicinal chemists will never go back to the way it was, but I think it is rebounding slightly," she says. However, demand has firmed up only in limited areas. "Clinical positions and positions focused on the development of biological therapeutics are opening up, and disease areas such as oncology are hot, but some CNS and metabolic disease research jobs are being cut," she says. In addition, "many of the open positions are available only to people with very specific skills."

From his vantage point, Patrick B. Ropella, chief executive officer of the executive search firm Ropella Group, has seen a definite overall improvement in the job market over the past 18 months, although hiring plans have lost some of their momentum over the past six months. Ropella's client companies, which are in the chemical, pharma, and allied industries, started 2011 by hiring employees to build out new plants, start divisions, or launch new product lines. But "we are seeing much less of that right now," he says. "Some companies are implementing hiring freezes." For others, "we are back to filling replacement po-



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sitions." Ropella, however, believes that the slowdown is a "temporary trend" driven by companies' frustration with the U.S. political climate and questions about how the results of the 2012 election will impact business.

To help them manage their careers in the less than favorable employment climate, chemists and other scientists can sometimes benefit from reaching out to one or more recruiters to establish relationships and get into their databases—whether they are currently looking for a job or not. Having made that connection, recruiters will already be familiar with a person's skills, qualifications, and career aspirations, making them better equipped to possibly place that individual in a future job, Ropella says.

Although freshly minted graduates and those with only a few years of industry experience "are not the most likely" to be placed by recruiters—especially those who are retained by companies to find experienced candidates—they can still seek out and connect with recruiters, Albert says. "You never know where that relationship will lead—if not today, it could pay off in the future."

When contacting recruiting firms, it is important for a prospective candidate to pinpoint those that specialize in the scientist's area of expertise or targeted field of employment, such as medicinal chemistry, agricultural chemistry, or water treatment, Ropella says. One resource for finding the right firm is "The Directory of Executive & Professional Recruiters." Known as the "Red Book," it provides contact details for recruiters and is available in print or online. Job seekers can also conduct Internet searches or go to websites that list recruiters by their area of expertise, Ropella notes.

Successful recruiters must remain tightly connected to particular business areas to be able to deliver the candidates their clients want, "which are people from competitor companies or experts who can hit the ground running from their first day on the job," Ropella says. As a result, recruiters can provide information about the best job openings long before they become publicly available, he adds. "That puts us in a powerful position to place candidates into just the right role."

With their expansive view over many companies and openings, headhunters can also come up with a broad range of job opportunities for which their candidates might qualify. "Recruiters helped me in my previous job search by expanding my field of interest from pharmaceuticals to personal care," says James Grant, a technical screening chemist for personal care products at AkzoNobel Surface Chemistry in Bridgewater, N.J.

"Initially, I was hesitant to go into the personal care field, because it was too far removed from what I had studied in college," Grant says. However, right after graduation, recruiters placed him in the personal care industry as a temporary employee at Johnson & Johnson. Less than two years later, a Ropella recruiter contacted him, "noticed my background and growing desire to learn more about the personal care industry, and pointed me to the position at AkzoNobel."

In addition to finding job opportunities tailored to a specific candidate, recruiters often can provide a direct link to those making hiring decisions inside companies, says Andrew Cook. He just found a job as a principal scientist at Constellation Pharmaceuticals in Boston after working with Marc Miller, a recruiter at Klein Hersh International. Miller's connections made "a massive difference, as the biggest hurdle to landing a job is getting the recruiting manager to look at your curriculum vitae and consider your profile," says Cook, a medicinal chemist who had worked at Pfizer's Sandwich, England, research hub before the company announced plans to phase out the site (C&EN, Feb. 7, page 5).

Sunovion's Newcom has enjoyed the same benefit. "In my last two job searches, hiring managers at two different companies told me that they would not have evaluated me given what they saw on my résumé, because they were looking for a different kind of candidate. However, based strictly on the recommendation of my recruiter, they decided to bring me in and eventually extend a job offer."

After helping a candidate get his or her

foot in a client's door, recruiters can also coach that person so that he or she is prepared for the rigors of the interview process. "The best recruiters can give you a lot of information about a particular job opening, the hiring manager, and the company before the initial phone interview," says Bruce Wilburn, a Ph.D. organic chemist. He is working with recruiters to find a job for the fourth time in his 25-year career in the lubricants industry. In the past, he has also benefited from getting "a great deal of valuable postinterview feedback from recruiters about what the hiring manager is thinking."

Intimate knowledge of a client's inner workings also allows headhunters to help in negotiating salary and benefits, observes Newcom. "Knowing both what you want and what the company can offer in terms of a compensation plan, recruiters are often well positioned to mediate a deal," he observes. "Those kinds of negotiations can be scary, especially given the current economic climate. You don't want to ask for a base salary that a company might consider unreasonable, for example, and thereby eliminate yourself as a possible candidate."

Although recruiters can provide a great deal of assistance, they cannot do everything required for a successful job search. Before approaching a recruiter, candidates should have written a good résumé that highlights and quantifies the value the candidates brought to a former employer through their accomplishments, says Ronald McElhaney Jr., managing partner of Management Recruiters of Savannah, which focuses on the specialty chemicals job market. They should have also combed through their own network of contacts and explored opportunities through social media outlets such as LinkedIn. In addition, when meeting with a recruiter, "candidates have to be able to clearly lay out what they want to accomplish in their career, what job responsibilities they are willing to take on, and what they require in terms of compensation," he says.

McElhaney also strongly encourages candidates to explore whether relocating is a viable option in their job search. In the midst of what he describes as a "very robust" specialty chemicals job market, he has recently placed several

candidates, each of whom had to turn down job offers after they learned that they would lose too much money on the sale of their home if they were to sell it and relocate.

Candidates “have to be very candid and very committed to their goals because they become my marching orders,” he says. “If that individual changes his or her mind when an offer is on the table, then we have all wasted a lot of time going nowhere. So it is important for candidates to have a game plan and stick with it.”

In addition, candidates need to be honest in communicating their salary and bonus numbers, their strengths and weaknesses, and their skills and experience to recruiters so that they can place them into positions for which they are ideally suited, says Ropella.

When working with Miller to prepare for a possible interview at Constellation, for example, Cook highlighted his epigenetics experience, which was relevant to the open position. At the same time, he acknowledged that he had no experience working in a small, focused drug discovery firm, having spent his entire career in a large multinational company. Laying all credentials on the table is important as “you have to be able to trust recruiters to act on your behalf and represent you in the best light without over- or underselling your abilities,” Cook says.

As they develop trusting relationships with recruiters, candidates should ask to be informed of any work the recruiter is doing on their behalf. “Be sure that your recruiter is not submitting your résumé to companies without your approval,” Ropella warns. “You want to be sure that you are not being recommended to companies that might be staffed by people you don’t want to be privy to your job search, for example,” he says.

At the same time, candidates need to be sure that their résumé is not being submitted for positions they were already working on with another recruiter, Ropella says. He advises candidates to keep a dated and detailed log of conversations with recruiters so

they can keep track of which recruiter first introduced them to a particular job opening.

With the help of well-connected recruiters, some chemists are finding lucrative jobs right now. “Strong medicinal chemists, for example, are getting multiple offers from multiple companies,” says Albert. “If you are an innovative, out-of-the-box thinker and a serious drug hunter, there are opportunities to be had.”

However, despite having the best recruiter connections, some candidates will not be placed in a job. “With the chemistry marketplace the way it is today, there are a lot of unemployed chemists who are just not going to get jobs because they are not relevant in today’s market,” Albert says. “Some have been out of the lab too long, some were marginal performers in past positions, and others just don’t have their hearts in the field.”

Boehner concurs, adding that many chemists have worked at big companies, gaining experience that is too narrow to allow them to be qualified for many open positions. “Today, companies want to hire people to do a job that two or three people used to do.”

Boehner has advised many laid-off medicinal chemists to think about any relevant experience—such as project management or managing teams or working on clinical development—that they can use to sell themselves to a prospective employer. “Today, we all have to be our own marketing machines,” she says.

Boehner counsels scientists who are currently employed to act defensively by working “to ensure that they are gaining in skills and thinking about how they can solve critical problems in their organizations.”

In a market where people often now get to stay in a job only two or three years rather than for a decade or two, scientists need to be able to “show how they have made an impact at a company and track those accomplishments,” Boehner adds. “It’s important to stay ahead of the game, always working as

if you might get that pink slip tomorrow,” she says. “The people who take responsibility for their own future are the ones who are going to be successful and survive going forward.”