

Gradline aims to inform and entertain members in the early stages of their career in microbiology. If you have any news or stories, or would like to see any topics featured, contact **Jane Westwell** (email j.westwell@sgm.ac.uk)

Life science commercialization



If you are coming to the end of your PhD and are interested in business then you might want to consider working in the booming area of life science commercialization.

The government has recently been encouraging the transfer of knowledge and technology from the academic to the commercial sector. Universities have received funding to build-up teams of staff to promote knowledge transfer activities. Many institutions have developed existing research support or business development offices, but some universities and the MRC have created technology transfer companies to commercialize their research (e.g. Manchester, Imperial, Cambridge and Oxford). Within this sector are a number of roles open to life science PhDs.

Research support – gathering and disseminating information on potential sources of funding to academics. Staff may be science specialists or perhaps focus on funding from Europe.

Research development – helping academics attract new sources of external research funding. Once this has been identified, a research development officer might help to draft applications and draw up contracts.

Business development/commercial services – creating links with businesses and other organizations; developing local networks of universities, biotechnology companies, etc.

Technology transfer – liaising with scientists who have a commercially valuable idea, assessing its potential and, if necessary, managing the patent process.

Some of the roles overlap and job titles may vary. However, looking at relevant web pages will give you an idea of the scope of these positions.

A career in technology transfer is by no means restricted to working in the UK, as Canada-based SGM member Alain Richard explains opposite.

A job in ...

Name Alain Richard

Age 39

Present occupation

Director of Commercialization, Life Sciences, Valeo Management, L.P., Montréal, Québec, Canada

Previous employment

Technical support management – Genomics One Corporation, Laval, Québec, Canada (2000–2002); Quantum Biotechnologies, Montréal, Québec, Canada (1996–2000); Postdoctoral researcher – Laval University, Québec, Canada (1995–1996)

Education

Laval University: PhD Microbiology and Immunology (1995); MSc Microbiology and Immunology (1990); BSc Microbiology (1988)

Q What does your company do?

Valeo Management is a limited partnership that commercializes technologies from four Québec universities. We concentrate on promoting ideas with a solid business case that meet important industry needs. Most of the company's current activities involve technology transfer under licence and we work in close collaboration with the research bureau from each university. Income is given back to the universities and the inventors. Valeo Management has also helped to create spin-off companies, including two in biotech-pharma.

Q Why is this important?

We ensure sustainability in development and commercialization of university research and the spread of promising discoveries into society via business. We also set up and fund proof-of-concept experiments that greatly increase the value of a technology. Without these

Technology Transfer



experiments, potential licensees often do not consider the technology, rendering its commercialization difficult.

Q What prompted you to leave research?

During my graduate studies, I quickly realized that I enjoyed giving seminars. I also wanted to be in contact with other people, communicating and presenting technologies, which I preferred to working at the bench.

Q How did you find the transition from university-based research to the commercial sector?

I actually found it smoother than I had expected. Maybe this was because I began in a start-up company where everyone had to multi-task – we were all in the same boat! I did find, in the private sector, there is a greater emphasis on complying with deadlines to meet market needs ('time-to-market' concept).

Q What skills from your research career were applicable to working in technical support management?

My clients were scientists working in private or public labs, so the years I spent in the lab prepared me adequately to understand their needs; resulting in an efficient service.

Q What new challenges did your current post bring?

The main challenge has been to develop my business flair and not to spend too much time evaluating the commercial potential of a technology. The dynamics of business are not based on crystal-clear facts but on taking risks and using instinct. Another challenge has been finding ways to tell some scientists that their research cannot be commercialized for reasons such as intellectual property issues, production costs, competitors, lack of a market, etc.

Q What advice can you offer to others thinking of a career in life science commercialization?

I would recommend technology transfer, which is undergoing a very exciting and rapid evolution. Technology transfer and commercialization of research are by essence multi-disciplinary and the variety offered by a degree in microbiology is definitely an excellent preparation for this career path. Also, many projects involve microbial processes, such as protein production. I believe that an MSc or PhD degree in a relevant field can be an asset, helping in the interaction with the scientists who feed the technology pipeline.

Further information

Office of Science and Technology – www.ost.gov.uk/enterprise/index.htm

UK Science and Technology – www.uksciencetech.com

Valeo Management LP – www.valeosec.com/index.html

Valorisation-Recherche Québec (VRQ) (in French) – www.vrq.qc.ca

Licensing Executives Society (USA and Canada) – www.usa-canada.les.org

Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM) – www.autm.net

Taking UK science to Parliament

Monday, 14 March 2005

Britain's top younger researchers visited the House of Commons to present their work recently. Over 540 applications were received from scientists, engineers and technologists for the 270 places at this annual event which aims to showcase UK research and R&D in National Science Week. Both poster judges and visiting MPs commented on the wide range of work displayed and the very high quality of the presentations and the enthusiasm of the presenters.

Sponsoring MP Dr Brian Iddon commented that these unique events brought real UK science and younger researchers to Parliament and were a central feature of the Parliamentary 'science' year and much appreciated by members, peers and others. About 70 MPs called in to visit the posters.

The traditional lunchtime reception, now in its seventh year, covered all areas of SET. Congratulations to SGM member, Dr Clare Lanyon, a postdoctoral research associate in the School of Biology, Newcastle upon Tyne University, who won a £250 commendation for her poster presentation in this session. It was entitled *Does the immune system play a role in the community structure of commensal micro-flora and associated chemosensory individuality?*

An innovation was an evening reception focusing on Biosciences, sponsored by relevant organizations including the Biosciences Federation. It is hoped to hold this every year from now on.