

Staffing for Today

Workforce trends point to a growing demand for professional staffing services.

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The latest advances in technology and science have created a rising demand for qualified science professionals. In this economy, where many companies may still be hesitant to hire, professional staffing agencies are moving forward to meet the increasing need for temporary-to-permanent professional candidates.

According to the American Staffing Association (ASA), more than 90% of U.S. companies currently use contract help. And with the average daily employment for temporary help services having increased at an average rate of 10% in the past 7 years, it's estimated that 2 million people a day are now employed by staffing companies.

Providing further proof of its viability, the staffing industry generated more than \$62 billion in revenue in 2003, with the fastest growth occurring in professional and technical occupations, as more and more people are drawn to the flexibility and independence of contract work.

With many companies continuing to turn to staffing organizations to meet their hiring needs, developing an understanding of how this symbiotic relationship benefits both the hiring organization and the science professional is essential. For many contract employees—74% according to the ASA—contract work is a valid method of securing permanent employment, to “get a foot in the door.” Moreover, 45% say they are attracted to contract employment for the entrepreneurial spirit of the lifestyle as well as the opportunity to work on challenging assignments.

“Working with a staffing agency helped me get started in my career,” says Tara Wilhelm, a recent graduate who was placed

in a contract laboratory position at a leading pharmaceutical company through On Assignment Lab Support, a life sciences staffing service provider based in Calabasas, CA. “With a staffing agency backing me up, I was able to finally break into the industry, which I wasn't able to do on my



own. My staffing consultant helped guide me into the right position based on what I was looking for in a career. I also received career guidance and support that I would not have received otherwise; and after an initial start-up period, the benefits of health insurance, vacation pay, and bonus packages.”

Many companies, including those in the biotechnology, pharmaceutical, food and beverage, and engineering fields, find that using contract employees is a valuable way to test candidates for their skills and suitability before advancing permanent job offers. Developing a long-term partnership with a professional staffing organization can also save valuable time and wasted resources when struggling to meet expected and unexpected staffing challenges. A first-rate staffing agency can even help its clients anticipate and meet future staffing needs by proactively

marketing viable candidates to them throughout the year.

Choosing a Partner

The key to making the partnership a working success is an understanding of the process.

“As a hiring organization looking to work with a staffing agency for the first time, be sure that the consultant working on your behalf has the relevant background experience and is qualified to guide your recruitment decisions,” advises Lynn Bierling, regional director of On Assignment Lab Support. “Particularly in the professional life science areas, it's imperative that staffing consultants have experience in the fields they serve so that they can offer a firsthand understanding of their client's needs. A reputable

staffing consultant should not only meet with each candidate personally but also be able to discuss the intricacies of the assignment in detail—scientist to scientist. In addition to reviewing skill assessment tests, when consultants meet with candidates, they will often discuss the latest lab equipment, research techniques, and recent developments in the field.” Bierling goes on to say, “The goal is to ensure that the candidate has not only completed the necessary training listed on his or her résumé, but that they have developed a true comprehension of the material. Equally important, a staffing consultant should have a good understanding of their client's expectations for the position, including present and future training requirements, necessary skills and certifications, and corporate culture, to ensure that a candidate is a good fit.”

An agency's roster typically includes a wide variety of available candidates, from

Industry Association Resources

Additional information on employment counseling and workforce trends in the chemical and life science industries can be found at these websites:

American Chemical Society, Washington, DC, www.chemistry.org. The American Chemical Society provides a full range of professional and career services to its members.

American Staffing Association, Alexandria, VA, www.staffingtoday.net. The American Staffing Association is the voice of the staffing industry.

Association for Women in Science, Washington, DC, www.awis.org. The Association for Women in Science is a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote women's activities in all scientific fields, from mentoring to scholarships to job listings.

Institute of Food Technologists, Chicago, www.ift.org. The Institute of Food Technologists is an international nonprofit organization that offers resources on education, professional advancement, and employment.

On Assignment Lab Support, Calabasas, CA, www.onassignment.com. On Assignment Lab Support is a provider of staffing assignments for science professionals in the biotech, pharmaceutical, food and beverage, chemical, personal care, and science industries.

nondegreed applicants to those with doctoral degrees, and from new entrants in the science field to seasoned workers with more than 30 years of experience. As a service to its clients, a staffing agency will tailor candidate interviews according to specific job requirements and necessary skills, and offer training opportunities, such as accident-prevention programs, to ensure candidates' skills remain marketable. One example is On Assignment's OSHA-compliant Safety Ready program, a proprietary effort that works with a company's current safety-training program to ensure a safe workplace. The comprehensive offering includes thorough training on accident prevention and general safety awareness, instruction on proper procedure standards to identify and prevent potential hazards, technical educa-

tion on potentially hazardous materials, guidance on procedural steps in the event of an emergency or risk situation, and wallet-sized carrying cards outlining emergency contact information and on-site laboratory safety reviews. The Safety Ready program is supplemented with assignment-specific training topics, including laboratory safety, hazardous communications plans, injury and illness prevention, chemical hygiene, and bloodborne pathogens.

Many recently graduated science candidates entering the job market for the first time with associate to postdoctorate degrees haven't received the benefit of career guidance. To ease the transition from an academic to a working environment, staffing agencies assist candidates by offering services such as résumé development, briefings on interview skills, and training on Good Manufacturing Practices guidelines.

"We have found that many students, particularly those in the science fields, are unaware of all the different industrial paths their academic degree can take them on," adds Bierling. "There's a real need for increased awareness of all the possibilities within the scientific community. Our staffing consultants are reaching out to many of the leading universities, from Stanford to Rutgers, to lecture students on the basic skills such as how to handle a successful job interview and develop a compelling résumé. It's become an extremely popular outreach program, and the students we meet with have been extremely grateful to receive the information, which is specifically tailored to them as scientists."

"When I first graduated from school, I sent out a lot of résumés, but no one responded," noted Wilhelm. "The companies I talked to said they were looking for someone with experience. Once I signed up with On Assignment Lab Support, I was working shortly thereafter because I had someone on the inside vouching for me and backing me up. And now, I'm finally gaining the experience I need to develop my career."

Expanding Career Options

Scientists uncertain of their career path also find that contract employment offers a "no risk" way to experience different work environments—a corporate versus

an entrepreneurial-driven company, for example. Working with a staffing agency is also an appealing avenue for seasoned specialists who are curious about changing industries and want to expand their careers, such as a biologist with a background in the pharmaceutical field who is curious about opportunities in the food and beverage industry.

Career Resources

The Riley Guide, www.rileyguide.com. The Riley Guide is an online directory of employment and career information resources and services on the Internet.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington, DC, www.bls.gov/home.htm. The BLS is an independent federal statistical agency that collects, processes, analyzes, and disseminates essential statistical data to the American public, the U.S. Congress, other federal agencies, state and local governments, business, and labor.

Whatever the objective, candidates should be prepared to candidly discuss with their staffing consultant their short- and long-term career goals, as well as strengths and weaknesses, in order to ensure they are guided in the right position. Staffing consultants agree that open communication with the candidate is necessary to establish a correct baseline for the job search and that "soft skills," such as personality and work style, are just as important as technical skills. Experienced staffing consultants know that their client's preferred employee personality type is just as important as their certification and skill set needs.

"As an example, someone who enjoys working in a group environment, at a quick pace, and wants to see results would thrive in a quality control environment versus an R&D environment, where it might take longer to see results," adds Bierling. "Honesty and communication between staffing consultants, clients, and candidates are the key to a long-term successful placement."

Further Reading
Staffing Today, 2003, published by the American Staffing Association.

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