



Professional & Workforce News

ACS DEPARTMENT OF CAREER SERVICES

THE EMPLOYER SPEAKS

An Interview with Brian Fowler

Brian Fowler, a senior associate with a Georgia-based recruiting firm, offers below his timely suggestions for how recent chemistry graduates can take advantage of trends in the job market. His firm, Elite Search, Inc., specializes in placing scientists and engineers in scientific positions.

After Fowler earned a B.S. degree in chemistry from Georgia State University, he continued his chemistry studies for five more years at Georgia Institute of Technology. Later, he received a master's degree in business administration with a concentration in international business and marketing from Georgia State.

In addition to his current position, Fowler has spent six years as an environmental and analytical chemist. His background in biotechnology research includes two and a half years contributing to a doctoral study on the synthesis of cyanine dyes for use as DNA markers.

Q. What are your thoughts about the job market for Ph.D. chemists and for B.S. graduates? How does the market differ among these groups?

A. I believe the market is better for Ph.D.s today than it has been in a long time. A need still exists for specialization.

For B.S. chemists, there has been an increase in job offers for inexperienced chemistry graduates and for salaries that is unprecedented in 20 years. This is due to the scarcity of candidates, more emerging technologies, specific needs for chemists in a broad range of hybrid areas like biochemistry and biotechnology, and a large demand from the medical devices and pharmaceutical communities within emerging technologies.

Q. How do internships, co-ops, and summer jobs for undergraduates influence the hiring of B.S. chemists?

A. First, I would say they would highly influence it. It's always a good idea to get experience during your education. You have to remember that new graduates are

competing only on what they have done in school. So, summer jobs in chemistry or related sciences definitely add to a person's science background. Co-ops and internships provide experience and a look at a variety of job situations.

Co-ops are designed to fill and recruit positions when people come out of school. They also give you direct contact with those with more experience. They are a chance to showcase your abilities while you are still in school.

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One other thing to do would be to add a lab assistantship while in school. A lot of times, any additional experience above and beyond what is required for the col-



lege curriculum is viewed by employers as positive.

Q. What do you see as the trends in the job market for chemistry graduates in 2001?

A. For B.S. chemists, I see a strong employment market in certain areas of industry. Those that are experiencing growth include biotech, green chemistry, pharmaceutical, medical, combinatorial chemistry, and other computer chemistry-linked applications.

At the graduate levels, in the same industries, more specialization will be required in emerging technologies such as genetic expression and anything else to do with the human genome and the medical application of new technologies.

A broad base of skills is needed because companies want to stay streamlined. Small to medium-sized companies will only increase in the future, and there will be more of an international focus; and foreign language skills, cultural experience, and familiarity with foreign lands will take on a new emphasis.

Q. How do these trends compare to what you were seeing for chemistry graduates in 2000? In short, what is new in the job market?

A. One thing that is definitely new is the increasing number of opportunities. Each new graduate is seeing multiple interview opportunities. Most are receiving multiple offers and are having to decide what are the important factors in climbing the career ladder. For experienced chemists, consulting opportunities for previous employers are at an all-time high. A large part of this trend is due to downsizing and to companies that have cut their workforce too much.

Q. How would you advise undergraduate chemistry students to adapt to these changes in the job market?

A. First, students should gain as much experience about the job requirements as possible in their area of interest. Research the current industry, and be knowledgeable about the trends.

Second, be careful not to let abundant job opportunities cause you to lose sight of career focus or become a job hopper. Demonstrate that you are a team player, open to diversity, able to build coalitions and be flexible.



The number one thing employers are looking for is an individual who makes an immediate impact at the company. They are looking for a team player—someone who has a focus on not only the job responsibilities but also how it fits into the big picture with customers and others.

Also, have reasonable demands regarding what your starting worth and responsibilities should be. Trainability is important. Demonstrate that you have met or exceeded expectations in specific instances.

Q. Suppose that you were entering the chemistry field in 2001. How would you prepare yourself so you could take advantage of opportunities in the field?

A. The number one thing employers are looking for is an individual who makes an immediate impact at the company. They are looking for a team player—someone who has a focus on not only the job responsibilities but also how it fits into the big picture with customers and others. They also like to see innovation and an ability to make decisions in an informed manner.

They are looking for someone who is current on topics pertaining to the company and the job responsibilities. Employers are seeking someone who can lead, support decisions, and stay with the company.

Job hopping is still a definite negative. Employers expect to be respected, even when candidates may be considering more than one offer. They would like an answer to their offer in a timely manner. They are looking for someone who is willing to learn, grow with the company, accept training, and can admit responsibility for mistakes and move on.

Q. Experts have predicted that recent breakthroughs in the Human Genome Project are expected to open up many opportunities for chemists over the short and long term. Do you see the coming years as the Golden Age of chemistry, and what are your recommendations on how aspiring chemists can adjust their curricula to best prepare for the future?

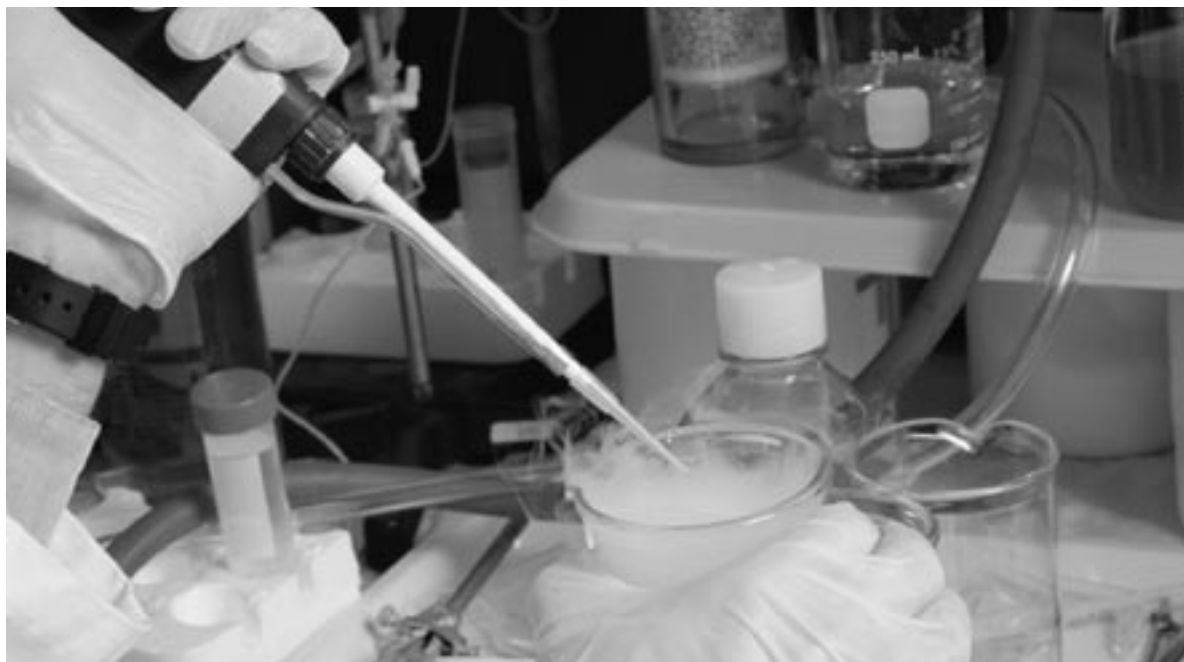
A. In answer to the first question, undoubtedly there are new areas of the sciences that are experiencing growth like never before seen. The Human Genome Project and associated chemistries are perhaps the most exciting development in science in the past generation.

Consequently, more startups are involved in the area of biotech and biochemistry than ever before. There is abundant capital for these startups.

One caution: I would say that many of these company startups will not succeed. Another caution is that we are just on the cusp of understanding what the human genome is about, and it will take many years to decipher, organize, and act on the information that is just now becoming available.

Also, even before entering school, candidates should find out which schools offer a focus on biotech or a mixed chemistry curriculum and seek advice from instructors and school counselors on the best way to approach the curriculum. They should seek as broad a spectrum of related science course work as possible and assist a professor conducting research in their area of interest or a related field.





Switching to a new industry has pluses and minuses. A plus is that it's easier to maintain confidentiality of your search. A drawback to seeking employment in a new industry is that you must learn a lot of new things and do a lot of research to make an educated choice about your career move.

A midcareer chemist in this position must demonstrate how the skills and knowledge he has acquired can be

Q. What advice do you have for mature chemists (ages 50–69) about what employers might be seeking from them? How can they keep from falling out of step with changes in the job market?

A. The most important thing for someone making a midcareer change within the same technical field is to use their existing network of industry and academic contacts. Target a specific company that you are interested in and work to make stronger network ties at the company. Remember that within the same industry, keeping your search confidential might be an issue. Be sure to communicate specific reasons to the hiring manager that detail why you wish to make a change.

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related to the responsibility of the position he or she is seeking in that unrelated field. It's important to remember in either case that employers are interested in someone who will fit the company culture and work as a team player. Specific skills that may be absent can be taught.

Q. Any final comments on the current job market?

A. My first advice for mature chemists would be to caution against developing negativity





toward market perceptions; that is, maintain a positive attitude about changing industry and company trends.

ability, honesty, leadership, and initiative are all skills that are still highly valued in today's job market.

Stay current in emerging technologies and fields. Emphasize to prospective employers what your immediate impact on the company will be and what you have to offer.

Be confident that job performance, experience, limited job movement, communication, customer awareness, train-

A couple of final thoughts. Given the current job market and its many exciting opportunities, recent graduates have a decision to make: Enter the market, or go back to school for advanced training or a degree. In the same light, midcareer chemists must have additional education in the form of professional training or graduate experience.

The job market is not going to squeeze for the next four or five years at a minimum. And I think it will remain predictable longer than that.

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