

Reactions from the Bioservices Sector

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Polyclone BioServices, Clinsys, Arkus, ClininInvent Research Pvt Ltd, Lal Path Labs are some of the new players in the Bioservices sector. Naveen Kulkarni, CEO, Polyclone BioServices Pvt Ltd; Dr Surinder Kher, chief executive officer, Clinsys India Limited; Dr Anupama Ramkumar, director, Arkus Clinical Trial Support Solutions; Dr Arun Bhatt, president, ClininInvent Research Pvt Ltd; and the HR Head, Lal Path Labs share their reactions to the questionnaire.

Is there a shortage of qualified workforce? How should it be overcome?

Naveen Kulkarni: Most importantly, the academia has to work with the industry to understand what is required by the industry. This is possible by way of projects, collaborative research activities and to achieve this, the academia has to provide with all possible information about what is going on in the institute/college at the research level and allow students to interact with industry people and companies.

Dr Anupama Ramkumar: There definitely is a shortage of trained and aware workforce in clinical research industry. I guess the industry grew so fast that it took everyone by surprise. Though there are various training institutes focusing on CR now, I feel efforts have to be made to integrate this training and research ethos at the college level. This has to be part of the curriculum in medical schools or pharmacy colleges.

Dr Arun Bhatt: Yes. The problem is essentially at the level of middle management-clinical study manager/project manager.

These positions require prior work experience of several years as CRA/clinical team leader. There is limited ready talent available as the industry itself is still in its infancy. Except two-three CROs, the rest of the CROs are in business since three years. There does not seem to be a solution for short-term except for the CRO to invest in talented manpower, identify their potential and provide an environment to develop them into effective managers. It is also necessary for the industry as a whole to consider whether current strategy of luring young candidates with little experience and offering ridiculously high emoluments will hinder development of managerial talent.

What is the present supply and demand situation in India?

Naveen Kulkarni: There is a lot of demand for human resource in the biotech industry in India and this will only grow. The present supply of students is very high but mostly the sheer volume of students produced by the academia is not qualitative. The industry requires skilled resources which is not a very high expectation but just that they need to be "hands-on" about what they know theoretically.

Dr Surinder Kher: It is challenging. As a country, the demand for trained clinical research professionals certainly is on an increase, which is directly related to the increase in clinical research activities in the country. We also see a number of clinical research facilities growing both within the bio-pharmaceutical companies and the contract research organizations. Unfortunately the new entrants in this space do not put in enough effort to train people, but instead look for trained people around. By doing this, the demand supply problem has compounded within this industry and the attrition is on a rise.

Dr Anupama Ramkumar: Theoretically speaking, the supply should exceed demand because there are a large number of graduates coming out of the various institutions in the country. But the ground reality is the opposite. What these qualified graduates learn in their years at college is absolutely not in line with what is required at work. The awareness too about career opportunities is poor. The training institutes too do not have a uniform standard or curriculum and therefore the output not really consistent or as desired. Till the government and the industry make a concerted effort to address this issue, this supply-demand gap is going to remain as is.

Dr Arun Bhatt: There are no exact figures available. However, for entry level, the supply is much in excess of demand. In contrast, at middle manager level, the supply is much less than the demand.

HR Head, Lal Path Labs: As far as we are concerned, we don't find any dearth of required talent in the market, though, at times, it become difficult to get trained manpower in the remote areas. In those scenarios, we try to place experienced hands from within the system. It is easier to fill up those positions rather than finding incumbents in those remote areas.

What does your company look for in candidates during the hiring process?

Naveen Kulkarni: We need "hands-on" students who have good exposure to the basics of molecular biology with cloning, PCR and related techniques.

Dr Anupama Ramkumar: This is a personal opinion. I would be happy to find a person with an attitude to learn and good communication skills, especially in English. A lot of companies who are ready to invest time and effort into imparting customized training will feel this way.

Dr Arun Bhatt: Our focus on candidates who have basic knowledge of clinical research, have initiative, are good communicators, are focused on learning and growing and are willing to put efforts in self-development.

Dr Surinder Kher: We look for some basic educational requirements-a biosciences degree preferably a Masters. People who have knowledge of GCPs or have participated in multi-country studies would get a preference. But over and above this knowledge, we look at certain essential skills like integrity, attitude, willingness to learn, flexibility, customer orientation etc in these individuals. I strongly believe that these skills are important to any business but extremely critical for business like clinical research, which is purely peoples business. We also look at the cultural fitment for people we hire based on these human skills. As we know we do not have lot of available clinical research people in this country (nor do we expect this in the short to medium term) we have to train people in house.

HR Head, Lal Path Labs: As we are extremely conscious about the quality of our reports and also due to the fact that we are bound by the various accreditation bodies like CAP and NABL etc., we generally look for working hands in each area who have the requisite qualification and at least five years of practical experience, especially in labs having automated systems. Accordingly, the candidates are generally inducted from the competition.

Are you satisfied with the students coming out from the biotech institutes?

Naveen Kulkarni: No, because to a large extent their knowledge is only theoretical and rarely we find a student with adequate skills to handle the job.

Dr Surinder Kher: Not really. The clinical research students with degrees/diplomas that we have seen so far have not met the expectations. It is very simple. When we say that there is dearth of CR professionals, there is even higher scarcity of people who can teach clinical research. There is no teaching related to practical aspects of clinical research. There is no teaching regarding basic soft skills required in clinical research. So the teaching institutes will have to address this as they grow. The students we have seen so far are just like any other students of biosciences with some additional theoretical knowledge of clinical research.

Dr Anupama Ramkumar: It is difficult to answer this question with a plain "yes" or "no". There are some really good candidates that one finds and it is quite often. And the problem is not with the students, it is with the curriculum.

Dr Arun Bhatt: So far only around 5-10 percent of students pass through our stringent recruitment process.

What are the current salary packages at the entry level and for those with 3-4 years of experience?

Naveen Kulkarni: BSc, MSc 1.2-1.8lakh, MBA in biotechnology 1.8- 2.4 lakh/annum and PhD 3.6 - 4.8 lakh/annum).

Dr Surinder Kher: The packages in the current environment of attrition are difficult to benchmark. Also the degrees really do not make a big difference compared to relevant experience. The ranges for a fresher with the above degrees would be Rs 2-4 lakh/annum while as the range for a 3-4 years relevant experience with similar degrees can be Rs 5-10 lakh/ annum.

Dr Arun Bhatt: There is no set package as of now. The fresh CRAs could expect annual emoluments (CTC) in the range of Rs 2-2.5 lakh/per annum. The package for experienced candidates depends on their prior experience and prior salary.