

Reaction from the BioPharma Sector

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The HR heads and CEOs of some reputed BioPharma companies, Thomas Putti, head, HR and administration, Advinus Therapeutics, Dr BB Lohray, CEO, BHUVID Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, Dr JN Verma, CEO, Lifecare Innovations, Dr SV Kapre, executive director, Serum Institute of India, share their views on the biotech HR supply and demand situation in the country.

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

Thomas Putti: Yes, there is an absolute shortage of qualified workforce. BT is seen as next wave on the way after IT and it is going to be huge. It is important for us to prepare for it. We need to have more effective academic programs around BT. Some of the universities have started offering these programs. We need to go a long way in making our curriculum more industry-specific. Further the institutes need to jointly come out with plans to orient postgraduate students on the laboratory working.

Dr BB Lohray: Yes, to some extent. But there is also an increasing flux of talented scientists returning home from abroad, especially in biotechnology area, who are very well trained and can train others with required knowledge in this area. Our university education is still not at the cutting age and we are still teaching rudimentary and outdated syllabus. Universities also lack excellent teachers due to poor emoluments and poor laboratory set-up. I suggest that selected universities and government laboratories in each state may be directed to conduct practical laboratory work for 6 months (4th Semester) for

all the students in that state and sufficient funds may be allocated to do this. Most of these laboratories and universities, which have research programs, could appoint a few associate professors additionally to impart this specific training to MSc students. This system is prevalent in Germany and many of the students get absorbed in industries even before they finish their fourth semester, since they are very well trained in research labs.

Dr JN Verma: I have been on the interview committee of BCIL and over a period of time, I have realized that the focus of students is misplaced. All of them just want to do R&D, but most of them are either not aspiring or willing to obtain a PhD degree. This is not going to take them anywhere in research. With regards to the biotech/life sciences industry, the students are not even aware of the companies active in this space and their general awareness about the industry is very low.

During my interaction with the students, I found that there is a total disconnect with the industry. Many a times I have found that even the PhDs are clueless about the industry. When they appear for the interview in a company, they are quite confused and come with the premise that the industry will pay more as compared to a research institute. Because of this attitude and the fact that the company has to invest their resources in training the candidate, the initial salaries are quite low.

Dr SV Kapre: Yes. The reason is when we talk of a qualified person, we talk of someone well versed with technical handling. Since the biotech industry that was not big earlier has started growing, the technology and administrative capacity needed is in large numbers. The earlier courses were never tailored with this in mind, as focused needs did not exist. Now the teaching institutes should cleverly tailor their courses to the present requirements.

What is the present supply and demand situation in India?

Thomas Putti: There is an obvious shortage of requisite talent available in India. I am not able to put a figure on the exact gap in demand-supply at this point of time. The shortage ratio could be very high as we progress towards 2010.

Dr BB Lohray: The question of demand and supply in this context is quality based.

There is a good amount of human resource available, which has MSc in various branches of biotechnology, microbiology, molecular biology etc., with average knowledge of the subject with absolutely poor practical skills. Therefore, quality human resource is a crunch in biotechnology for want of reasons mentioned above.

JN Verma: What we get we do not want and what we want, we do not get. I feel that the demand-supply ratio is very high, as what we want does not exist. Overall, there is a lot more manpower available than required and there is no need for establishing new institutes.

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

Thomas Putti: Advinus looks for qualities like institution and academic record, functional knowledge, personality traits such as being energetic, flexibility in approach, ability to think innovatively and ability to accept and take constructive comments, ability and aptitude for working in a team environment, ethics and integrity.

Dr BB Lohray: As I mentioned, industries are always looking for candidates with aptitude, good knowledge in basic fundamental of biotechnology, with good understanding of upcoming science and with a good practical experience in basic of biological science. However, for routine work, good practical hands are important.

JN Verma: Ideally the industry would like to take in candidates, who have the ability to think, plan, execute, compile, present and draw conclusions.

Is the biotechnology industry too facing attrition?

Thomas Putti: Yes, there is a huge challenge of retaining the trained and experienced people. We are successfully handling attrition, constantly addressing people issues such as providing an environment of learning and constantly developing their capabilities, revising their packages where necessary, looking at a fast track growth for merit employees to match their individual aspirations.

Dr BB Lohray: Yes, but to a much lesser extent at this moment since biotechnology is still not fully developed like IT sector in India. However, the situation will worsen as the biotechnology industry grows and the talented scientists find many more lucrative offers with better work environment.

What are your suggestions to bridge the demand-supply gap and increase the talent pool?

Thomas Putti: More universities need to offer programs in the areas of medicinal chemistry, molecular and cell biology and pharmaceutical sciences. Constant institute-industry interface on making the curriculum more jobs specific. Premier training organizations like NIIT also can play a big role in creating talent pool to meet the short-term requirements.

Dr JN Verma: I believe that at the Master's level the industry should be invited to the academic institutes to talk to them and this should be done at the beginning of the course/ program. Industry visits by students alone are not sufficient. During the Master's education, there should be some kind of introduction to the industry.

There is a need for a biotechnology management course or a biobusiness management course, which should be a part of the regular Master's program (MSc or MTech Biotech) and not as a separate degree.

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

Thomas Putti: The salary in this industry space will be driven by market forces and additionally it will depend on various factors such as qualification, university, skill level etc. The skills that are found scarce will demand premium.

Dr BB Lohray: In fact, pay package depends on two major factors, the need for the skills in industry and second, the number of candidates they have to choose from. Also it depends in which city the job is going to be located, cost of living etc. Nevertheless, at present a general pay package for big cities such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad and Delhi, where most of these biotechnology companies are located is ranging from Rs 1.5-2.0 lakh/pa (BSc); Rs 2.0-3.0 lakh/pa (MSc); Rs 6.0-8.0 lakh/pa (Ph.D) and similar for MSc with MBA for fresh candidates.

Salaries may be little less in cities like Ahmedabad, Pune and Kolkata. Experienced candidates, especially PhD with post doc experience in good laboratories abroad are in high demand and salaries may range from Rs 12-20 lakh. These numbers should not be taken as fixed package but only as a guideline.