

The 6 Biggest Science Career Hazards -- and How to Avoid Them (Part One)

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The employment business is a good place to get a perspective on what works and what doesn't work in the area of career development. For years, I have made mental notes as I watched people rise to the top -- or stay in relatively the same position over a far-too-long period of time. I've had my own share of career blunders, as well, and decided to write a series that would incorporate what I have learned from my own experience as well as highlight some of the roadblocks that my firm has identified on the path to career success. As our practice dictates, my emphasis will be on biotech, pharmaceuticals, and nanotechnology industries. But much of this material will apply across the board to employees in any sector.

While focusing on six areas that most organizational development experts would agree are probable areas of concern for most technical employees, I'll describe several situations in which you could find yourself. After reading this through perhaps you can approach them with a better perspective for decision-making. Others are more ethereal in nature; these take some thought – even discussion with others who know you – in order to identify how they present a problem. Self- promotion falls into the latter category.

The Fear of Self Promotion

It sounded as if the interview had gone well. As the talented scientist briefed me on the results of his meeting with our client

company, I understood that he had successfully presented his skills and abilities to the director of research and her team. A red flag went up, however, as he described the way that the company closed the session – with the infamous “We’ll be getting back to you” response. Because this client typically reserves that statement for those candidates who get bad news, we were discouraged. We had high expectations going into the interview. Everyone who had seen this fellow’s resume had felt that the fit was ideal. You couldn’t find a better match for that company’s brand of science. These candidates are hard to find!

An irritated director of research described the interview in this way: “Jim seemed withdrawn and disinterested. His seminar went well enough, but afterward in the one-on-one meetings he just fell flat. We couldn’t get anything out of him related to his accomplishments, or how he felt about working with us. Frankly, no matter how good a scientist is, if he can’t relate the benefits of hiring him, than I can’t see how I can extrapolate that myself. Get me someone with a little spark, will you?” she said, obviously frustrated at having spent a day with this fellow. Through persistence, we found the firm a candidate with “spark” – one with significantly less relevant experience than Jim had but whose interests and enthusiasm were evident to everyone who spoke with her. Jim remains at the medical research facility where he has been since his postdoc, seemingly held to that environment by his inability to communicate his strengths effectively.

In another internet essay, I described personality differences in research organizations and how interpersonal styles can foster or frustrate communication. What became clear to me was that despite which communication “style” is most comfortable, the employees who will ultimately be successful are those who can express themselves well to a variety of personalities up and down the organization. Unfortunately, many scientists and technical people suffer from an inflexible communication style that fails to

do them justice in an interview or where a strong, persuasive voice is needed.

My thesaurus shows selling and persuading as synonyms, although many technologists would not want to be associated with “sales.” But can you imagine a more important time to do a little selling than in an interview or when asking for a raise? That is why it has always surprised me that so many wonderfully talented technical people have such a hard time presenting themselves positively and enthusiastically. This fear of selling oneself is referred to by management consultant and behavioral scientist George W. Dudley as the “fear of self-promotion.” In a workshop on the subject, Mr. Dudley described the problem in this way:

“The fear of self promotion consists of all behavioral habits, thoughts, actions, or feelings, which conspire to keep competent people of all walks of life from being able to stand up and take credit for who they are and what they do well.”

Does Cream Always Rise To the Top?

We have all known someone who wasn't necessarily the best in his or her field but who has been able to move upward – perhaps getting the best promotions and big raises. And I've always found it curious when companies with specific technical needs hire those with less than the desired scientific skills. They find candidates whose “energy level” appears to move projects along. Dudley and his partner Shannon L. Goodson call these people the “natural self-promoters.” They have no trouble seizing any opportunity to promote themselves to people who might help them get ahead. While if overdone this can certainly result in trouble, Dudley and Goodson indicate that a certain amount of self promotion is a necessary lubricant to getting things done in the corporate environment.

At the other end of the spectrum from those “natural” self-promoters are those like Jim who believe that the hardest working, best producing, and most deserving will always rise to the top – and that people will automatically recognize talent. These folks grew up believing that tooting your own horn was pushy or egotistical. The rules of work have changed, however, and you can no longer keep yourself on the right career track by working hard, staying loyal and keeping your mouth shut.

Do you have to change your personality or your principles to self-promote? Not at all. And you don’t need to be the natural self-promoter, either. All you need to do is realize that you have a problem promoting your strengths to those around you. Once you recognize this, you’ll start to discover the difference between being egotistical and making your competence known. If your annual review is upcoming, or you are out in the interview circuit, I can’t imagine a better skill to have under your belt!

The Counter-Offer

Almost every career has this scenario somewhere along the line: You’re presented with a new opportunity – a position that looks exciting with a company that appears to have a lot of potential. The offer for employment is in your hands and it is time to review the options. As you sit back and analyze your present situation, it becomes apparent that your career has not grown the way it should have with the company. It’s a shame that they never recognized your potential, but you decide that there is no chance for improvement and make the decision to accept the offer. A resignation letter is drafted and your plans to move are firmed up. It’s at this point, however, that you may come face-to-face with what the Wall Street Journal called “career suicide:” The counter-offer.

Each company has a different attitude about counter-offers, and many of the Fortune 500 firms have eliminated the practice entirely. Although every manager reacts differently, the scenario is usually played out with a surprised boss indicating that there was a nice promotion right around the corner, and that it will materialize early if you would reconsider. After more selling than you've seen since you were first hired, they announce that you've been bumped up a notch or two on the company totem pole. Does it sound like your ego could use this kind of pampering? Think twice. There are strong reasons for not letting this conversation get started at all.

For the most part, these situations occur because you have caught your immediate supervisor completely unprepared to deal with your departure. He is embarrassed, immediately anticipating the conversation that he's going to have with his boss – the one in which he tries to explain why he let you get away without a plan for your replacement. A lot of things are going through his mind, but foremost is that you have proven your disloyalty to him and to the team. His immediate concern is to find a way to hang on to you while he thinks over the situation a bit more thoroughly.

A tremendous amount of stress plagues the manager confronted with the loss of a key employee. Unfortunately, the resulting offers for increased status in the organization can be scrutinized weeks or months later in a completely different light. An example of this appeared in the New Jersey Supreme Court (*Shebar vs. Sanyo*).

An employee of a major electronics company was recruited away by a competing firm for a key management position. Before his departure, his employer made him a substantial counter-offer for a senior position and increased salary. He decided to accept the offer from his current employer and, less than four months later, he was terminated for no apparent reason. The court ruled in favor of the employee, and extracted a substantial penalty from his former employer as well as issuing a very tough statement about the

policy of counter-offers in general. The fact still remains, however, that this fellow had his career permanently damaged by the whole affair. The company had simply bribed him to stay onboard long enough till they could find his replacement.

The most obvious solution to the problem is not to get the employer involved in your career decisions. Analyze your situation adequately before you go on interviews with other companies. Is there a potential for a change that would alter your feelings about your job? Have you had the kind of heart-to-heart talk with your boss that could lead to some real improvements?

When you start the process of looking outside your company, it should be done in a spirit of total commitment and resolve. Once you engage in conversations about counter-offers, your *present* job becomes the opportunity with the highest risk factor. Not only do you have to prove your merit in the new position, you somehow have to mend the terrific strain you've placed on your relationship with your employer, the boss, and your co-workers. It is a situation that rarely works out in the employee's favor.

When you think about it, walking back over a burned bridge is bound to do more than singe your feet!

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