



Ten Must-Have Skills That Get You Hired!

Lessons from BIO and DIA job fairs

By **David G. Jensen**
Search Masters International

AT THE BIO MEETING IN TORONTO, more than 5,000 people showed up at the job fair—completely unexpected crowds that led to its early closure by the fire marshal. At the DIA meeting in Chicago a week later, the hall was packed as a variety of speakers described their views of the current and future job markets. These are just two examples of how trade shows and scientific meetings are changing—offering a variety of educational content across the broad spectrum of their attendee's professional lives. Industry meetings are not just technical seminars any longer.

Whether this is a result of a poor economy or a lasting change is unclear. But while it is with us, I'd recommend that you participate in this aspect of any upcoming meeting that you will be attending. And in case you've missed these most recent, I've recapped the best advice into one "Managing Your Career" column this issue that may be of interest for your own personal development.

What Employers Look For

There were job-search experts on hand at this year's crop of meetings: Tom Kotsopoulos (recruiting manager, Apotex Pharmaceuticals), Jill Mueller (senior vice president, human resources, Abbott Laboratories), as well as session organizer Dr. Mark Dibner (founder and chief executive officer, BioAbility). I found it fascinating that there were so many common threads in the discussion about what skills these employers are looking for.

Here are 10 areas that were considered by this group to be the most important skills of the successful job-seeker. If you are in the job market, take a look at these and see what evidence you can provide employers at interview time to support each of them. If you are a manager, use this as a checklist after an interview to gauge where your applicant stands in the process.

Communication Skills: Tom Kotsopoulos places this one first in his list of skills, and it was in the top three with each other speaker as well. Communication skills broadly refers to one-on-one verbal language skills, writing skills, presentation skills, and the ability to "convey thoughts, opinions, suggestions, questions and answers in an appropriate and professional manner," as Tom describes it.

Another element of Communication is "listening skills." How often have I been in an interview with someone who obviously doesn't listen well? Let's face it . . . Listening is tough when you are sitting across from a prospective boss, nervous and feeling like you'd rather be in the dentist's chair. I learned

long ago that you must focus on the person in front of you—you need to listen intently to every nuance of every question that the interviewer asks. And, if you listen well then you will obviously ask much more perceptive questions yourself.

Job-Related Skills: While it is indeed important that you "fit" that job description, the whole area of job-related skills is flexible, depending upon the company and the hiring manager. In some organizations, they will take as little as 60-70% of what they were looking for in order to have a person who seems to fit the "personal chemistry" attributes and company culture.

Multiple Skill Sets: In the good old days, 10 or 15 years ago, before cutbacks and downsizings, employers were content to find people who brought one highly specialized skill to the table. While this kind of hire still takes place, most employers will now go out of their way to hire those who bring multiple skill areas with them: Biology and Computer Science, Chemistry and Biology, Engineering and Biochemistry, Science and Business . . . Combination skills can dramatically affect your "promotability" (see this area below).

Willingness to Learn: Years ago, I came across a hiring manager who told me that his number one determination for a hire came from an applicant's record of success in what he called "lifelong learning." Are you inspired by continued learning and development? What is it that you have learned recently? What do you want to learn in the future? These are the kinds of questions that employers will ask.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that this refers only to those "hard" skill areas that impact your job, such as training in new lab techniques or leadership skills. Certainly these are important, but don't hesitate to mention that you've been taking up Tai Chi, or that you've gone back to school in the evenings to learn about French Literature. These show that you try to constantly improve and enrich your mind.

Teamwork Skills: This one is a no-brainer. Absolutely no one wants to hire the wild individualist who refuses to fit into a team. Have you worked in a successful team-based environment? How have you contributed to the team's success? What have you learned about teams in the workplace? You'll need to

David G. Jensen is the founder and principal consultant of Search Masters International, a unit of Kelly Scientific Resources, a leading worldwide Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical Industry executive and scientific search firm. Contact him at jensedg@searchmastersinternational.com, or at Tel: (928) 282-5366; Fax: (928) 203-0077.

prepare yourself for concern in this area, as it regularly comes up in job interviews. All of the companies represented at BIO and DIA felt that it is a key determination in a hiring decision.

Customer Service: Who is it that benefits from the work that you do? Your boss? The lab down the corridor? These people are customers! A focus on customers and on customer service is essential in order to bridge the gap into your new job. Do you know who your customers are? Are you familiar with the needs and expectations of your customers? How have you supported your customer's success? These questions and more will be asked of you in order to determine your understanding of this critical skill area.

Initiative: Many companies will learn about your level of initiative

through their reference checking process. They will ask your references these kinds of questions: Have you ever gone above and beyond the call of duty? What have you done to exceed the expectations of those whom you support? What kind of work hours do you keep?

My recommendation is that you don't allow companies to get their sole determination of your initiative by talking to your references. Instead, come up with examples before your interview. Be prepared to talk about some of your most important accomplishments, paying special attention to those situations that show you have gone the "extra mile" in order to satisfy the needs of the project and those who are counting on your efforts.

Adaptability: I found it interesting that, despite the fact that the speakers hadn't compared notes in advance, there was a common thread in each of these

seminars. That common thread was that people in industry are subjected to constant change, particularly those in the biotech industry. A key part of your interview preparation will be to find some examples of how you have adapted to unexpected circumstances.

In Tom Kotsopoulos's presentation, he tipped the audience off to two questions that he likes to ask in interviews: What are your thoughts about why organizations have a need for change? Have you sought to maintain or exceed your results in the face of change?

Promotability: I'm not certain that this is even a word, but I can tell you from personal experience that recruiters and employers use this expression all the time. Promotability refers to a gut-level instinct that an interviewer develops regarding an applicant's ability to grow in an organization. As interviewers, we ask ourselves, "Does this candidate demonstrate the overall behaviors, skills, knowledge and desire to grow?" (Or, is this person simply going to do this job adequately and then be of no further use to the organization?)

It is to determine your "promotability" that you are asked about your short-term and long-term career expectations by employers. It isn't so important that you pick just the right long-term career goal when asked, but that it be evident that you have a plan. People who are promotable have career plans in place, and they know where they are on that plan at any point in time.

Salesmanship: If you are a technical employee, you might be wondering why these several career speakers identified this as a critical skill area. While it may be considered by many to be in the "communication" category above, it is actually important enough to be considered a separate skill area. All employees must have the ability to sell, and this becomes evident in the way that you describe your own strengths in a job interview. Many scientists don't see this ability as an attribute, but in reality, where would you be in a company if you couldn't sell your project to management? (Or for that matter, if you couldn't sell your previous contributions in an annual review?) ■