



# Two Pharmaceutical Career Blunders

*Avoiding these missteps is easy when you recognize them in advance*

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**H**EADHUNTING IS A GREAT way to get a perspective on what works and what doesn't work in career development. During my years at Search Masters International, I watched and made mental notes as people I interviewed rose to the top, or stayed in relatively the same position for a far-too-long period of time. I've had my own career blunders, as well. I'd like to share what I've learned about two common roadblocks on the path to pharmaceutical career success.

These "career blunders" aren't only a concern for technical employees; they may apply to your situation even if you are in Sales and Marketing. One of them, the inability to self-promote, is something that is so often found in scientists that I believe it must be taught in grad school. Perhaps reading this will help you recognize that this issue has impacted your career negatively. The other blunder happens when inexperienced negotiators go into the job market with the half-baked idea that they can use a new job offer to improve their current scenario. They realize their gaffe when they learn that this has sabotaged their professional reputation.

## The Fear of Self Promotion

**Recruiter's Notebook:** It sounded as if the interview had gone well. As Janice briefed me on the results of her meeting with our pharmaceutical client company, I understood that she had successfully presented her skills and abilities to the director of research. A red flag went up, however, as she described the way that the company closed the session. The infamous "We'll be getting back to you" response was used, and we knew this client typically reserves that statement for those candidates who get bad news. We had high expectations going into the interview. Everyone who had seen this woman's résumé felt that the fit was ideal.

An irritated director of research described the interview in this way: "Janice seemed withdrawn and disinterested. Her seminar went well enough, but afterward in the one-on-one meetings she just fell flat. We couldn't get anything out of her related to her accomplishments, or how she felt about working with us. Frankly, no matter how good a scientist is, if she can't relate the benefits we'd get in hiring her, than I can't extrapolate that myself. Get me someone with a little spark!" she said.

As my notes go on to say, we found the firm a candidate with "spark." This person had significantly less relevant experience than Janice, but her interests and enthusiasm were evident to everyone she spoke with on interview day. Janice remains at the medical research facility where she has been since her Postdoc,

seemingly bound to that environment by an inability to communicate her strengths effectively and with passion.

Everyone knows that there are a lot of ways to communicate. Salespeople, for example, have an innate ability to express themselves well to a variety of personalities, but most scientists and engineers would not want to be associated with "sales." Unfortunately, these technical professionals often suffer from an inflexible communication style that fails to do them justice when a persuasive voice is needed. 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 that 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."

Has your career been affected negatively by this factor? If so, you may be wondering if you have to change your personality or your principles to self-promote . . . Not at all! 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 approaching, or you are out in the interview circuit, I can't imagine a better skill to have under your belt.

## The Counter-offer

**Recruiter's Notebook:** The large pharma company made an outstanding offer to David to become their new Fermentation Manager, and he committed to start on the first of the following month. Following normal practice, our recruiter made a welcome call to check in with him on his first day of work. Unfortunately, he hadn't shown up for the job; he had chosen to call that morning and tell the Director he had changed his mind about the position. It turns out that his employer had extended a similar offer and promotion to stay, and David had accepted this counter-offer. Needless to say, we moved quickly

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with another candidate and had the position filled shortly afterwards.

David's lapse of judgment was noted by our team as well as by a number of highly-regarded industry professionals who work at the firm he had rejected. Within six months, one of those client managers called me to pass along the news that David had been let go from his company and was back in the job market. My lesson learned on this one is that even though it is a very large industry, it is a very small business. It is amazing to me how fast a reputation can be damaged by an apparent lack of integrity.

Almost every career has this scenario somewhere along the line: A new opportunity is presented from another employer—a position that looks exciting with a company that has lots of potential. The offer for employment is in your hands and it is now 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 they never recognized your potential, but you decide that there is no chance for improvement now 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 good reasons for not letting this conversation get started at all.

These situations occur because you have caught your immediate supervisor completely unprepared to deal with your departure. She's embarrassed, and the first thing that she thinks about is the conversation that she's going to have with her boss, the one in which she tries to explain why she let you get away without a plan for your replacement. A lot of things are going through her mind, but foremost is that you have proven your disloyalty to the team. Her immediate concern is to find a way to hang on to you while she thinks over the situation a little 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, as it was in David's situation. 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?

The point is this: 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 in the long run!

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#### References:

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