

Kevin Wilkinson

Department - Chemistry
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Title: Bioanalytical Analyst (temporary) future Scientist
Institution / Company: Enthalpy Analytical, Inc. (2202 Ellis Rd. Durham, NC)

Enthalpy Analytical provides bioanalytical services to pharmaceutical companies conducting clinical studies. We also provide air quality analysis services in a separate division.

Describe a typical day.

I get to work around 9:00 AM and check with the scientist I am working with for goals for the day. I spend most of my work time in the laboratory running tests, assisting other analysts and documenting my work. I take lunch around 12:30 and finish between 5 and 7 depending on how much work I need to do. What is really nice is that when I leave, I have the rest of the day to myself to do as I wish. I can leave my work in the building.

As an analyst, I manually run the tests the company does to make money. This basically means general laboratory work with ~100 clinical samples a day. Very often, I am extracting drugs from biological matrix in a series of steps which generates a solution suitable for analysis on our LC/MS/MS equipment. I am also responsible for keeping GLP compliant records of the tests I run. Additionally, I assist scientists with development of methods to test for new drugs in new matrices.

The nature and difficulty of the work that I do is very similar to what I did as a graduate student and post doctoral researcher, although it is sometimes more repetitive in nature.

What do you enjoy most?

I like the attitude of the people that I work with. There is a sense of communal responsibility. Everyone is successful together, or, if something goes wrong, we all work together to prevent the error from happening again without the finger pointing game. I also like the focus of the business environment -- creativity with a purpose, goal, and result. We are not expected to sit around all day and think Big Thoughts About the Universe, rather, we use our creativity to turn a profit, and effect the common good.

What are some of the challenges?

The major challenge of my job is keeping my attention focused on a single task for long periods of time. It's easy for my mind wander on the more repetitive tasks which often leads to a mistake or something not being documented correctly. There are lots of opportunities to make little mistakes that can ruin a day's work.

An additional challenge is that we have hard deadlines for data which can raise the stress level when the research isn't going as planned. These deadlines are written into the contracts for our clients.

What is the biggest misconception about your career field?

A major misconception among academics is that industrial jobs are somehow more volatile than academic careers. Competent workers that contribute to their co-workers' success have jobs as stable as any post doc or young professor would. There are stability pitfalls to either side; however, being laid off from an industrial job often does not carry as large a stigma as losing grant funding or being denied tenure.

Also, there is a sense that when economic times get difficult, big pharma prefers to do work internally, leaving CROs with few orders. However, the reality is opposite: the bioanalytical divisions of big pharma are often terminated and outsourced first, leaving more business for CROs. Enthalpy has been growing rapidly since I joined for these reasons. Additionally, Enthalpy has been able to hire talent from recent layoffs from large pharmaceutical companies in RTP.

How did you find out about your current position?

I went to the EPA career fair, and met my current boss there. I handed him my resume and heard back from Enthalpy about a week later. Because Enthalpy isn't a very large company, it wasn't on my radar when I went to the fair. Sometimes a smile, a little humor, and a handshake goes a long way.

What strategies or resources did you find most helpful during your job search? Please include any OPS related resources and service and/or our outside resources?

I am providing a list:

- 1. I think Dara gave me useful psychological help when I sat down and talked with her. She gave me extra confidence that helped me believe I would find a job. Having someone to lean on when things aren't going exactly well and give you a boost can help the search because it makes you ready and confident for the next possibility.*
- 2. Friends and family are important. Unknown to me, a scientist at Enthalpy and I had mutual friends, which helped my application. I would recommend against overt networking, because it comes off contrived and a good judge of character can see through the intentions. I think making friends first and later telling them you are in the job market can open doors more than handing resumes to a faceless corporation.*
- 3. I attended several panel discussions to get an idea of how other postdocs negotiated their job search.*
- 4. Since I was a grad student as well, I went to UNC career services to start out. They tend to be very good at fitting round pegs in round holes, but you should look elsewhere for truly personal advice. Additionally, they were helpful in getting some on-campus interviews, which gave me practice.*

How long was your job search?

13 months.

Looking back on your time as a postdoc or your job search, what do you wish you would have done differently?

I think my job search would have been better if I did two things differently. First, I should have spent some more time during my career thinking about what my next career move should be. It was difficult to see past academia when I was a part of it because all the people that I interacted with were part of it as well.

Second, I would have spent a little more time getting to know my colleagues in the department better in a social (not networking) manner. Having friends going through the same stages I was would have made the job search smoother and less nerve-racking. It also may have provided opportunities for positions.

What career planning and/or job search advice do you have for current postdocs interested in your career field?

- 1. Industry is not "selling out." It is using your creativity and intelligence for a different, but equally important, end.*
- 2. Finding a job is much like finding a spouse, lover, etc. There is only so much planning and work the candidate can do. Some of the process is left to chance. There will be heartache when the seemingly perfect employer does not return your calls, but these events are learning experiences that give wisdom for when the next opportunity arises.*
- 3. Do not underestimate the power of hope and positive thinking. Becoming depressed over a failed opportunity can hinder the next. As difficult as it seems, enjoy and learn from the process.*
- 4. Be flexible. Don't expect to land a job doing exactly what you are doing as a postdoc. In cases such as these, emphasize your ability to assimilate and use new information.*