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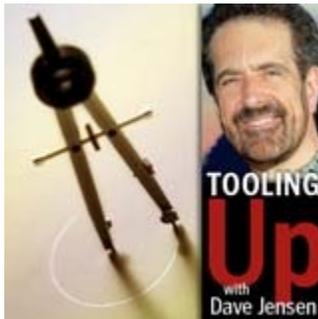
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Tooling Up: Transitioning to Teamwork

David G. Jensen
United States
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"The whole teamwork thing was the most difficult aspect of my move to industry," a young scientist with 2 years of industry experience told me during a recruiting interview. He noticed differences in the industry culture every day of his first 6 months on the job, with many shifts lasting into his first year. But the single biggest shock was the issue of teamwork.

"Everyone talks about it, so you know to expect it when you get there," he continued. "Still, this difference between academia and industry sneaks up and surprises you in so many ways." For a recruiter like me, a person's attitude toward teamwork is vital to the process of candidate selection. I enjoyed the young scientist's candor and made a positive note in my file for the client company.

Just a few weeks later, Bill Lindstaedt called from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). Lindstaedt

directs the university's Office of Career and Professional Development, and he was mulling over seminar topics for an upcoming grad-student and postdoc event. "What would you think of a seminar called 'Surviving and Thriving in Your First Year of a Dramatically Different Culture?'" he asked. "What a great topic," I replied. It reminded me of that conversation with the young scientist and of all those transplants to industry who complain about this issue of teamwork.

In this month's Tooling Up column, I will share with you the experiences and advice on teamwork from the panelists I gathered for the UCSF workshop, which took place last month. The panelists are all experienced professionals working in and hiring for industry.

DR. SPENCER'S SILOS

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"The topic of teamwork comes up regularly ... anywhere where the academia-to-industry move is discussed. But I think it's a disservice to gloss over the topic, because in reality it can be a fairly large hurdle for a successful industry transition," said Andrew Spencer, a research scientist at [Alvine Pharmaceuticals](#) who has experience at biotech companies and small start-ups. (Spencer's name will be familiar to some of you: He's a longtime contributor to the [Science Careers Discussion Forum](#).)

One reason it's such a big transition is that Ph.D. work is done in relative isolation on a single project with clearly defined boundaries--what Spencer calls working in a silo. "Everything you do, your entire focus, has to do with the work in your silo. While you work with others in the lab, you don't have any real investment in your colleagues' projects, which is one major difference in industry," Spencer said.

In Spencer's analogy, academic scientists generate knowledge within these silos and send it out only when it's published. But industry is more like a distribution center, he says: Knowledge is immediately accessible to all others in your group and used by the company to push projects along. "There is no sense of 'ownership' by scientists doing work in industry. It's more for the common good, and this can be a rude awakening," Spencer said at the UCSF seminar. You don't "own" your research results in industry as you did when you were working on your thesis project.

Spencer admitted that it took him a while to understand this during his first year in the biotech industry. "As a scientist doing bioanalytical work that was required for ongoing drug-development projects, I was a part of several project teams," he said. "It was my job to attend these meetings, gather information, and then go back to my group and share. I was supposed to be the knowledge distributor, and yet I kept using the academic approach of holding this information for my own use," Spencer confessed. "My colleagues had to come and pry it out of me until after several of these situations, I finally got the message."

LEAVE YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR

"If you are going to succeed in working on teams, the first thing you need to do is to leave your ego at the door," said Mary Gerritsen, executive director for molecular and cellular pharmacology at [Exelixis](#), a growing biotech company in the Bay area. Gerritsen's name appears on more than 1000 submitted patent applications, and she's the first one to admit that she was only one member of a team in developing those patents.

Gerritsen said that egos don't belong in a team, because data and results don't benefit the individual; they benefit the company.

"Once you have the ego issues resolved, the next issue for your developing teamwork skill is your ability to set priorities and focus on the critical issues," Gerritsen said. "In academia, you can go off into interesting side channels. But your company teammates, who are counting on you to advance their project, would be very disappointed if you didn't stay focused on the project goals, focusing your efforts on what needs to be done first."

SKILLS THAT AREN'T TAUGHT AT THE UNIVERSITY

Many young scientists applying for their first job in a company wonder how they can discuss teamwork with an interviewer when they haven't had all that much experience working in teams. "Teamwork is the business-world equivalent of 'plays well with others' in kindergarten. Universities just assume you've already learned these lessons," said Judy Heyboer, a San Francisco-region human resources consultant. Heyboer was formerly senior vice president for human resources at Genentech, so her opinion goes a long way on this topic.

"As an interviewer, I'll ask you directly whether you would like to work independently or as part of a team, and then I'll look for examples," she says. For example, "I pay attention to whether you participated in team sports or joined clubs." She said that you should mention even small examples of teamwork, such as playing intramural sports with fellow students.

"Other questions would deal with projects in your lab and how they intersected with yours. I will ask you about your volunteer activities and whether there has been a willingness to step

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outside your own priorities and help others," Heyboer said. "Finally, I may propose a task and ask how you would construct a team to address it."

YOU'RE PROBABLY NOT THE EXCEPTION

The question that deals with a preference for independent work or teamwork sounds like a trick question to me. Although Heyboer and my other two panelists admitted that there are indeed some scientists who have their own level of independence in industry, they are few and far between. Answering with that preference would certainly limit your career opportunities in most companies.

As Heyboer says, "There is the rare genius who is so good that a company is willing to build a little cone of isolation to allow him or her to succeed, but that happens so infrequently [that] you cannot count on it."

The only thing you can count on is that you will be asked to be a part of a team and that your skills in team participation will lead you to a role in project or team leadership if you make that cut. The ability to work well in a team is so integral to today's company environment that it is more than just a hot HR buzzword; it's a lifestyle.

<p>A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, Dave Jensen is the founder and managing director of CareerTrax Inc., a biotechnology and pharmaceutical consulting firm located in Sedona, Arizona.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor.</p>
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