

# Considering a Career in the Pharmaceutical Industry?



Conversation with Dr. Thomas Large, Ph.D.,  
Senior Vice President, Drug Discovery, Sepracor

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After earning a PhD in Neurobiology and Physiology from Northwestern University, Dr. Large was awarded an HHMI Postdoctoral Fellowship at UC San Francisco in the laboratory of Prof. Louis Reichardt. He spent the following seven years at Case Western Reserve University as an Assistant Professor in Neurosciences. Dr. Large entered industry in 1997 as a Global Senior Scientist for Research Triangle Park, becoming a team leader in 2000. He joined Eli Lilly's Neuroscience Discovery group that same year, held positions from Lead Biologist to Group Head, while with Lilly through early 2007. In January, 2007, Dr. Large became Senior Vice President for Drug Discovery at Sepracor, Inc., a research-based pharmaceutical company in Marlborough, Massachusetts.

**Q & A with Tom Large** (Summarized by Alison Hall, Director, Graduate Education)

**What qualifications are important for a position as a staff scientist?** The quality of publications is crucial, much like academia. Don't worry that you're not doing drug discovery as a student or postdoc, the ability to produce is important. Of course, if you know a particular animal model that is needed at the company, that will help. Personal networks and references are crucial. The actual skill set is less important because you'll learn some, but may be a good add-on if you are otherwise attractive. The quality of the organization you come from the quality of the mentor are important. Big companies want to see a postdoc. In general, about 3 years postdoc experience seems to bring you to peak attractiveness to industry. An MBA is not necessary or attractive unless you want to go into financials.

**How do you break through the HR departments?** At a large Pharma, there might be 100,000 CVs submitted in a year, scanned into a database and filtered by company HR to be relatively inaccessible to the department heads looking for new staff. It is very important to utilize personal contacts to get through. Note that residency status is not that important, the company will help you get a green card, residency does not factor into the hire decision.

**Will failure to identify a drug mean you get fired?** No! failure is not a sin. You will be rewarded for making the decision clear. However, it is bad to waste resources and not come to a conclusion.

**How is academia different than pharma?** The cultures are very different, and the styles may appeal to you or bug you. For example, in industry, you set yearly goals and check on them each quarter. Nice things about industry are the high level of resources and generally better salary, as well as the focus on drug discovery. Academia seems more hierarchical, but allows complete intellectual freedom (at least you are free to do what you can get funded for!).

Indeed, the work ethic is also quite different between academia and industry, with more manageable regular hours in industry, more guilt in academia.

**What should I think about when choosing between small and big pharma?** How long will the position last? The stability of the position--or company-- may be quite different. Small is attractive because you can wear a lot of different hats, while large might pigeonhole you, and can be less flexible. To learn if the company is "safe," try Google/ Yahoo financial, look at burn rate and cash on hand.

**Positively choose industry because you want to do drug discovery, not negatively because you couldn't do what you wanted to in academia. The opportunities and rewards are quite different, and if your interests lie in industry, you'll be happy!**