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Swings and roundabouts

In the volatile world of pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, seeming paradoxes abound. Already, huge companies such as Glaxo Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham have merged, forming even bigger entities while simultaneously reorganizing themselves to act as if they were just a collective of small biotech firms.

Meanwhile, the more successful biotech companies are starting to resemble their pharmaceutical counterparts, not only in size but also in therapeutic approach. Genentech, for example, is considering dipping its toes into small-molecule therapeutics. And companies such as Celera, whose past president once said that it was primarily an information company, are now entering the race to find therapeutics.

The paradox — or, at least, confusion — continues when shifting the focus to employment (see pages 4–7). Many scientists switch company, or even form their own, around the time of a merger. Yet many mid-career academics are leaving tenured posts for pharmaceutical or biotech positions.

Perhaps this confusion stems from a more central paradox. Drug discovery, once the domain of blind screenings, is becoming more scientific in terms of target selection and lead-compound identification. Yet it is also becoming brutally industrial in terms of the speed and efficiency with which compounds can be screened. Job prospects in industry will depend on which of these factors is dominant. At the moment, science seems to be winning, which would help to explain the influx of academics into industry.

But the final paradox could yet occur. If drug discovery and development become too automated, scientists who were once attracted by the novelty could depart because of the resulting routine mundanity.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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