

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Senior European Sales Manager:
Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Matt Powell (4953)
Andy Douglas (4975)
Frank Phelan (4944)

Netherlands/ Italy/ Iberia:

Evelina Rubio Hakansson (4973)

Scandinavia: Silje Opstrup (4994)

France/ Belgium:

Amelie Pequignot (4974)

Production Manager: Billie Franklin

To send materials use London
address above.
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

International

Advertising Coordinator:

Hind Berrada (4935)

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:

Ben Lund

European Satellite Office

Germany/ Austria/ Switzerland:

Patrick Phelan, Odo Wulffien
Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11/-2
Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
o.wulffien@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@natureny.com

US Sales Manager: Peter Bless

US Advertising Coordinator:

Linda Adam

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
19-1 Haraikatamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746

Asia-Pacific Sales Director:

Hideki Watanabe
e-mail: h.watanabe@naturejp.com

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Chemistry's clouded view

What a difference a year makes. In March 2001, a survey of the American Chemical Society (ACS) revealed that about 1.5% of its members were unemployed. The results of a similar survey, released late last year, showed a jump in unemployment to 3.3%, the highest figure since the society began tracking employment more than 30 years ago.

The one ray of hope in the survey is that salaries for chemists in their first job after gaining their PhD have climbed by almost 8%. The rest of the analysis is covered in clouds, with more on the horizon. The survey notes that as chemistry employment usually leads economic indicators, rather than follows them, it might be a while before this trend reverses.

Adding further gloom to the scene, the chemical industry increasingly relies on the pharmaceutical sector for employment. But that sector has also been in the doldrums lately, with few successful new products to market, lots of lawsuits and steady consolidation. And now, with the US economy still shaky, many state-funded universities are considering making cuts to the size of their faculty (see *Nature* 421, 5; 2003).

All of these signs point to longer job hunts. But what can you do to increase your chance of success? The ACS offers some advice. Brush up on your interviewing skills. Consider smaller biotech firms — after ensuring they are solvent. And don't completely rule out pharmaceutical companies; some skills are still in demand, but these tend to be in speciality areas such as computational or synthetic organic chemistry.

Whatever the position, persistence, patience and polishing of both scientific and job-hunting skills should eventually yield results. And, if all else fails, there's always the other p-word — a postdoc.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



Contents

SPECIAL REPORT

Europe seeks mobility
for students

p296

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Career centre
Information on the
scientific job market

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

RECRUITMENT

SCIENTIFIC ANNOUNCEMENTS

SCIENTIFIC EVENTS