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Mapping life-science skills

Cartographers commissioned by the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTEA) to map the skills needed to work in Britain's bioscience and biotech sector found one broad area of the professional landscape lacking. And a specific set of missing skills within that region might provide the most opportunities for young scientists.

To complete the 'functional map', SEMTEA last year surveyed 35 of Britain's drug-discovery firms to see what skills they need to operate, and whether the government should provide training in any particular area (see *Nature* 421, 871; 2003). This year, a panel of scientists from academia, the drug industry and the biotech sector combed the results of the survey and reported back.

The good news? The panel found plenty of aptitude in basic business functions such as sales, marketing and human resources within the bioscience companies. In fact, there was only one area that needed work, but it was the area on which the success of these science-based companies ultimately rests — applied research and development. The need is particularly acute in areas such as analytical chemistry, which companies use to create, then screen, molecules to fight disease. But the biggest single need identified by the panel was for specialists in information management — for instance, professionals who can set up, maintain and track libraries of biological compounds. This is a subset of bioinformatics, itself one of the most in-demand scientific skills globally over the past few years.

But identifying which skills are needed and devising ways to meet that demand is only the first step, the panel admitted. The next — and biggest — challenge is attracting students to disciplines such as chemistry, where interest has been falling steadily for years. Perhaps news that job opportunities exist in the sector can help to reverse the trend.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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