

William Thelin

Department - Cystic Fibrosis/Pulmonary Research and Treatment Center
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Title: Associate Scientist

Company: The Coca-Cola Company, Atlanta, Ga.

Describe a typical day?

Presently, we are setting up the biological sciences laboratory at Coca-Cola and no two days are alike. At this point, I spend time reading papers, designing experiments, unpacking and setting up laboratory equipment, and managing research collaborations. Generally, we have one to two meetings daily to discuss company objectives, group business, research ideas, external collaborations, or intellectual properties. However, in the next few months I will be primarily working in the lab.

What do you enjoy most?

I really enjoy the collaborative environment at Coca-Cola. I have the opportunity to work with a diverse group of individuals including biologists, chemists, lawyers, and other business people. Interacting with so many different people has really helped me to understand how our business works and where I can make the most impact. Additionally, we also collaborate extensively with researchers at many different companies and academic labs, allowing me to meet and work with many outstanding scientists from around the world.

What are some of the challenges?

One of the biggest challenges we face relates to intellectual properties. In academia, one rarely thinks about whether their research is infringing on patented technologies; however, this is a hard reality in industry. The patenting of gene sequences and assays narrows the landscape which we can operate in. In the taste field, the academic and industrial researchers understand the tremendous value of novel insights into taste improvement and modulation. Consequently, many research studies appear as patents before they are published as manuscripts.

What is the biggest misconception about your career field?

One motivation for taking a job in the pharmaceutical or biotech industry is that, often times, the research focuses on the treatment human diseases. For many people this provides a sense of satisfaction in their job. Many fellow scientists have commented to me that they think that biological research in the food and beverage industry must be solely geared towards increasing product sales—not towards a loftier goal such as disease treatment. However, Coca-Cola has invested heavily in multiple areas related to health and wellness, one of which is the development of a biological sciences group. Coca-Cola beverages are sold worldwide, with more than one billions servings sold every day. Thus, our group has the opportunity to have an enormous impact on health and wellness.

How did you find out about your current position?

A former collaborator whom I met as a second year graduate student told me about the position shortly after he was hired to be the laboratory director of the biology group at Coca-Cola. While this seemed like one of those serendipitous events where the timing was “just right,” I believe that maintaining a good network of colleagues and collaborators is critical.

What strategies or resources did you find most helpful during your job search?

As I mentioned above, networking was a critical aspect for identifying and being considered for open positions. While searching for jobs, I contacted a number of companies, some of which I had contacts with. In most cases, companies where I had no connection or contacts did not reply to my application. However, when I had a connection with someone at a company, I always got a response back and usually an opportunity to interview. I think that it is important to remember that successful networking begins where you work, with your boss, grad students, post-docs, collaborators, etc.

Another critical part of the job search was the interview. Corporate interviews were completely unfamiliar to me. The interviews follow a very rigid structure that requires the interviewee to provide many examples of past performance. Prior to my interview at Coca-Cola, I practiced with Dara at the OPS. The practice

session made me realize how unprepared I was. However, Dara was a tremendous help and the interview went well in the end.

Looking back on your time as a postdoc or your job search, what do you wish you would have done differently?

I would have spent more time learning about industrial science and the specific interests of the company prior to the interview. I did not interview for any jobs which were directly related to my graduate or postdoctoral research, which I think is common. Thus, I had to be able to demonstrate a working knowledge of research fields which were new to me and demonstrate how my strengths and knowledge could be applied. Although I felt like my job talk went well, I think it could have been better tailored to the audience if I had learned more ahead of time regarding the position I was interviewing for.

What career planning and/or job search advice do you have for current postdocs interested in your career field?

Utilize and maintain your contacts including the people you work with currently—you never know who will help you find your next job.

If you meet people at companies that you are interested in working at, always follow up with at least an e-mail thanking them for their time—they will remember you.

Your interview will be substantially better if you prepare for it. Take advantage of the services OPS offers.