

Researchers challenge themselves with mini-exchanges ^[1]

From Our Labs ^[2]

Ever since he was hired by the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR) six years ago, Honnappa Srinivas, known as “Srini,” has worked at Basel’s Center for Proteomic Chemistry (CPC). He leads an oncology and a neuroscience project within CPC and helps to validate hits from high-throughput screening. His job is challenging, but last year he decided he wanted to get a broader picture. He knew how his own department worked, but he wondered, “What happens in other labs?” If he spent time in another department, he felt it would better enable collaborations between partners. “Not, you do your job I do mine: I want to know details of your experience,” he says. “Perceptions can be wrong based on not knowing capabilities from other departments. Once you know what they can do, you can come up with new solutions.”



So Srini participated in NIBR’s Job Discovery Program, through which associates can sample

life in another department. Since August, he has spent a few hours a week working at a target validation oncology lab across the river from his home lab. He says, “I feel cross-departmental collaborations, with people going to the other side, can really help people contribute.”

Srini initiated his move at his last year-end review. His manager, Ulrich Hommel, Head of Integrated Lead Discovery in CPC, recalls, “Srini proposed to do an exchange under the Job Discovery Program to increase his experience. He already had a plan in hand, a demonstration of his pro-activity and curiosity in learning new things. It was great to see his enthusiasm for this. He got interested in oncology and was fascinated with novel ways of targeting cancer cells.” Srini had already approached Thomas Radimerski in Oncology, who’d agreed to host him. The way Srini planned his schedule he could continue his usual projects.

Srini received a warm welcome in Oncology. “A new person in a lab tends to make everyone more enthusiastic and brings about a positive energy,” Srini says. At his host lab, Srini had to use different techniques: “I had the opportunity to work with cell lines, something completely new for me. I was a beginner to start with, but Thomas and his lab associate, Rita Andraos-Rey, answered all my questions, and I was able to contribute to the validation of new cancer targets emerging from RNA-interference screens.” This latter endeavor, known as Project Drive, involves some 50 scientists who are mining data to determine which genes are crucial drivers of cancer cell line growth.

Srini plans to visit other collaborators’ labs. In 2015, he might spend some time in a translational medicine lab, learning how compounds work in patients. He says. “The better you understand your collaborators, the better you can contribute.” He advises others at NIBR, “Take some time, two or three weeks, go and learn something new, make new connections!”

A new world two blocks away

James Berstler, Science Associate II in the Cardiovascular and Metabolism (CVM) department in Cambridge, started working at NIBR four years ago. It was his first job after getting his MS in biochemistry at Bucknell, where he had done protein purification. At NIBR, he was developing radioligand-binding assays, seeing how potential small molecule or antibody-based drugs compare in terms of binding to their target.

Sometimes, though, he missed the challenges involved in protein purification, which involves understanding cell culture, protein structure, column chromatography, and instrumentation. Berstler says, “I enjoy protein purification because it is challenging, rewarding, instructional, and I am contributing to an often essential part of the drug discovery process.” Berstler heard about the Job Discovery Program and thought, “Maybe I can find a group within CPC and do some protein purification as well.” So he reached out to Daniel Baird, who welcomed him into his lab.

Whenever you go to a different site and especially a different country, you learn different ways of doing things: different techniques, different work styles. So find out where there's a gap in your knowledge and think about who you want to be in five years. What's missing? You can use the Job Discovery Program to figure out how to get there.

Daniel Baird, Investigator II in CPC

Daniel Baird, Investigator II in CPC, has become an ambassador for the Job Discovery Program, which he learned about in 2010 while himself on month-long sabbatical in Basel. "If you've been doing the same job for two years," Baird says, "it's nice to have a break. If you go to a person working three or four stages downstream, it gives you an appreciation for what you do. And it extends your personal network." Baird maintains that even a short exchange helps rejuvenate you in your current role and ensures "you're not trapped in your silo. That is a danger to your own career and to the pharmaceutical industry in general. We must adapt to an evolving science."

When he hosted Berstler, Baird says, "I wanted Jim to innovate in a new way. The reagents were all ready for him, so when he came, he could take off and do some experiments." It was a win-win situation, benefitting both the host lab and the guest scientist.

While at Baird's lab, Berstler met a dozen associates at his level. "We had lunch together, and I learned new ideas," Berstler says. "And I told them, come to my lab if you want to learn radio-ligand binding! You could shadow me for two weeks. They were aware of radio-labeling techniques, but I told them this is something we do on a regular basis, and they said perhaps down the line we will collaborate. The more receptors they purify, the more they will need to use these techniques to show how well the proteins bind and how they influence the function of the receptor."

During the exchange, Berstler got to work on an autoimmunity project, which he had never done before. Although the host lab was only two blocks from Berstler's usual workplace, it was a whole new world. "I feel I have new collaborators, new friends," he says. "I consider them my colleagues now."

The Job Discovery Program is very flexible. Researchers can spend three weeks embedded in a lab or they can stroll to a lab across campus and work there one day a week for a couple of months. No need to be thousands of miles away from their home site; Job Discovery proves that local exchange can have a huge impact. People take part in the program to learn a new technique or technology and to meet new collaborators. The experience leaves them with new skills, new colleagues and a better sense of how their usual endeavors fit into the big picture. Non-scientists as well as scientists can get exposure to new departments through the program. Associates without PhDs have found these "micro-sabbaticals" to be especially helpful in furthering their careers.

NIBR wants its associates to make full use of the Job Discovery Program as well as associate development programs it offers. "Novartis puts great priority into developing its associates," says Berstler. "And we want to challenge ourselves and expand our horizons."

His host, Baird, agrees. "Whenever you go to a different site and especially a different country, you learn different ways of doing things: different techniques, different work styles. So

find out where there's a gap in your knowledge and think about who you want to be in five years. What's missing? You can use the Job Discovery Program to figure out how to get there.”

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