

ADVANCE
YOUR
SCIENCE
CAREER IN
THE VIRTUAL
WORKPLACE



THE DAYS OF THE INSULAR WORKPLACE ARE WANING, ESPECIALLY IN THE SCIENCE COMMUNITY.

As the pressure to compete globally increases, leaders within the sector are being forced to think globally—and this means more deeply embracing the trends of working across time-zones, being present in professional social media, and learning to collaborate more effectively.

There is no doubt that virtual workplaces and networks are playing a key role in connecting science professionals, and encouraging companies to re-imagine their workforce models. But what will this mean for employees of these companies?

DEFINITION:

Knowledge network: a connected group of individuals, teams or businesses that share information, specialist expertise and resources to achieve a shared objective.

If science professionals are to evolve and be part of this change, they must become accustomed to:

- accessing work and projects globally;
- collaborating with employers and colleagues across geographic borders; and
- using 'knowledge networks' to raise productivity and increase the quality of the work they do.

Here, we explore some of the ways that science professionals can do this, and how they can build and grow their careers in the process.



FLEXIBILITY IS NOW AN ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

Our increasingly socially connected world is fundamentally changing the way we work.

Science professionals, as well as the companies and institutions they work for, need to collaborate and share their resources to stay efficient and viable. The virtual, flexible scientific organization is now an economic imperative—not a futuristic idea. And, there's strong evidence that the workforce is already adapting to this essential model.

It is not uncommon for many Fortune 500 companies today to draw 20% or more of their professional workforce from a flexible talent pool. Global research firm IDC predicts that by the end of this year, there will be about 1.19 billion free agents, or about 35% of the worldwide workforce. By 2020, there are credible predictions that around half the U.S. workforce (about 70 million people) will be independent workers. Yes, 50% in just seven years' time.

Recruitment practices are already reflecting this rise of contract, 'free agent' or 'knowledge worker' labor. It's clear that talent in most sectors—including the scientific community—is increasingly found through virtual networks. These networks don't just fill job vacancies, they connect companies to the right kind of people with the right skills at the right time. And this is why they're so successful.

The virtually networked style of recruitment is what we describe as a 'talent supply chain' strategy. Not only has it been proven to save time and money, it elevates the quality of a company's product because of the extremely high level of skills that today's contingent workers bring to the table. This powerful combination of high quality talent provided in a just-in-time manner is why 'social recruitment' and virtual work has the edge over traditional workforce planning and sourcing practices. And it's also why companies care much less about where their talent works, and much more about the output they deliver, than they ever have before.

In fact, according to a June 2011, study by oDesk.com, an Internet start-up and early adopter of the virtually networked workplace, 54% of employers do not have a preference regarding where their workers are based. Furthermore, 71% of free agents, or contracted workers, do not have a preference regarding where their employer (or the source of work) is located. By leveraging virtual networks to build a distributed core workforce that is an integral part of a company's workforce strategy, the study showed that more than half of the responding employers were able to grow their business in terms of revenue, size, and scope of service. These are the kinds of results companies are seeking now.



SCIENCE AND FREE AGENT COLONIES

As we can already see, ‘free agents’— those who do not choose full-time traditional employment with an organization—are accounting for an increasing proportion of the worldwide workforce.

Plenty of research shows that this is occurring in response to personal choice as well as economic and innovation imperatives. Free agency is no longer the fringe of the employment landscape; it is more and more the norm, even the desired. Free agency is just one aspect of an emerging model of work that every work style and job category needs to prepare for, and which has particular relevance in the scientific arena.

They’ve been called ‘business colonies’, ‘synchronized workforces’, and even ‘skill-set modules’. But, no matter what we call them, each of these terms describes a group of networked individuals who collaborate to complete a project or specific stream of work in a coordinated way. And nowhere is this becoming more popular than in the technology and scientific fields.

These networked workforces are formed on a temporary, ad-hoc and even on a permanent basis and can comprise just two people or thousands of integrated scientific professionals. Regardless of their size or area of excellence, they all have the same objective: to deliver their knowledge and skills in the most efficient, productive (and professionally satisfying) way.

All of these different ways of working denote a transformation that is happening in business-to-business relationships, but even more importantly in business-to-talent (employee) relationships. All parties are coming together to seek out new ways of doing business because workers insist on more satisfaction from their work, and employers need more creative ways of managing the workflow.

And ultimately, these models will provide individuals with greater choice in how they engage in work—they can be free agents negotiating work on a contract-by-contract basis directly with a company, or they can join up with like-minded individuals to form groups of specialists capable to completing, and negotiating for, larger projects.

As STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) skills become critical to a wider variety of industries, these new employment models will likely be used more often, and for more complex, business-critical projects. As a result, they’ll become more attractive to talented workers and there will be more work available on this basis. It’s ‘the snowball effect’, and it has already started.



DEFINING THE NEW WORKFORCES

Business colonies:

Futurist Thomas Frey of the DaVinci Institute defines them as, “organizational structures designed around matching talent with pending work projects. Some will forgo the cost of the physical facility completely, opting to form around an entirely virtual communications structure.”

Synchronized workforces:

Pockets of talent that are considered a critical asset to an organization, but are not necessarily needed throughout the entire process of a project. Companies might employ these workforces “in sync” with other pockets of talent in different locations.

Skill-set modules:

A ‘hub’ of highly skilled professionals with the same credentials and experience. Biotech hubs for example, are concentrated in the eastern U.S.



WHICH NETWORKS?

Even if you already know how important networks are becoming to the new world of work, how do you know which ones to join? And, more importantly, how should you engage with them?

Several networks have already received a lot of attention for creating a model of collaboration for others to follow, and many have taken on the same aspects of other social media tools.

ResearchGate.net is one such network, which has gained popularity over the past year for its ability to easily connect scientists, allow them to answer questions from peers, share research papers, and find collaborators for future projects. Scientists can share their photos and profiles, as well as their work with colleagues around the globe. Since its inception in early 2011, more than one million publications have been shared so far in a notable example of how the traditional scientific journals are now being bypassed as an avenue of publication.

Other Internet sites blazing the trail toward a more open and virtually networked scientific world are mathoverflow.com where mathematicians can ask and answer questions, potentially leading to the solutions of complicated problems much faster and more efficiently. Similarly, sites like The Public Library of Science, or plos.org, and arxiv.org (a Cornell University Library site) are open-access archives of scientific publications, demonstrating the philosophy that it should be easier in today's connected world to access knowledge.

In a real-world example of how social networking in the sciences can prove valuable to even the most seasoned professionals, the online network sermo.com—the largest online network for physicians—helped one doctor with a dilemma.

According to a research study by Deloitte, an ER physician wanted to know how to remove a serrated blade from a patient's thumb without further damaging surrounding tissue. Within hours the doctor's online community posted the answer: "Use a drinking straw split sideways to lever the blade out of the patient while protecting the adjacent tissue."

This example is a particularly inspiring one. It demonstrates the power of real-time knowledge sharing.

Clearly, we all need to balance our involvement in professional networks with all the other demands and interests in our day. So, the key is to align your engagement in these networks with your professional goals. See it as part of your career planning and development and go into it with that in mind at the outset. Seek out knowledge, connections and discussions that help you achieve these goals over the medium term—and be willing to give of your own knowledge and time in order to get something back.



MAKING THE CONNECTION IN YOUR CAREER

Everyone is being challenged to do more with less. Within the science industry, increased challenges in the development of drugs and other products are influencing how companies conduct business and control costs.

Even for large, global scientific companies, the most important projects are now likely to be conducted on a micro—not macro—level. What this means is that even for the biggest operators in this sector, their success is far more contingent on individual projects and perhaps even the talent and outcomes of individual ‘employees’.

Particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, we already see how smaller organizations and working groups collaborate to deliver key aspects of individual projects for larger corporates. They do this because it’s faster, more efficient and often delivers a better, more innovative result at a lower cost.

What this means is that individual employees with critical STEM skill-sets now have greater flexibility and choice in the way they apply these skills to the market. They have access to big ideas and big projects, even if they’re ‘temps’.

There are two key ways to move into this work-style and develop the collaborative skills required to be the talent of the fast-approaching future:


1 Join networks: it’s one thing to make connections and contribute to dialogue on scientific social networks, but another to use them to complete work. The tools

and networks used will depend on your area of expertise, but being fluent in using them to complete work will be a key requirement moving forward. Employers will increasingly want to see how you’re already doing this.

2 Work with a Talent Agent: if you’re seeking work on a project basis, specialist workforce solutions providers like us can help you access them. Talent Agents assemble project teams of all kinds for the world’s largest and most successful scientific organizations. They have a steady stream of work that provides the security of a ‘full-time’ job without the restrictions of working for one organization or even one industry.

We know that more and more companies are favoring the model of a connected, contingent workforce that collaborates effectively. We know that this work style is now how some of the biggest, most exciting and challenging projects are being done. We also know that STEM talent is in high demand.

Now is the time to get started and make the connection between the new world of work and your own science career.



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