

A Career in Pharmaceutical Research: Bill Martin
Senior Director, Theravance, Inc.

How did you decide to pursue a career in industry?

“I think the consideration to go to industry really started as an advanced postdoc. It started with the nature of my work which was in trying to understand pain, the nature of pain and in part, one understands pain because you want to treat it, you want to improve it, you want to make sure that patients can live a pain free life. And I was fortunate in coming to meetings like the Society for Neuroscience meeting to interact with scientists who happen to work in industry and I saw what they were doing to create new molecules that could be potential therapeutics and when I considered my job options I applied to just a couple of companies, one company actually, Merck, and then also to many different academic labs. Fortunately, I had a choice, I could choose to start my career in academia or to start in industry and I really asked the question, which one is better for me in terms of my scientific progress? Where can I do my best science? And coming out of UCSF which is a very collaborative research environment at the time, I liked the idea of the team science that industry offered.”

What is the main difference between working in industry vs. academia?

“The fundamental difference between academia and industry is really individual vs. team science. While we’re all individual scientists to some extent, when you practice science in an industrial setting you do it in the context of a team. And that’s something that is a little bit unique to individuals who work in a university setting. They think of themselves as collaborative within their own laboratory but often not very collaborative across laboratories and that daily approach of it’s not just my ideas, it’s the ideas of a larger team that I’m charged with executing is a real difference between academia and industry.”

What excites you about your job?

“I think I’m excited about the different things I get to do every day. Some days are very science and technical focused where I’m looking at the nuts and bolts of a project, other days are focused maybe more on the business and strategic side where we might be considering how to best set out the clinical development strategy for a new analgesic for example, and so that mix of science and business really suites me because it kind of keeps in the forefront of my mind, you know, there’s a patient on the other end of what we’re trying to do. There’s high failure in everything that we do, and so there has to be some link to, you know, improving human health that kind of keeps me going.”

What advice do you have for someone interested in a career in industry?

“I usually advise scientists to start asking questions, to meet people, to check their assumptions. Coming out of academia everyone always thinks they understand what the other side looks like and as is the case with academic positions, all companies aren’t the same. Companies have different cultures and different styles and ask questions of scientists that work in those different companies to get a sense of, you know, does what they do align with what you’re interests are. Can you see yourself working in that type of environment?”

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