Early Career Members

Lessons Learned from Private Industry

I have been employed in industry for three years since completing my graduate and post-graduate education and research. While at first glance, this may seem like a short period, much can happen in three years of life or a career. I remember being asked many times at the start of my first industry job if I was still “drinking from a fire hose.” I had not heard this metaphor before, but I quickly understood that it accurately describes the feelings that I experienced many times as a new employee! As scientists, we are trained to construct a hypothesis, design an experiment to test the hypothesis, and use appropriate methods to analyze and interpret the resulting data. Scientists in industry adhere to these principles, but also juggle the complexities of balancing inherent scientific curiosity with available resources; contributing to diverse teams; developing and executing a personal performance plan; and many other tasks like evaluating employees, submitting capital requests, and maintaining any required training or certification required by the position. These additional components of a job that were not learned at a university contribute to that feeling of “drinking from a fire hose.” I am an early career member, and although I have a long way to go on my career journey, allow me to share a few of the lessons that I have learned along the way:

1. It takes a few months to navigate the internal workings of a new organization. Before starting new positions in industry, I envisioned being quickly immersed in science and product development on Day 1. Instead, Day 1, in my experiences, has involved safety training, learning how to access the company email system, and wondering how to request company-provided equipment like smartphones, iPads, or vehicles. Is there a manual or PowerPoint that clearly describes how to complete these initial tasks or a directory of who to ask? Absolutely not! While some companies may have a new employee orientation meeting, this training is often brief and may leave one with more questions than answers. It is easy to become overwhelmed and discouraged in the first few months of new positions leading to individual accomplishments, continued development of team skills, or recognition, or facility improvement. Regardless of the pose of the team, effective teams include individuals with different skills, experiences in college or graduate school, and viewpoints. For example, technical teams in the industry might consist of agronomists, production specialists, statisticians, and engineers. While this diversity can lead to disagreements at times, it ultimately leads to a better solution.

Constant communication is another key to an effective team-oriented approach. Each member is familiar with the same jargon or background that you possess. Take time to educate and your terminology and logic. Similarly, as new concepts that you do not understand with your team, find ways to engage and involve them with agendas, individual assignments, and roles. This is especially important for large organizations, where employees are often located at different facilities. In such cases, teams frequently meet by teleconference, and effective team interaction can be difficult due to physical separation.

3. Resources are abundant, but some are required. Private industry has many resources. For-profit ventures generate revenue, but resources are often found in continued research and development, reinvested in continued research and development, or marketing specialists, statisticians, and engineers. While not

Jason Haegele
Crop Physiologist
WinField Solutions, LLC, a Land O'Lakes company