

Apprenticeship Journey

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How did you get into your apprenticeship?

When I was 17, I was studying for A-levels and decided that I was burned out with studying and rather than continue on to university and study physiotherapy I wanted to take a break. What this looked like was, to be honest, completely unknown, but all I knew was that I could not go straight into uni. After my A-levels, I increased the hours at my part time job to basically have something to do as I figured things out but also because my mother had decided to charge me rent while living at home. As the youngest of 4 (the oldest being 11 years older than me), I couldn't really blame her for being slightly upset - I hadn't left the nest, and I think she was looking forward to having her life back.

After I decided I didn't want to go to University, my focus turned to getting a job. My first opportunity came when I got an interview for GCHQ in their IT Division (thanks to a family member). I remember I had to go to Cheltenham for the interview, so I booked a B&B (before the days of Airbnb) and took the train down. I didn't really prepare for this interview as I didn't really know what to expect, so I turned up at GCHQ, and along with the other interviewees got an armed escort to a building to do aptitude tests. etc. Afterwards, I went home and was lucky enough to get invited back, yet I had already decided it was a "No" for me as I didn't fall in love with Cheltenham, but I did learn a few lessons about preparation.

Things then went quiet until my mother spotted a job advert in the local paper (Manchester Evening News from memory) for a position as an Associate Scientist. I actually can't tell you much about the advert, as I think she applied for the position for me to help kick me into gear. She told me to tidy up my CV, dress smart and turn up on this date and time for the interview. I think this actually helped me as I went into it incredibly relaxed and didn't suffer nerves. The interview process consisted of an aptitude test (which I'd done previously) and two formal interviews: a technical and a personal interview. I remember coming out of both thinking they were easy, but I would say that was because I connected with the interviewers on a personal level more than anything, as I can assure you my level of knowledge of genetics was basic.

Within a couple of days, they had called me back to offer me the role and mentioned that as part of it they would support me in getting a HNC as I studied. The course would be one day a week and when I wasn't going to Uni, I would work the full week. I wasn't really bothered about that as I'd decided I didn't want to go to University, but then I thought, "Why not?" As you can tell I was quite relaxed about it all. I passed that course (with a slight hiccup in my first-year exams) and then got a high enough grade to turn it into a full BSc, which would take a further 3 years. By now it was clear that this was the correct thing to do.

I think this time of my life taught me a few valuable lessons about time management, commitment, application, etc., as it wasn't easy. Doing a full-time job whilst studying (usually a more out of date syllabus than what occurred in industry) was difficult but manageable. From there that set me up for a career that I am now proud of and have a lot to thank my mother for in those early days!



What is your job/study now?

I am now Senior Vice President of Compliance & Categories at Scientist.com. I've spent over 23 years in the pharma industry in various roles. For 13 years I was a geneticist at AstraZeneca, then I moved into R&D Procurement at AZ for Pre-clinical Services and Human Biological Sample acquisition before I joined Scientist.com in 2016. As part of Scientist.com I have two core roles: Head of Compliance and Head of Categories. Whilst these are two different departments, they have a lot of synergies, which enables the roles to complement one another.

As Head of Compliance, I am responsible for the business and to ensure we align with the policies and procedures of our Users to ensure their marketplace does not introduce loopholes to compliant outsourcing. I am also internally responsible for compliance with the business, from running our third-party risk management process to data privacy to ensuring internal procedures meet external regulations/legislation. As Head of Categories, I run a team of scientific subject matter experts whose role is to understand the challenges faced by our Users when outsourcing regulated services and develop solutions to address those challenges or open up new opportunities. These individuals are embedded within the Users' internal teams to provide expertise and guidance, and my role is to coordinate the existing solutions as well as develop new areas where there is a demand.

What does the future hold?

The future is incredibly exciting, as a business we have a huge opportunity for growth, and we are now moving into supporting the entire drug discovery pipeline from discovery through preclinical into clinical trial support. Our overall goal is to speed up pharmaceutical research to lower costs of new medicines and get them to patients as quickly as possible without compromising the quality standards of the research. We have already delivered tens of millions of dollars of savings to Clients and have positively impacted the progression of multiple drug projects, and from a personal perspective I feel extremely lucky that we get to provide guidance and support to companies to make them more efficient for the benefit of patients who ultimately need all the help they can get.

Thoughts on financial side vs degree programme

I think in today's climate it is a no brainer - I would only ever recommend an apprenticeship and have provided that guidance to friends and family. For me the biggest misconception is that an apprenticeship is only available as a trade - that is not the case. Companies are realising how powerful this tool can be for them, as it also addresses a real challenge in society - the cost of education.

On that subject I personally think the cost of education is now prohibitive to the vast majority of people, and this will only get worse as time moves on. You can see from the recent article by the BBC that student loans are now saddling individuals with the equivalent of a second mortgage before they are even in a workforce, yet they are expected to make these financial decisions at 18, when they ultimately do not even know what their career path will be.

For me an apprenticeship is the best of both worlds - you get the academic training that is the societal expectation, but you combine it with real world experience, which can drastically differentiate you from individuals who have just gone to University. The quality of the education is the same whichever route you take, so why would you not want to have the additional earning and experience potential an apprenticeship provides?