

Advancing the careers of life science professionals of Indian origin

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Indian-American life scientists can advance their careers by networking, receiving help from mentors and pursuing collaborations in academia, industry and the nonprofit sector.

Recent studies have shown that diversity of thought and the use of a range of approaches are crucial to innovation. Consequently, top universities and businesses are altering how they select employees and learning to embrace diverse thinking. This has led to an important trend in the last few decades: the US workforce deployed in the science and technology sectors has become more ethnically diversified, and today about 14% are Asian-Americans¹.

Americans of Indian origin constitute the third-largest subset of Asian-Americans², and their educational qualification levels are among the highest of all ethnic groups in the United States. Over 65% of Indian-Americans have a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to 28% of all Americans, and nearly 40%—five times the national figure—have a master's, doctoral or other professional degree². This has allowed for a growing presence of people of Indian origin in various roles throughout the life sciences in the United States, which in turn has resulted in new alliances between the US life science industry and its emerging Indian counterpart.

But despite this significant progress, many hurdles remain for scientists of Indian origin trying to advance their careers in the US life science sector, mostly stemming from marked differences in culture and family values. Commonly recognized obstacles include a tendency to understate one's contributions risk aversion and fear of failure.

First-generation life science professionals might grapple with additional issues, such

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At regular networking events and conferences, EPPIC helps life science professionals of Indian origin advance their careers.

as immigration and visa requirements; the lack of US academic mentors for those who obtained their PhDs abroad; communication gaps with US colleagues owing to barriers of language, culture and communication style; lack of awareness in the United States about the expertise and academic standards of Indian universities and life science research institutions; an Indian educational system that focuses more on rote learning than on problem solving; and the need for those who hold non-US PhDs to establish their scientific credibility through extensive postdoctoral training.

There are three key elements to breaking down barriers and advancing careers: mentorship, networking and collaboration. Professional relationships of these three forms are valuable whether you come from India, China or small-town America.

Mentors can open doors, give priceless insights into cultural nuances and provide feedback on the effectiveness of presentations and other communication. Networking builds connections that will facilitate career moves and scientific progress. Collaboration allows scientists to celebrate their 'sameness', share scientific passions and transcend cultural differences; it is the common language, the bond that provides support as researchers navigate their careers.

Filling a need

EPPIC (formerly known as "Enterprising Pharmaceutical Professionals from the Indian sub-Continent") is a nonprofit organization founded 12 years ago in the San Francisco Bay area to address many of the barriers that face Indian life science professionals. EPPIC's mission is to advance the

careers of life science professionals in the Indian-American community by promoting networking, collaboration and mentoring. The group also fosters US-India life science synergies and provides a resource for industry and academia. The vibrant and growing community at EPPIC includes scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, managers, executives, specialized service providers, consultants and investors. In the past 12 years, EPPIC has organized over 40 quarterly networking events and four annual conferences to promote the success of the Indian-American life science community.

Over the last 10 years there have been several studies and articles focused on the careers of immigrant Asian scientists. These articles discuss the effects of so-called 'glass

ceilings', 'bamboo ceilings' and 'silicon ceilings' and try to identify the barriers and challenges faced by these immigrant ethnic communities³⁻⁵. In 2006, Roli Varma conducted a study on India's 'techno-immigrants' working in the United States⁶. A study with specific emphasis on the Indian-American life science community does not exist but would be extremely valuable. There is no organization better suited than EPPIC to conduct such a study. Therefore, EPPIC strongly urges all Indian-American life science professionals to participate in our survey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/EPPIC_Survey). The survey results will be made available in late 2010 and will form the basis for further targeted research and strategies aimed at improving career trajectories

and promoting success in the life science community of Indian origin.

COMPETING FINANCIAL INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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