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Building the Next Generation

Michael Hall, Roche, Welwyn Garden City, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Within our programming and statistics departments, we have successfully ran a student recruitment program for a number of years. Students approaching their third year of University will take a year away from their studies to gain experience in a professional environment. The benefits work both ways; we as a company offer bright young individuals a route into the industry, which they may otherwise find difficult to obtain as a graduate. In return, what do we get? Enthusiasm, fresh ideas and an enormous talent pool of potential for highly sought after positions to name but a few. Many students upon completion of their final year of studies have jumped at the opportunity to apply for permanent positions at the company. Due to the students' time spent working here we know what we're taking on, with instances of returning graduates climbing their way up to management positions and even beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Attrition and staff retention will always pose issues for any business. In an industry where lucrative contracting jobs are frequently offered, and recruiters are constantly trying to entice people into new jobs, do we need to think of different methods to acquire and retain talented employees? Obviously experienced staff will always be at a premium, but by offering a route into the industry for keen and intelligent people, we can look to build this experience from the ground up, and with it, a sense of loyalty and belonging to a company.

RECRUITMENT

Every year we will look to recruit four placement students to our statistical programming and statistics departments. We will target University students who are enrolled on mathematics or statistics courses with an industry placement year as part of the curriculum; however we are willing to consider most appropriate applicants.

Building relations with Universities can form a key part of this, with word of mouth and presentations from former placement students notably increasing interest in the scheme. Established links with University contacts themselves play a crucial role too, as whilst advertisements are sent to many Universities, it is ultimately up to them how they publicise the roles. For these reasons we see a lot of strong applicants coming from the same Universities each year.

It is not required that applicants have prior experience in the statistical programming packages we are looking for, as we are confident that if we find the right individual, this can be trained and learnt on the job. Assessments constitute a broad range of considerations; general interview, logic test, technical statistics test and a team exercise are all included to gauge how well a candidate may fit into a team.

THE ROLE

Any starter in a role at a new company has a lot to learn. However, when industry knowledge, therapeutic areas and technical tools are all added to the learning of company systems and procedures, there is a lot to take in. This process isn't expected to happen overnight, and support including training courses and close mentorship is provided to help get new starters up to speed. With this guidance, placement students can make themselves an asset, rather than an overhead within a few months.

During their placement year, students will be expected to contribute in a large number of areas. Standard production of datasets, tables, listings and figures, QC of others' work, presentations, department initiatives and even leading small studies across either early development or late phase trials may be undertaken within the year. They will be treated in a similar manner to a permanent member of staff, with line managers looking for opportunities for personal development throughout their time spent at the company.

When nearing the end of a placement year, students will often be asked if they'd like to extend their contract until they return to their studies at University. This overlap period of about three months with the next intake of students can prove very useful. By this time the previous students are able to guide and help train the new students in various aspects of the role, thus relieving a significant part of the burden that may have been placed on permanent staff to do this.

BENEFITS

We often find students are already familiar with R and other programming languages aside from SAS. Previously our industry has always stuck with SAS, and only now has started to venture in new directions for tools. Having this insight means students can give something different when on placement, offering suggestions about when the use of other tools may be beneficial, or even helping in the development of permanent staff in the form of advice or training in the tools themselves.

In an ideal situation, students will leave to complete their studies, and then show an interest in returning to the company once they have done so. There is no pressure on them to do this; however the benefit of both parties knowing what they're taking on is big when making this decision. Quite frequently when students do decide they wish to return to the industry, they are happy to come to Roche as their first port of call. In doing so, expensive recruitment agents are bypassed, presenting a significant saving for the company.

The onboarding period in these cases is minimal, with returning students already familiar with any in-house systems and processes. Often these graduates will remain at the company for a significant period of time, and there are many instances of returning students working their way up the company ladder. Former placement students may now be found occupying project lead, management and even head of site roles within Roche.

CHALLENGES

Sometimes students may not suit the role as well as initially hoped, however with a limited term of employment, the risks presented to the company are minimal. One of the most pertinent challenges is students formally accepting offers, but continuing to apply for placements elsewhere. Late drop outs can unfortunately deny other students a role which they would have been delighted to take, so it can be preferential to collaborate with Universities who discourage their students from doing this.

Explaining the differences between the roles of a statistical programmer and a statistician to candidates with no prior knowledge of the industry can also be a challenge. Although this becomes apparent to students throughout the year, it may be that they regret not having this knowledge when first deciding which role to apply for. Conversely, it also causes much debate amongst the recruitment team when candidates show no clear preference of role and could fit into either.

THE FUTURE

So far the success stories have far outweighed the tales of woe; therefore we see no reason for the scheme to discontinue in the foreseeable future. A possible extension of the scheme could see more departments involved, with rotations or split roles across a period of 12 to 15 months. This would have the benefit of students being able to see which role they are best suited to, whilst also building a more all-round knowledge of the industry and key functions close to their own role.

CONCLUSION

The value added to the statistical programming and statistics departments at Roche from having a student placement scheme is very evident. The scheme has been running successfully for 14 years, and the benefits of having an established scheme in place are a definite asset for the company. Not only have valuable members of staff been recruited in this manner, but fresh views and ideas have been brought into the departments. Inefficient industry norms are more likely to be challenged, with placement or returning students often keen to adapt different tools they have used elsewhere to our sometimes dated processes. There are many untapped and talented individuals out there who can benefit from us, just as we can benefit from them.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Michael Hall

Roche Products Ltd

6 Falcon Way, Shire Park

Welwyn Garden City

AL7 1TW

United Kingdom

Work Phone: (44) 1707 36 6413

Email: Michael.Hall@Roche.com

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