

**You'll have to check my calendar:
A newbie's insights into the world of pharma**

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ABSTRACT

Organisations usually vary in how they are structured and how they perform. A lot of this depends on the types of organisation, the size and the management, but it is the workforce and what they understand that truly drives a business.

Having recently moved to a large multinational pharmaceutical company from a small, local CRO, there has been a noticeable difference in the ways that the companies operate. From meetings and communication, to processes and attitudes, there has been a lot of transition, some of it straightforward and obvious and some of it slow, and at times, confusing.

This paper explores some of these insights, comparing a 2-year stint as a statistician in a CRO with a relatively new outlook as a programmer within corporate pharma, explaining these differences and highlighting areas in which each organisation could use as a learning point from the other.

INTRODUCTION

I began my pharmaceutical career as a statistician in small CRO, working primarily on phase I studies. Although my role was that of a statistician, it involved a diverse range of responsibilities: data management - mapping, cleaning, transforming; programming – derived data, specification and report writing; PK analysis and maybe sometimes some actual statistics! In the two years that I was there, I gained experience in many aspects of biometrics.

In early 2018, I started to look for programming roles – the role that I felt suited me best. My search ultimately led me to break with the world of CROs and join “big pharma”. This move presented a great change, in not just in where I worked, but more how I worked, and my experiences form the inspiration for this paper. It is portrayed as a discussion of CRO versus Big Pharma, however reference will be made to behaviours symptomatic of being a larger company versus those of being a smaller company. For the purposes of this paper any comparisons made will be that of a CRO (specifically, my experience of a CRO) versus a large pharma company (again, my experiences of) but it should not be ignored that more than a few examples given here could be applied to a variety of industries and setups.

APPLICATION AND INTERVIEW PROCESS

From the beginning there were noticeable differences in the ways each company operated. The interview processes varied markedly. For the CRO, I applied for an advertised job by sending in my CV with a covering letter. After an initial telephone screening interview, I was then invited for a face-to-face interview which was (fortunately) followed up with a job offer the next day. The entire process from application to offer was approximately one month.

For pharma, whilst not noticeably different in what was expected of me in the actual interviews, was significantly different in how the company operated. I was approached by a company employee who was interested in my CV. Sometime later I went through a telephone screening interview which resulted in being invited for a half-day interview. The process and the interview took much longer than for the CRO. From application to offer spanned several months.

This is by no means a complaint in how long the process took, simply an acknowledgement of the greater complexities in recruiting at a larger organisation. At the CRO there were at most 4 people involved in all the interviewing and decision-making, whereas at the pharma company I personally had interactions with at least 10 different people with regards my interviews and job offer (undoubtedly others unknown to myself, were also involved). The difference here would be that the CRO, being a smaller company, has a smaller HR department and shorter chain of command so allows for more personable and quicker decision-making. Big pharma however has stricter processes and thus tends to have more bodies involved in any hiring decisions, extending the time taken from advert to interview to job offer to acceptance and starting.

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I would say that these different approaches to recruitment certainly have an effect; a pharma company would probably have a more competitive recruitment pool due to a number of factors, including prestige and opportunity, unlike the CRO which may struggle more to acquire similarly talented workers. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as the CRO is then more likely to take chances on people, and while this could end up as a poor move, conversely, it could end up having a major payoff. At a time when good programmers are in short commodity, shortening the recruitment cycle time is proving to be a challenge across the industry, and it may be that there is something to be gleaned from the lighter recruitment processes of CROs.

MEETINGS AND TIME

One of the biggest culture shocks was the constant barrage of meetings: Although it is reasonable to assume an initial increase in meeting commitments owing to training, on-boarding and gaining familiarity with colleagues, there is no respite. In fact, they seem to be increasing as I gain more responsibilities. I do not have to attend as many meetings as my senior colleagues, but this is still an extraordinary amount compared to my time at a CRO; I used to have 2-3 meetings a month and now it is not unusual to have that many a day!

To begin with, many of these meetings appeared on the surface to provide minimal return. I did not have enough knowledge or context to contribute to what was being discussed, but this has definitely changed over time. I still occasionally have meetings which I would question are they the best use of my time, but I am getting better at identifying these. Perhaps I took too naïve an approach when I first started and assumed that a calendar invite meant compulsory attendance.

I genuinely get the feeling at times that there are those who enjoy meetings simply because they see it as a "badge of honour" and this is certainly more noticeable in pharma than it ever was in the CRO. This in part may be down to the more competitive nature that I've noticed in the pharma company than in the CRO

Speaking to others who have also worked in CROs, there is usually an acknowledgment of some sort with regards timekeeping and billability, which could be a factor in there being fewer meetings. Fortunately for me, I did not experience this fixation with the monetary side of things, with regards time management at least. There is also the case that, as everybody was based locally, and working from home was not common practice, there wasn't a need to arrange a time when everyone was available. People could exchange thoughts and information in a less formal setting.

Whilst no time is free, the perspective of how it is spent, from my experience, is quite different across the different types of organisations. CROs are more likely to focus on the immediate, short-term demand, somewhat like short order cooks, delivering a study or component, such as TLGs as a standalone item. Pharma companies have longer term perspectives, seeing their studies as part of a greater whole that supports and drives forward the science. These two worlds are not incompatible - there are many successful partnerships between clients and vendors – nor are the different operating perspectives wholly confined to one organisational type or the other, but they are typical, and can cause misunderstanding and missed opportunity.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE/FUNCTIONS

Coming in from a CRO, I was quite used to a small team; there were around twenty-five of us in total. This meant that I was well acquainted with the entire team and, because of the wide range of project tasks, I quite often worked with the whole department over a number of studies. However, as soon as I joined big pharma, my programming department alone numbered well beyond 25 and that's just locally. Across the whole of biometrics there must easily be a few hundred in this office alone, in addition to the many spread out across the other sites and around the world. Additional to this, are the contractors and external business partners who we work with regularly on a day-to-day basis. And then there's all the other departments that make up the lattice work of delivery.

It's not just the greater number of staff that has taken getting used to. It's also how distinct the departments are within biometrics. Where before I knew everyone in the company, it can feel like I barely know anyone outside of programming, let alone stats or data management. I know the members of the teams I am a part of, but, unless they are local and I can meet with them in person, my knowledge of them may be limited to a name and a voice. This seems odd given how closely related our roles probably are. That being said, there are a lot more communities and opportunities in pharma, allowing colleagues across functions to meet and achieve common goals; for anyone coming into pharm they just have to make sure they're actively join and participate in these groups.

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TRAINING AND SUPPORT

I have found the approach to training very different between the two organizations. Whilst the CRO was more on the job training and less formal, big pharma is a lot more structured, with a lot of training materials in place due to the larger number of staff to train. Whilst both still expect you to go through all of the SOPs, in terms of day-to-day tasks the CRO allowed me more flexibility in my learning and an increase in responsibilities quite quickly, allowing me to pick things up quicker, asking questions and getting the work when appropriate.

The training in pharma is more extensive; initially there were many SOPs to read, learning modules to complete and training sessions to attend. There were inductions into various systems and many displays and pointers of locations for numerous amounts of essential information. In part due to its size but also the culture of the company I work for, they are more able and willing to invest not only in my technical development, such as R and data visualization, but also in soft skills, such as public speaking and leadership training, and see these are key in my career development and long-term progression within the company. For anyone considering a move from a CRO to a large pharma company this is a definite attraction.

As is the case with any job move from one company to another, there will be an unfamiliarity for all the new rules and processes: there is an expectation that things will be similar to some way in which you've worked before and then there is the inevitable shock to the system when it soon transpires that different companies have completely different ways of doing things. This was certainly the case for me and for a period of time I constantly felt like a rabbit in headlights – this is no longer the case but there were certainly moments when I wondered if I'd made the correct career decision. Fortunately, I am surrounded by some incredibly supportive colleagues, not least my line manager and project lead who provided much reassurance. Whilst it is certainly true that it is down to an individual in how they treat you, the attitude of the company indicate that they expect all its employees to behave in this way.

BENEFITS/FACILITIES/AMENITIES

Needless to say, the benefits in big pharma greatly exceed that of a CRO; there are a greater variety of schemes and benefits available to employees, and these help encourage employees to stay with the company in the longer term.

One thing I have certainly noticed in my time working in both organizations is the attitude to wellbeing. Whilst the CRO felt more personal due to the smaller number of staff, there was no overarching structure in terms of employee wellbeing. In contrast, whilst there is a much larger workforce in the pharma company, and the closeness with colleagues might not necessarily be as present, there is a greater emphasis on employees and their wellbeing. Not just in their wellbeing at work, but in their personal lives too. Having previously worked in companies (excluding the CRO) where these things are not necessarily taken into consideration, I can appreciate more what is being done. Aside from things such as a gym, on site physiotherapy, masseuse, etc., there are also many schemes for colleagues as part of a flexible benefits system. You can also purchase extra days of holiday which is always a delight.

Where recruitment and retention are a common challenge across the industry, the overall package offered is an important component in attracting new talent and rewarding/recognizing existing colleagues. In this pharma companies are likely to have the edge, as they are typically more able to afford these benefit schemes and build more comprehensive benefit packages.

TYPE OF WORK

As I have discussed previously, the type of work varies greatly between the two different organizations: where there was a greater variety of things I could do within the CRO, pharma allows greater variety within programming and functional representation. In the CRO, as I was a statistician, I could perform a number of tasks related to the role, but I was also able to do many programming tasks, as well as some data management. I was also in the unique position of being a PK analyst, which added another dimension to the work I was doing.

Having this experience allowed me to gain a lot of knowledge quite quickly and made me a good source of information for a lot of people, not just within the department, but within the company. Being in this position made me feel incredibly valued, which made it a difficult decision to leave as I really enjoyed what I was doing.

Having been in a pharma company for a while now, it is still an odd sensation that, workwise, my main tasks are entirely programming related. I am no longer considered a go-to source of information for many aspects of a study, I am longer as visible – as a programmer, I am part of a much larger team, each of us playing our own particular

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role within the greater team. Whilst this is obviously not unique to a pharma company, it is the first time I've seen it from this perspective, having previously been in a role with more overarching responsibilities.

WORKLOAD

Due to the nature of a CRO, it is very limited in the work that is available, but this work tends to come in high volume with shorter turnaround times. By the time it came to me leaving, I had a very good knowledge of all the tasks that needed completing and how to find this information fairly easily, allowing me to keep myself busy where needed and help reduce the load during critical periods. When there was time I was also able to identify areas of improvement in programs or processes and work on these.

This is not as easy to do in the pharma company as there is a lot more available work and a greater number of people involved in its delivery for the distribution of work to not be organised incredibly well: there needs to be far more coordination, communication and collaboration. Because of the large team in place in pharma, and how spread out they are, communication is incredibly important; if people don't communicate, there can be a lot of confusion and the best way for teams to stay coordinated is to stay connected.

CULTURE

Working in a CRO, you never really appreciate the medicines you are working with, or what you are working towards – especially in early phase studies. Because a molecule doesn't belong to the organization you work for, there isn't a real understanding of what it does, why, or how it does it. In my time at a CRO I must have worked on dozens of molecules in some capacity, but I can barely tell you what any of them were supposed to treat. All I know is that we were testing that they were safe for humans; the doses we should be giving; and the interactions of any drugs with the human body.

Working in pharma however has been eye opening. To start with, at my level, you no longer work on multiple drugs, for various ailments in various capacities – you focus on one, maybe two, drugs and you quickly learn much of the science behind the disease area and how the drug is treating that disease. There is an incredible focus on the patients, certainly where I am, and there is a constant celebration of molecules that achieve key milestones in their development or when we launch to market – not because of increased revenues for the company but because the work we are doing is having a positive impact on the lives of patients.

IT AND COMPUTER SYSTEMS

Obviously, with there being a sizeable difference between the companies in employees and systems, it's not surprising to learn that this requires a massive difference in approach to IT solutions. As the CRO has a much smaller workforce and fewer systems necessary, this means the IT department doesn't require quite as many staff. The servers are all located on site and all of the help is in-house. There are no external numbers to call, there is no 24 hours help desk, just an email system for requests or low-level issues. For any bigger issues there is a phone number, or alternately, you can go and speak to the member of the IT department in person.

Pharma, however, having to cater for approximately 90,000 workers, with many more software to implement and maintain and various time zones to deal with, has a much larger IT contingent. In order to accommodate everyone, there is generally support 7 days a week, which is useful at times when there are critical deliverables due, just for the reassurance that, if there are any IT or system problems, there are people on hand to help resolve those issues. But the size of pharma IT means it is not one IT team, and rather is comprised of many disparate teams, each with their own remit and area of expertise. Identifying which team is the right team to help with an issue is not always obvious or straightforward.

CONCLUSION

All in all, each organisation has its own positives and negatives, neither organisation is perfect. Whilst the CRO was small and seems to offer less than the pharma company, my time there was invaluable as it allowed me to grow quickly and in multiple directions, rapidly expanding my knowledge of the pharma industry, especially with regards all things biometrics.

So why move? Although pharma may not at times be as agile as a CRO, or the range of activities as diverse, it is exciting to be an active part of these new discoveries. As a programmer within pharma I am able to build a greater depth of knowledge of the science and a stronger connection with science and ultimately the medicine and treatments that impact the lives of our patients.

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We live in an exciting moment in time within biometrics - the promise of personalized medicine, real world evidence and acceleration in development will impact how the industry operates, and the partnerships it forms. I am glad that I had the opportunity to experience working in both CRO and in pharma, and am pleased that I was able to take away what I did. I think the industry benefits from both approaches, and that both are stronger with a movement of talent from one to the other.

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