

Prospecting for Great Programmers – Advice from a Hiring Manager to Make You a Solid Gold Addition to the Team

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Prospecting for Great Programmers – Advice from a Hiring Manger to Make You a Solid Gold Addition to the Team

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ABSTRACT

Eureka! SAS programming in the pharmaceutical industry is a very rewarding career. For the manager, when hiring or dealing with the day to day, having extraordinary SAS programming resources to count on is as good as gold. When looking at a stack of CVs, how do we shake the pan to find the ones that are truly sparkling? That is, how do we select the ones to interview? What makes a good interview and more importantly a good hire? Once integrated into the team, how does the programmer gain trust, and elevate to be the real deal and not just iron pyrite? You can stand out by considering some nuggets of advice that can serve to differentiate you from the others in the eyes of your manager and peers.

This paper is for everybody. It breaks down concepts from the manager and employee perspectives, before and after a programmer is added to a team. This is important because job changes occur frequently in the course of a career. You can shine from the very start and get brighter over time! Topics will be explored on how to develop as a programmer, how to communicate with your manager, clients and peers, and how to develop your leadership potential. The ideas unearthed in this presentation will set you on your quest to build a solid gold career.

INTRODUCTION

First let me state that when dealing with people there is no exact formula that works the same for everybody. The human condition has so many variables that it is impossible to create a program, that when followed to the letter, will produce the same results every time. It is not what you can expect from a fully validated SAS program used in clinical research. The intent is not to give you a step-by-step procedure but to cover topics and provide suggestions for you to think about as you stake your claim on a brilliant career within our extraordinary industry. Items covered will span across our personal experience and our unique perspectives on both sides of the lead/support relationship. As we dig into these topics, we'll pan for the gold nuggets of wisdom that may be helpful to you. At the very least, use this information as a self-exploration of sorts, a kind of personal data-mining, to find individual meaning, specific actions and, we hope in the end, personal benefit.

Our organization has been successful in finding exceptional talent, which is motivated and takes responsibility for their own career trajectory. Using if-then-else logic is certainly not showcased here on how we hire and evaluate our staff. These topics are meant to be general in nature and give you something to think about as you follow your personal trail to success. At a high level, we begin with some self-evaluation before you even consider a new role within your organization or start prospecting for a new position. Concepts and items to consider before, during and after an interview are presented. Finally, once you are selected we will discuss items to help polish your image and demonstrate your value to your department or project team. Building a solid gold career requires a thoughtful and intentional approach. Good planning and knowing where to dig deeper will help you build integrity, provide focus and push you in the right direction. Gather your accoutrements, pull out your gold mining pan, and let's start looking at some helpful nuggets. We will do this at points along the way on your journey to personal success.

PRIOR TO A JOB CHANGE

We've all changed jobs at some point in our career and the reasons may vary. A recent news release stated that the average person with a Bachelor's degree changed jobs about 12 times between the years 1978 and 2012 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Some had to change and others made the change by choice. Doing the math, that is a job change roughly every 3 years over this span. That number seems on par with the job applicants for contracted CRO SAS programming positions within our industry, though this is just an estimate based on our limited sample size of experience. People working at sponsor pharma companies usually stay a lot longer as do permanent employees at CROs. Given the current direction of our industry, there is a high likelihood that at least one more job change is on the horizon.

BEFORE THE DECISION TO CHANGE

Regardless of the reason, job changes are not taken lightly and there are many things to consider before making any change. Not the least of which is the driver for change. If you feel your organization is not providing what you are

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looking for, you need to first consider how you can influence change within your current organization. If this can be done, it is win for you, your company and your customers. Decisions to leave come with baggage so be sure you're not taking that baggage with you.

SELF-PREPARATION

What is your definition of success? If it is simply the size of your paycheck then you are probably working in the wrong industry. We work hard in pharma and are compensated fairly for our effort, but most people I have worked with look at much more than just pay. Some consider the contributions made to the effort at finding cures for disease and increasing the quality of life of our patients. Others value the respect that is given to them for their clinical or programming knowledge or abilities to get things done. Some like working with data and providing solutions to the many challenges that come up during the course of a project. The meaning of success is a personal thing but I bet yours has at least a mix of these components.

Identify your areas of special interests and take an inventory of your skillset. Is there a match between the two? If so, where? If you are doing the work that you truly love, then a career in your field doesn't feel as much a job as it does a personally rewarding and fulfilling use of your time. Here is an example: some programmers really like to work out cause and effect or structured logic to provide resolution or clarity to a problem or process. This is both interesting and challenging. Is it rewarding to them after their logic has been verified by others? You bet! Do you know somebody like that? Do they look for ways to incorporate logic into their daily work?

Here is a little secret that has helped many in their professional careers. Most professionals generally like to help other people. Don't be afraid to ask for help or provide this help when asked. Most managers will look for the right opportunities for you if they know what you want. Help others. Put yourself out there and volunteer for new things when you have the time. Let's take a look at your pan. Swirl the water and wash away some of the mud. Maybe some of these will be a gold nugget:

- Prepare yourself
 - Understand yourself and what defines success to you.
 - Understand your company and where you fit in. Can you make small adjustments that will benefit you and your organization?
 - What interests you? Do you gravitate toward certain areas of interest? Is this available at your current company or does this require you to look elsewhere?
 - Are you passionate about some certain aspects? Are these built into your goals? If not, can you share this value with your current manager and build this in to future goals?
 - What is your plan to pursue those areas? Do you even have a plan?
 - Have you asked your manager to help you? Let your manager know what you want and see if you both can find the opportunities for you.

Consider your career as a long journey and be open to new opportunities if they match your goals. Many Argonauts, those forty-niners who sailed around the horn to California, were blinded by gold fever and showed up with nary a plan, and of course many failed. Match your goals with smart objectives and make sound decisions. Understand what new benefits or experiences lay ahead and what is important to you. You don't have to employ a perfect plan, just think ahead and try to learn as much about your potential opportunities as possible. Use websites, user groups and your network, even ask your peers direct questions about where they see you and where your strengths lie. Get as much information as you can to help in your decision making. Shake, rattle and roll that pan to see what nuggets we can use:

- Don't just change for change's sake!!
 - Know what you want / find out what YOUR company offers, then look to what other companies offer
 - Understand the company and position for which you are applying. If possible get a sense of the career path. Does that line up with your expectations?
 - Have a plan and evaluate how it allies with the company
 - Network, network, network

If your plan has you looking outside of your company for opportunities then you will have to sell yourself and make the best first-impression possible with your CV in order to get selected for an interview. It is no secret that keywords are useful in a CV for searching and selecting potential candidates. Don't waste space with career objectives and the

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old “references available upon request”. Start with a concise summary of who you are and what value you bring as a candidate. Some call this an elevator pitch and it is important considering the hiring manager may have just a few minutes to review your CV and decide if you will move any further. There is temptation to embellish in order to sell yourself, but beware! The forty-niners of old used to stake false claims to throw off the competition. Be careful with any shenanigans on your CV because you may be asked to share more details, and explain your experience. Remember, most jobs require an attention to detail, so be sure you don’t have any spelling or grammar mistakes or you may not even be called. Shake, rattle and roll; let’s see what pans out:

- Getting selected for interview
 - What to look for in a CV
 - 30 Second elevator pitch
 - Describe what you are good at and what you are looking for
 - History, skills, keywords
 - Concise statements of contributions value you brought and how
 - Check the details, dates, spelling, be able to explain anything on CV you may be asked

Now you’re onto something and have been selected for the interview. Remember, both sides are now looking for that lucky strike and you have to really shine. Be confident and answer every question but make sure you understand what is being asked first. During interviews, many candidates simply answer questions with definitions of some data or analysis model and so forth. To differentiate yourself, use actual examples from your implementation of the model in question. Real-world experience is much more impressive. It’s okay if you don’t have experience on a certain task. In a case like this, have you performed a similar task or can you provide an example of a time where you did learn on the job and were successful? Demonstrate your mastery on the related skill and how you will apply learning from that task to what is needed.

For instance if you have been asked about programming ADLB datasets, and you haven’t even developed any BDS programming, don’t waste time describing the BDS. If you have similar experience developing legacy analysis datasets then talk about some of the challenges you’ve overcome. Show your mastery of the data and describe how you may have implemented the analysis. Show good examples of teamwork and talk about how dedicated you were to task and timelines. Show that you were a team player and that you understand what it takes to get the task done and that you have the drive and ability to follow through to completion.

Your primary objective is to get the hiring manager to have a strong feeling and level of confidence regarding your fit for their organization. It is not just your skillset but your attitude and approach that is important.. You must also determine if this job is the right fit for you. Understand the role to be filled and understand the organization’s purpose and values. Do your own homework and be prepared with questions of your own. It is very impressive for the interviewer if you know about the organization and have specific questions about the role and how you fit in to the overall goals of the company. Also, use your time wisely and save the HR questions related to benefits and compensation for another time. Hey, you don’t even have the job offer yet! Swish, swirl, see if any of the items here pan out for you:

- During the interview
 - What makes a great interview
 - First impressions
 - Know about company to which you are applying
 - Blogs posted, drugs developed, specialties
 - Be calm and relaxed
 - Connecting with the manager/interviewer
 - How to express yourself
 - Standing out
 - Does the manager feel this candidate will fit in well
 - Demonstrating experience with the job/role

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AFTER A JOB CHANGE

If you have made a job change or a change to a new department congratulations on your bonanza! Now that you have struck gold, a whole new level of work begins. You now have high expectations. After the minors found a productive area, they would typically employ a tool called a cradle which was a little box that was used to wash away all of the unwanted dirt and mud leaving behind valuable gold dust. This is much like the refinement of scope to the immediate objectives of your new position. The time is nigh to be at the top of your game. Set up narrow objectives and more importantly deliver on them. Get up to speed quickly and start producing for your new team. Swish, swirl, see what's in the pan:

- Expectations
 - Meeting expectations of your employer
 - Meeting expectations of yourself
 - Approach your work on a daily basis to align with your plan

Every journey starts with a single step and at this stage, yours is to understand your new environment. The first part of that sentence comes from Confucius. To further quote him, “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, with is the bitterest.” Observe everything and understand why you are at your new position, there is a reason. Learn what is important in your department and see how people interact with one another. Share your experience and bring ideas to the table. If you have a special skill, look for opportunities to present early on so you can make a good first impression then follow-through on all things so you can make a lasting impression.

In our industry we all follow SOPs so learn how things are done and follow the rules. You will establish credibility by doing the right thing and following through on the items expected of you. Some say over-promise and under deliver. Set high expectations for yourself and deliver according to your plan. Forty-niners used to refer to the term “grubstake”. That is just enough return to buy your next meal. Using your skills and wherewithal, be much more than that to your team. Get up to speed and start contributing right away. Swishing the water through your cradle we see the following:

- Adapting to your new environment
 - Learn the processes and systems to understand them thoroughly
 - Learning the company culture not just the SOPs
 - Fitting in with the team
 - Establish credibility
 - Bring your skills and ideas

There are a few areas which will either make or break you regarding how you are perceived to your new peers. These are communication, efficiency and quality in your work. American philosopher, William James, has a very relevant quote, “Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.” Be diligent in these three areas and you will find great success in your position.

Whenever you are in a new situation or are assigned a new project or unfamiliar task, you will have a lot of questions. This is expected and usually planned within your timelines and those of your project leads or team members. Spend a little time and think about how you wish to communicate your questions. Find out from your colleagues or customer groups if they already have a preferred medium like logs, email or some other way to get the message across. Also, spend time, but not too much, to find the answers yourself. Give your questions in batches to avoid becoming somewhat of a distraction. Finally and most importantly, take time to listen, and by doing so let the information sink in.

We are human, therefore we make mistakes. That is our reality and you can count on making mistakes. They will happen sooner or later. What you do about them says a lot about your composition and fortitude. Accountability means taking ownership of your mistakes, recognizing the impact rectifying the matter with the proper resolution. You need to also understand why you made the mistake and finally how you can ensure that it doesn't happen again. It is good to be accountable and you will earn respect. But it is better not to make the mistake in the first place. Be careful and check your work. If you don't have time to thoroughly check your work, then talk to your team. Again, seek help if needed. Above all, the quality of your work should be your top priority.

Most people in our industry work under fairly tight timelines and are expected to produce the highest quality deliverables. Regulations require high quality, validated deliverables and project managers and your customers will require them in as little time as possible. If you are a programmer, then write your code with the idea to reuse it as

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much as possible. Employ validated macros or other department tools which will reduce the chance for error while increasing speed. Ask for help or take a class to increase your skills. Never stop learning. Open your mind to think of ways to fully utilize the resources at your disposal in order to become faster and better. The gold prospectors did this when they channeled water from a river or stream to separate out the gold dust. This gutter was known as a long tom and greatly increased the efficiency of the process. Washing away the sediment we see the following:

- Personal accountability in all that you do
 - Communication
 - Get the job done right
 - Speed and accuracy
 - Improve your efficiency

Whether you know it or not, the things you do have an effect on others. During the gold rush, somebody's stake would pan out and then everyone was rushing into the area to stake their own claim. While your actions may not have such an explosive effect, good positive interactions with others, quality workmanship, and dependability will lead to influence within your teams. That means that you don't have to be at the top in order to lead. Look for ways to help others. Talk to your managers and leads and volunteer to tackle issues that they are aware of that need action. These can be big issues or not. Even if there are no burning issues for you, try to help others with theirs whenever you can. You will learn a lot and gain respect. As you gain responsibility you may find that you are assigned to bigger and more visible issues that require a lot of thought.

Good problem solvers get as much information as they can at the start of any endeavor before trying to develop a solution. If you are on a bigger issue, then you may find yourself talking to many people. You will look to break down the issues into logical chunks that can be further broken down into very specific statements of fact. Then you can turn each fact into an objective and order those into a plan. You then will be able to look at your plan and anticipate what those actions will lead to. Throughout this process you may be communicating your analysis, action plan and/or timing with others. There is a very good book named "The Goal: A Process of Ongoing Improvement. It is related to this subject and was written by Dr. Eliyahu Goldratt. This is highly suggested reading for anyone wishing to learn more about problem solving and leadership. The take away here is that leadership begins with being competent, available and willing to accept any challenge that comes before you. Stake your claim to any of the following and your leadership potential will soar:

- Building leadership
 - Leadership can come from any level
 - Help others
 - Work with your lead/manager
 - Breaking down issues
 - Anticipation
 - Communication
 - Analysis & Action

CONCLUSION

We have lightly touched on some nuggets of wisdom from the eyes of a hiring manager. We are always prospecting (outside and inside our organization) for solid gold performance. We have presented some items for you to really dig into during your quest for success. The path started with understanding what is important to you. We cannot stress enough how important it is to make the most of the position that you have and align that with your personal goals. We then wound along as we worked through the preparation and expectations before and after a job change. Then we talked a little about personal accountability and leadership. The chances of any hiring manager finding fool's gold among the dear readers of this paper should be severely diminished if these solid gold thoughts are dusted upon the daily repertoire of their successful habits. Eureka!

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RECOMMENDED READING

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