



## | How to set up a successful CRO by surrounding yourself with the right team members

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**Afshin Safavi is a veteran biochemist with extensive experience establishing and leading bioanalytical teams in pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and manufacturing companies, as well as CROs. He and his teams have supported the development of a broad range of therapeutics in pre-clinical and clinical-trial laboratories. Prior to founding BioAgilytx, he was the Director of Ligand Binding and Immunoassay, operating under GLP at AAIPharma. At Talecris BioTherapeutics, he led the Preclinical and Clinical Assay Development team, building on his experience as a senior scientist at Nobex Corporation, GlaxoSmithKline and IGEN International.**



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In my previous article published in July 2015 on Bioanalysis Zone, I briefly described how I established a successful CRO using personal credit. In this article, I would like to share with you some of the practices that I employed to identify, interview, recruit and retain the individuals who helped me to build and grow BioAgilytix. Please note that for the purposes of this article, my focus is on the recruitment process utilized for building our Scientific and Operational Teams and does not include practices used for the recruitment of Executive, Finance, Sales, or Marketing Teams.

Before exploring the details of successful talent recruitment and employee retention, it is very important for executives of CRO companies to recognize that the most important factor in making a CRO successful is the people that you hire i.e., teams that interact with clients, run the facility and perform the scientific analyses. A CRO can have the latest and greatest platform instruments and technology, but these novel tools would be a wasted investment without client-driven scientists who understand how to properly use the technology and interpret the data generated.

As you prepare to hire your scientific team, it is very important to decide what you want your CRO to be known for and then screen for candidates who possess qualities that will help you achieve that company vision. From inception, the company goal at BioAgilytix was to establish a level of scientific knowledge and rigor that would differentiate us from other CROs. The focus on scientific excellence was in part a business decision inspired by the evolving pharmaceutical and biotech industry at that time. If you can recall, there was a noticeable shift in focus towards large molecule biotherapeutics, which luckily for me, coincided with my own personal interest and expertise in large molecule bioanalysis. However, each CRO is unique and must determine their own vision, then seek to hire scientific talent that fulfills that vision.

When CROs look to hire new scientific talent, managers are often instructed to find 'the best scientist' for the job. So how does one go about finding this rock-star addition to the team? You must first start by defining what the best fit is for your company, and more specifically, your departmental group. In the analytical and bioanalytical world, we often use the term 'fit for purpose' to define which assay parameters are important, depending on the use of the assay and/or the stage of drug development. The process is no different when deciding what type of employee will be 'the best scientist' for your team. With that in mind, I will review some considerations that I used to recruit for scientific talent at BioAgilytix.

BioAgilytix did not find its A-Team overnight, and we surely did not have the funds to obtain assistance from recruiters. Instead, we worked diligently to sift through hundreds of resumes found via word-of-mouth referrals from prior colleagues and trusted professionals in our community. Unfortunately, I cannot provide a generic timeline for how long it takes to establish a start-up team. In our case, it took about 6 months, but each scenario is different just like each company is different. The initial hiring process should never be rushed, for I have seen some CROs spend several years effortlessly trying to organically grow their team's size beyond 10 or 20 employees to no avail. In my opinion, stagnant companies such as these likely did not take enough time early on to acquire the right team members and failed create an environment that attracted/retained talented individuals.



In early 2008, when the other co-founders of BioAgilytix and I had just started the company on our own personal credit, we needed employees that shared our strong entrepreneurial values. These employees would be required to wear multiple hats and do everything from scientific analysis to business development activities. Our small yet agile team was tasked with the responsibility of doing whatever it took to bring in business and grow the company. Due to the intense workload and financial peaks and valleys characteristic of any start-up organization, I believe that it is critical to find employees who are mentally strong and spiritually resilient enough to handle the journey. The fate of your CRO rests within the hands of these selected individuals so it is important to keep employees invested in your company's success. One way of doing this is via competitive compensation packages for employees in the form of stock options, bonuses, dividends etc. Tying part of their compensation to company performance will make 'winning' for them as attractive as it is for you, and they will also feel the pain along with you when there are tough times. In other words, these employees should view themselves as part of the 'founding team.'

After BioAgilytix became cash positive and our business prospects were promising, the founders thought that additional hires were justified. The next group of people we decided to onboard were solid performers with excellent prior bioanalytical experience to start implementing more processes. These individuals can usually be found in various national and international bioanalytical conference meetings, or through job postings and recruiters. Early on we determined that a high level college degree or years of experience did not equate to relevant required experience and/or trainable employees. Hence, we created a policy that required all scientific applicants to take a written and practical test that evaluated key qualifying factors of the relevant position, regardless of their degree or experience level. This practice is a little unconventional, and I expect that each CRO will craft its own method for determining 'candidate cut-points.'

The subsequent stage of hires usually requires a mixture of solid performers of various experiential levels as well as entry level analysts. In my experience, I have noticed the tendency of many CROs to jump rapidly into this stage in order to keep the cost structure low and maximize profit. In my opinion this is an absolute mistake for the following reasons: (1) although the company may see relatively higher margins early on, the growth will be limited due to lack of strong scientific expertise and entrepreneurial culture; (2) absence of an experienced team will result in an abundance of junior staff with limited hands-on knowledge, which could cause quality to suffer; and last but not least (3) pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies today want CROs that can work in a consultative manner, which requires a highly knowledgeable and experienced scientific team. With that being said, I would like to make it very clear that no CRO can sustain constantly hiring seasoned scientists; however, coming up with an appropriate proportion of junior to senior staff is important for the long term sustainability of any company.

With that, I hope that this article has provided you with a helpful perspective on hiring based on my experience – just in case you are feeling adventurous enough to start your own CRO. The reality is that I am not sure if there is one ‘secret recipe’ for success in this industry. I believe that our success is the product of a combination of practices and systems that we implemented. However, if I had to provide only one piece of advice to all executives or company leaders, then I would suggest to surround yourself with people who are as dedicated as you, as hard working as you, and smarter than you to help you build and grow your company. I will leave you with that until next month, when I will focus my article on practices that BioAgilytix uses to instill trust in clients; because without trust, you cannot retain clients or maintain company success.

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