

MOVERS

Jai Nagarkatti, president and chief executive, Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, Missouri



2005-06: Chief operating officer, Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, Missouri

2003-05: President, scientific research division, Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, Missouri

2000-03: President of fine-chemical division, Sigma-Aldrich, St Louis, Missouri

1987-99: President, Aldrich, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Jai Nagarkatti is an oddity in today's corporate world. He has spent his entire career at Sigma-Aldrich, a \$1.7-billion life-science and chemical company based in St Louis, Missouri. Captivated by chemistry at an early age, he left his native India for the United States to get a PhD in synthetic organic chemistry at Texas A&M University.

Throughout graduate school, Nagarkatti had ordered his chemicals from Aldrich, so it seemed natural to apply for a job there. Starting as a production chemist, he has risen through the ranks over the past three decades — a journey to his current role as president and chief executive that he says has gone fast.

Only last year did he receive his first formal business training, through Harvard Business School's Advanced Management programme. Nagarkatti's three months in the programme exposed him to new trends in organizational structure, employee development and, perhaps most importantly, strategic planning for a global economy. Learning primarily through case studies, Nagarkatti says the most important insights came from being able to interact with peers in related industries across globe. "Not only do you learn about conducting business internationally, you get insight into different cultural approaches to problem-solving," he says.

In many ways, his lack of formal business training was advantageous. Although he intuitively understood asset management and capital funding, Nagarkatti says it is his focus on listening — to both customer needs and employee ideas — that remains the driving force of his success. "Business is common sense," he says.

Nagarkatti carries on a company tradition of cultivating talented staff, which he cites as his greatest achievement. Following the Harvard programme, he selected ten high-potential employees from different parts of the company to help him develop a strategic plan for long-term growth. The plan, implemented last year, includes expanding the company's presence in growing economies such as the Pacific Rim countries and building on its Internet presence.

Over the years, Nagarkatti has rebuffed offers to work for competitors or other industries. Early on, he did entertain the notion. But he preferred to show allegiance to a company that had treated him fairly and rewarded him accordingly. "The grass always looks greener on other side until you are there," he says, adding that he couldn't walk away from the company he has helped build. ■

Virginia Gewin

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

Britain's postdocs unite

The longer my postdoc takes, the more time I get to spend on the beach. My research involves collecting and analysing seaweed on the shores of Plymouth, in sunny south England. But I eventually want to become an independent investigator and, as seaweed research is hardly 'big science' and my institution is small, there are few visible career options. No postdoc from my institute has landed a tenured position for over five years.

Only about a quarter of UK postdocs get those sought-after jobs, I've found, and there's a real shortage of information, especially for young investigators trying to establish themselves after postdocs.

Concerned about this, I set off to look for the British equivalent of the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA), which pushes for better pay and benefits and identifies problems through regular surveys. To my surprise, I discovered no such organization exists in Britain.

Last year, I chatted with one of the NPA's executive officers, Chris Blagden, about how to start a UK association. On Chris's advice, I contacted colleagues at other institutions to form an ad hoc steering committee. Our efforts bore fruit this month, when the UK Research Councils agreed to fund an inaugural meeting of the UK National Research Staff Association at University College London on 22 June. About 30 postdocs

will attend, representing institutes from Sussex to Dundee and disciplines from computing to midwifery.

UK postdocs need a national voice. The government is under pressure to retain young scientists, to compete with the emerging economies of China and India, but no one has asked us what it would take to keep us working in science. Although our welfare state makes healthcare and benefit worries less acute than in the United States, postdocs are often treated as temporary technicians, not as trainee principal investigators. The resulting emphasis on short-term productivity means no clear career structure exists.

We aim to found an association to advance UK research by fostering the creativity and independence of postdocs. To do this we need to gather information about working conditions and aspirations, and bring together postdocs, mentors and potential employers at workshops and conferences.

Our trickiest objective may simply be to create a self-sustaining structure. But with a potential membership of some of the smartest and most motivated 25-35-year-olds in the country, we're confident that we can establish a lasting, productive organization. ■

John Bothwell is a postdoctoral fellow at the Marine Biological Association of the UK, Plymouth, UK.

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Clocking out

The watch that I wear belonged to my grandfather. It's the kind that you have to wind up periodically. When fully wound, it runs a bit fast. Towards the end of the day it runs a bit behind. But as long as I remember to wind it every night, it's pretty accurate on average. My experience of graduate school has run to a timetable every bit as erratic as my watch.

My first few years went by quickly. Classes came at me in double time. No sooner had I finished my fledgling experiments than my qualifying exam was upon me. My first few years of graduate school were one of those frantic black-and-white films from the 1920s. But the last year has been a silent art-film: poignant and slower. My final few experiments seem to unfold frame-by-frame. Every minute at the lab bench makes graduation seem a more distant prospect.

I think of my grandfather often when I wind my watch. Doing so puts things in some perspective. My grandfather overcame much greater obstacles in war-time Holland. He took enormous pride in doing what he believed in and doing it well. Winding my watch reminds me, too, that time always seems to balance out in the end. The thrill and rush of starting a scientific project inevitably give way to a more measured period of working out the details. Although eager to graduate, I'm willing to trust that finishing a PhD is well worth my time. ■

Milan de Vries is a molecular-biology graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.