

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Workshop strives to put a plug in St. Louis brain drain

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At one table, a professor of molecular biology and immunology at St. Louis University detailed his work with poxvirus pathogenesis.

And the topics at other locations at the Scientific Talent Open House on Thursday were equally esoteric, ranging from transgenic rat research to nanoscience.

The event at the University of Missouri-St. Louis was not a science fair of the variety that attracted the 220 participants to the field in the first place (as the rest of us struggled through biology, chemistry and physics).

Still, it was a fair. Of sorts.

A job fair.

A job fair for very smart people.

And while brief overviews of esoteric and complex scientific research projects were a subtext providing participants with a glimpse of the area's intellectual firepower, the real motivation for the open house was quite elementary:

For the region to have any hope of growing the economy by retaining existing businesses and adding new companies to the base, it is imperative that St. Louis plug the brain drain that is siphoning top-drawer scientists and researchers to points elsewhere.

"We don't want to show companies that people are leaving; we need to show them that people are staying," pointed out Jennifer Sowah, a business outreach specialist with St. Louis Community College and the Center for Plant and Life Sciences at BRDG Park.

It goes without saying that the effort to keep the best and the brightest from fleeing has

suffered of late, what with Monsanto (900 jobs nationwide), KV Pharmaceutical (289 local jobs) and Pfizer (600 local jobs) all shedding payroll since last summer.

Given the scarcity of well-paying, comparable jobs in the local science and research sector, many displaced by those companies are forced to expand their search for employment beyond St. Louis.

"There are a lot of people in St. Louis who didn't or don't want to leave," said Connie Wagner, who lost her job as a pharmaceutical metabolism researcher with Pfizer.

"But they may not have any choice. There are so many creative people that worked (at Pfizer), and St. Louis is just going to lose them."

Cell biologist Robert Maher was another caught in the crossfire when Pfizer ceased operations at its Chesterfield research unit earlier this year.

Like many co-workers, Maher accepted a transfer to Chesterfield after a layoff when Pfizer pulled out of another facility, this one in Ann Arbor.

"It's actually much easier the second time around," he said. "The first time it's much more emotional. The second time you understand it's just business. You may not agree with the decision and you may wish it wasn't you, but it's much easier."

What's not as simple this time around is figuring out where to go next.

Three years following their arrival, Maher and his family have taken to St. Louis. They enjoy the quality of life and would like nothing more than to remain.

"The problem, for me, is that St. Louis is ag-centric. I'm not a plant biologist, I'm a cell biologist, and I'm not sure how I fit," he said.

Making Maher and hundreds like him aware that the region values their talents and wants nothing more than for them to stay in the area was the driving force behind Thursday's open house, said Blair Forlaw, vice president for talent development at the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association.

"We need to create a buzz," Forlaw said.

Hence, the idea to bring examples of the vicinity's still-vibrant research community — transgenic rat research, poxvirus pathogenesis, divergence in agricultural biotechnology and the like — to the attention of the 220 participants.

Mary Beth Ottinger brought both buzz and job opportunities to the workshop.

Jefferson College, where Ottinger is the division chair for the school of business and technical education, has a help-wanted sign out for instructors in several areas.

Ottinger thought the chance to teach courses in computer integrated manufacturing and advanced industrial electronics would be of special interest to those in attendance.

"I'm looking for people with expertise in specific fields," said Ottinger.

"That is as interesting to me as someone with teaching credentials."

Out of work for 10 months, environmental engineer Scott Lemmons isn't quite ready to make the leap to teaching. "I really like what I do," Lemmons explained.

The hitch, as Lemmons and others are discovering, is that narrow science, research and technology skills often prove to be very restrictive.

Maher's concentration, for example, required him to work with the molecular particles called "biomarkers" used in clinical trials to determine the effectiveness of specific pharmaceuticals.

Beyond Pfizer, there's not much of a demand for that job.

"The sad thing is that so many of these people have so much to offer. But, unless they get a job like that again, they may not feel like they can contribute. At least not in the same way," said Wagner, who started at a division of Monsanto in 1991 and wound up, through various mergers, working for Pfizer "by default."

Wagner has no intention of allowing her brain and her talent drain off to another city.

A native St. Louisan, she's staying put and, thanks to an educational stipend included in

the Pfizer severance package, is taking lessons learned at the pharmaceutical giant and applying them to nursing school.

"As interesting as (research) is, I'm a people person," Wagner explained.

"I (want) to work directly with patients."