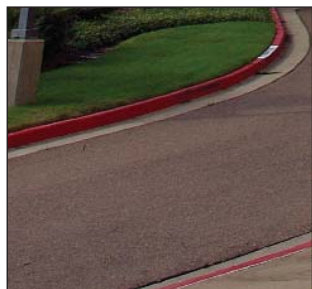
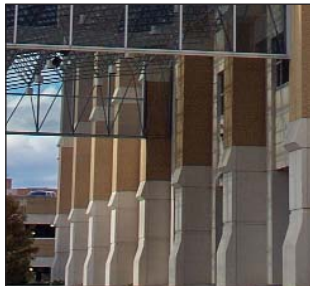


Piecing Together Your Career Path How to Land the Job That's Right for You



Andrea Hall

“All of my jobs have been satisfying,” says Emanuel “Manny” Furst, PhD, CCE, president of Improvement Technologies LLC in Tucson, AZ. Over the span of his career in the biomedical field, Furst has worked for a university medical center, an independent service organization (ISO), an equipment manufacturer (OEM), and in consulting. Although it may be unusual for a biomed or clinical engineer (CE) to experience several sectors of the field first-hand, all of these opportunities are available to those just beginning their careers, as well as those looking for a change.

But how do you know which career path is right for you? Which one offers the best salary and benefits?

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Where can you find the best opportunities for advancement? How much will you have to travel? Where will you be respected for your abilities and accomplishments? Each biomed or CE will have different priorities in his or her job search. Following is a summary comparison of compensation, stability, advancement opportunities, and other factors for in-house, ISO, and OEM jobs.

It's the Little Things

Or maybe they're not so little. For some biomed, the length of the workday, opportunities for advancement, training, work atmosphere and the respect they get from their colleagues is just as important, if not more, than the size of their paycheck.

Many biomed and CEs working in-house say their offices are cramped or in the basement, and that this

reflects the level of respect they get from the organization. This is often related to the market and the fact that hospitals never seem to have enough money, explains Furst. "Biomed, like other support services, is not a front-line operation, so it doesn't get the attention it needs unless there's a staff shortage," he notes.

Other hospital employees, however, have the opposite experience. Teri Gorski, a CE at Children's Hospital



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—Emanuel Furst

of Michigan, in Detroit, says, "I have a good working relationship with coworkers and other personnel in the hospital. We are respected very highly in this facility." More than the type of organization, "it depends on the culture and the people you work with, as well as your own personality," says Furst. "We're in a people business, and to get respect and recognition we must be able to relate well to people and be technically competent," he asserts.

"Those who take a job in a hospital transitioning to an outsourced department may find that they're not welcome, which may put stress on existing staff," Furst says. On the other hand, if the transition is handled well, "it may be a very welcome change."

Opportunities for advancement usually depend on the size of the organization rather than the type. A hospital may offer fewer opportunities than a national organization, but some hospital chains can provide mobility within the system, explains Larry Hertzler, vice president of marketing with TriMedx, an equipment service company owned by Ascension Health. For example, because Ascension Health includes 67 hospitals, employees can move to another site without losing seniority or benefits.

Gorski doesn't see much opportunity for advancement because her department is unionized. "We're really restricted in being able to move up within our department, unless you go into management," she explains, adding that there are only three managers for five hospitals in their system, limiting her prospects of moving up. However, "there is opportunity in the sense of learning," she notes. Gorski, like many in-house employees, is able to work on various types of equipment in the hospital

and enhance her skills.

Gorski's learning experience echoes that of many hospital employees. "The more progressive in-house organizations offer outside training, but it's always the first budget item to get cut,"

says Hertzler, who has previously worked in-house, for a large hospital system and in consulting. Hospitals tend to offer more on-the-job training, on a variety of equipment. Although training is widely available for

OEM employees, it may be offered on a limited scope of equipment, so that the biomed gains a depth, rather than breadth of knowledge, Hertzler explains.

According to the 2003 AAMI salary survey, manufacturers are more likely to send you to an industry conference or pay for continuing education, with ISOs running a close second in those categories, although 69% of hospitals pay for continuing education as well. It's a paradox of sorts—because ISOs and OEMs are cost-conscious, they want to have staff that's well trained, explains Furst. It's a win-win situation and helps retain employees. They do have to justify the expense, but they're "much more open to it than many hospitals, who may be penny-wise and pound-foolish," he says.

As with opportunities for advancement, the hours you are required to work and whether you have the ability to set your own schedule may also depend more on the size of the organization and the specific position you have. In general, new in-house employees are not scheduled for on-call work because they lack experience and may be unable to troubleshoot on their own. But OEMs often put their employees through a quick, intensive training program so they can be on-call 24/7, explains Hertzler.

Large businesses are better able to provide flextime and give holidays off. But "if you're a one-person shop, you may not have much latitude," Furst says. In-house workers are more likely to work evenings, weekends, and holidays. But employees of OEMs, particularly those in marketing, can expect to work 50 or more hours per week. So although OEMs and ISOs are better able to offer perks like training to their employees, they're often "more demanding and performance-oriented than hospitals," asserts Furst.

Hit the Road

As a prospective employee, you must decide whether you want to accept a position that requires travel or relocation. As with other aspects of the job search, trade-offs are involved, and you must evaluate them in light of your personal situation. Do you want to meet new people and experience a changing environment, or do you prefer the stability of interacting with the same people at the same location every day? Do you enjoy exploring new locales or do you want to be home every night to spend time with your family?

Relocation is becoming rare because the cost can add up, explains Richard Lechtenberg, aka Dick Berg, a recruiter. A company would rather hire someone locally. But travel may still be a large factor in deciding which job is right for you. And whether or how often you travel likely will depend on your specialty. If you service MRIs for an OEM, for example, you may be the sole technician for five or more hospitals. Some OEM employees can expect 30% or more of their work time to be on the road. In-house jobs rarely require any traveling, except for training or conferences, and the amount of travel required by an ISO position may depend on your specialty.

Jerry Zion, marketing manager with Fluke Biomedical in Carson City, NV, says that for him, travel is a “love-hate thing.” He takes approximately eight extended trips per year, both domestic and international, each lasting from seven to 10 working days. He dislikes the cramped seats on airplanes and being away from family, but loves “meeting with colleagues I don’t get to see every day.”

Being Satisfied

After examining the pros and cons of the various career paths, the question remains: where are employees happiest? Working at a hospital, ISO or OEM can be summarized as follows:

- **Hospitals:** Working in-house usually provides lower pay and bonuses, but offers overtime, on-call and call-back pay. On-call duties are usually shared, and

there is little or no travel. Biomedics often get less respect from colleagues. There is more variety in terms of equipment and breadth of on-the-job learning.

- **ISOs:** These organizations offer better pay than in-house, but require more travel. Biomedics may not feel welcome at the hospital to which they’re assigned. There are more advancement opportunities here than in-house, and employees are more likely to get outside training.
- **Manufacturers:** These companies offer higher pay and bonuses, but require more travel. They offer better health insurance and better advancement opportunities. There is more pressure to perform well, and employees usually work longer hours without any overtime pay. They may offer flex-time, though. The training offered may be limited by type of equipment (depth, rather than breadth).

For many, more than pay, benefits, training, or advancement, it boils down to job satisfaction. But job satisfaction means different things to different people. For some, it’s a job well done. For others, it’s helping people. For still others, it’s having a good relationship with colleagues.

“Figure out what you dearly love and want to be doing every single day of your life, and find which career path offers that. Then don’t give up.”

—Jerry Zion



For Zion, it’s “when a launch campaign comes off on time, on budget, and results in good, strong business.” He adds that satisfying the needs of the customer can also be satisfying for an employee.

“On a good day, you’re the hero,” says Rick Seaton, a clinical engineering technician at Kaleida Health System in Buffalo, NY, an ISO that has him on-loan to another hospital. “Sometimes the best part of this job is getting something done that no one else can.”

Many biomedics and CEs agree that the most satisfying aspect of their job is the variety. “The organized confusion” is what Gorski, of Children’s Hospital in Detroit, enjoys. “All the multitasking keeps the job interesting,” she says, explaining that she’s responsible for troubleshooting, installation and training, as well as data entry and paperwork. For Hertzler, of TriMedx, “the really satisfying things have been the wide variety of



projects and initiatives that you can get involved in are highly satisfying,” adding that “this industry lends itself to that.”

Furst says that his most satisfying job was with a university medical center. He enjoyed the collegial relationships with clinicians, teaching faculty, and researchers. “I had the opportunity to work beyond the bounds of the typical CE program as the department director in a department that was well integrated into clinical and administrative operations,” he says.

On the other side of the coin, you’ll often find the least satisfying part of a job. When there’s variety to keep

things interesting, the flip side is that even though you may do 10,000 things right, “one tiny problem and people are jumping on top of you,” Seaton says. For Zion, frustration is borne out of bureaucracy, “the inability to get what needs to be done, because others have a different viewpoint or agenda,” he says. Most would agree, however, that these are aspects of any job, regardless of which career path you choose.

Making a Choice

So how do you find the best fit? It’s important to

ask yourself some questions before you embark on this process. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do you prefer working in small groups or independently, or with large organizations? Are you a multitasker or do you want to focus on one type of equipment? How much responsibility are you willing to shoulder and do you eventually want to get into management? Will you consider working for multiple employers over time or do you want to advance within a single organization? “Figure out what you dearly love and want to be doing every single day of your life, and find which career path offers that. Then don’t give up,” says Zion. “There are lots of ways to enter even a tough employment market if you have the desire and that desire is driving your acquisition of knowledge and skill.”

The next step is to research the organizations. Start by looking at the organization’s Web site. Most sites have an “about us” section with lists of personnel and press releases. Also check out some of the biomed listserves and users groups, such as BiomedTalk. Look at the organization’s annual report to check its financial health.

Many agree that word of mouth is one of the best ways to find out what goes on inside a hospital or company. New graduates can ask their career placement office to put them in touch with people in the area they’re interested in exploring. Talk to friends who have been working for a few years. The biomed community is a

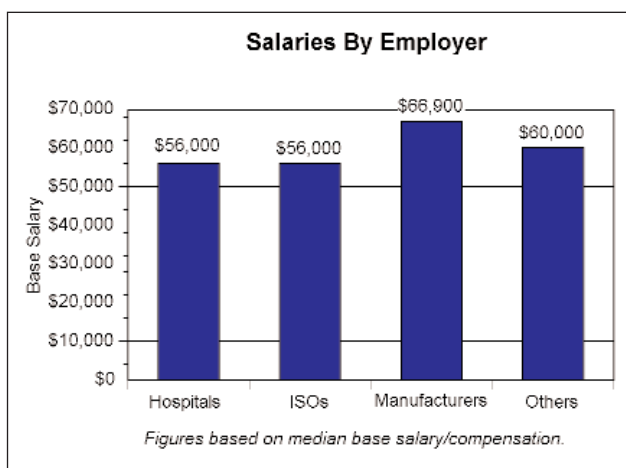


Table 1. Results of 2003 AAMI salary survey.

kind of family, say many in the field. If you're considering jobs in a different city, call a hospital, ask for the biomed department and find out who is hiring and what it's like there.

Get a good feel for what the job duties and responsibilities will be. Not all in-house jobs are alike. For example, some biomed jobs are expected to do paperwork and bookkeeping, while other organizations hire office assistants for those tasks. Some OEM jobs require extensive travel while others will only stretch across town.

Next, prepare for the job interview. Again, a number of Web sites contain a wealth of information for the job seeker. Start with career sites at colleges and universities and with simple Internet searches. Put together a list of questions to ask potential employers during interviews to find out whether or not the job you are interviewing for will work for you. Some sample questions include:

- What are the specific tasks required of this job?
- What are your expectations? What do I need to show you before I can move into new things?
- What is the most important problem for the new hire to tackle?
- What would you like done differently by the next person that fills this job?
- How does this department affect the company's profit?
- Will there be long-term stability with this job? (This is a particular concern with ISOs. When interviewing in this sector, you may want to ask what happens when your contract doesn't get renewed.)
- Do you provide training? In what ways can I maintain and enhance my competency?
- What opportunities exist for advancement?
- How does the company recognize outstanding employees?
- Why do you enjoy working here?

Many in the field suggest that you try to meet alone with the employees who would be your peers or arrange to shadow a

tech for a day. Ask them if they're happy doing their job, their likes and dislikes, asking for specific examples. Those doing the hiring will always paint a rosy picture, but talking to current employees is the way "to get the best insight on what it is really like to work there," says Berg. If the interview process seems to be going well, ask for a tour of the organization. See how the manager is greeted by clinicians. Is he or she greeted warmly? Do they know him or her?

Although you need a plan, don't make it so specific that you miss opportunities. Keep in mind that organizations change, as does the economy. Head counts may be reduced. "It's the nature of the ebb and flow of the business cycle," says Zion. "The medical device industry has been in the consolidation part of that cycle for a number of years now," he notes, adding that this can create changes in the number of employees or the type of employees an organization is seeking. In general, the medical equipment services industry is "a great field to get into," says Berg. "We'll always need medical care and hospitals will always need equipment to treat and diagnose patients, and someone has to fix and maintain that equipment," he explains.

"Try to continue to be engaged in something you have a real passion for," advises Zion. "If you're doing what you love, you're going to succeed and can make a difference." ■



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Where's the Money?

“When I moved from a supervisory role at a hospital into product marketing, I basically doubled my salary,” explains Zion. Although most biomed don't choose marketing jobs initially, positions with manufacturers do offer the best salaries—at least \$10,000 more than in-house jobs or those with ISOs, according to a 2003 AAMI salary survey.

However, if you want to work in one of the “high-end” specialties, such as MRIs, you can “do very well with ISOs,” according to Berg. According to the AAMI survey, specialists earn up to 27% more than other biomed.

Although it is tempting to take the job that offers the highest salary, it's important to look at the entire package. The AAMI survey found that employees who work for manufacturers and ISOs are more likely to receive bonuses or participate in profit sharing. Approximately half of these employers offer bonuses and/or profit sharing, while a vast majority of all three types of employers (76% of hospitals, 81% of ISOs and 94% of manufacturers) contribute to a 401(k) or similar plan, such as a 403(b).

Hospitals generally offer more in terms of overtime, on-call and call-back pay. More than half of all hospitals and about 40% of ISOs pay employees for overtime. Hospitals and ISOs are also more likely to offer on-call pay, while 35% of hospitals give call-back pay. Only 14% of ISOs and 6% of manufacturers offer call-back pay.

More than two weeks of vacation is quite common, with 89% of hospitals, 71% of manufacturers and 64% of ISOs offering it. However, the number of employers offering flexible work hours was much smaller (32% of hospitals, 33% of ISOs and 52% of manufacturers). Not surprisingly, 44% of ISOs give employees a car allowance, while only 16% of manufacturers and 3% of hospitals offer this perk.

Keep in mind, however, that these are just statistics. According to Furst, sweeping statements about pay and benefits are only a guide and won't dictate an individual experience.