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"The employment opportunities are currently high in pharma space but with certain caveats"

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Ahmedali N, Mentor, Cornucopia - V5 Global, a unit of FirstMeridian Business Services, talks about the staffing challenges in pharma in the second wave and potential solutions



How have jobs evolved over the years in the pharma sector?

Pharma industry has been highly conventional throughout, with all due respect the industry has only learned the hard way. With no intention to undermine the contributions that the legacy leaders have made but this stands true to a large extent.

The evolution has been mainly through the changing, upgrading, and enforcement of regulatory guidelines and the statutory requirements but lately, the pandemic has added significantly and contributed a lot to the evolution of jobs in the industry and so is the case to many other sectors too and not just pharma.

Some of the pharma jobs have evolved considerably over the years. In the manufacturing area where technology has been changing, the jobs have been changing and evolving rapidly. The manufacturing, quality, and R&D functions use a lot of modern machinery and equipment that have replaced processes that were done manually earlier.

Individual accountability has resulted in lesser layers in the management hierarchy. The medical reps also use digital technology for the promotion of products to the doctors, reporting, training, etc.

Also, the recent demanding requirements from regulatory and statutory bodies have resulted in serious changes across verticals within the pharma industry. Organisations are keen to have people with similar and relevant experience rather than invest in the process of unlearning and learn about the larger concept and process. Organisations are investing a lot in technology on various fronts which helps them in nurturing their talent on the go. Most of the desk processes have been automated and are now being done remotely and virtually which the sector was never in acceptance to pre-pandemic.

These macro trends are generating major shifts in the skills the operations workforce must have and forcing companies and their employees to accept new ways of working. Occupational profiles are changing too, some jobs are disappearing as a result of automation while entirely new jobs are emerging.

What are the employment/ career scenarios in other sectors besides pharma- healthcare, Biotech?

Overall, the employment scenario has indeed taken a hit with many small and medium scale enterprises giving it in as they could not sustain, the large ones shedding big numbers and leaving a high number of significantly qualified people trying to re-establish themselves in the market.

Large sectors like hospitality, retail, travel, BFSI, real estate, and services have taken a big hit, whereas the pharma, healthcare, and information technology industries have seen an unusual boost.

The focus during the pandemic has been significantly on the healthcare and pharma, as they played a key role in getting the world through the tough times, and information technology was looked up to strengthen the new requirements to allow the healthcare and pharmaceutical space to continue serving the community and society at large.

The employment opportunities currently are certainly high in the healthcare and pharmaceutical space but with certain caveats, testing the attitudes of people over capabilities as the last couple of years have taught us the significant importance of adapting, upgrading, and embracing as key competencies for an individual and collaborating and virtual management being the current trend with heavy focus as a new managerial skill.

As we now move on and hopefully the anticipated third wave may not take us back again to the lockdown's we may see a good revival of the economy and the industries may experience a significant boost and the employment opportunities are expected to be bright across. The difference could well be the in the desired skills of people, it would be the battle of the fittest who can embrace the new scenarios, environment, situations, and circumstances with the ability to take on the market in more innovative and creative ways.

It is very well anticipated that the demand will be high and bright for the talent as the organisations could well be in an aggressive mode to cover up the slump from the last couple of years and would require the employees to stretch and take the lead with added responsibilities and innovative methods to accelerate the business.

What role does FirstMeridian play while choosing the right candidates? What evaluation criteria do you follow?

First Meridian (FM) Group provides workforce solutions in various ways of managed, semi-managed and professional staffing services to different industries like IT, telecommunications, retail, services, Pharma/Healthcare, etc.

We strongly believe that in consulting business 'Time and Quality' are the two key parameters to differentiate you from the rest, working towards this belief FM group has taken various proactive measures to ensure we provide access to quality resources in the shortest possible time to our client organisations.

FM group believes in the concept of partnering with their clients and ensuring a good deal of value addition through the established partnerships. To be a valued partner, we must understand the client business-like back of our hand and hence FM group have invested well in setting up niche teams for key industries/ sectors and have onboarded some highly experienced individuals who have been there and done that!!

This gives a great amount of confidence to the client as the team understands their pain points, key areas of focus, the current trends, and the demanding market conditions, with little communication the understanding is thick, large, and deep.

The need for trained and skilled talent has been increasing significantly and with a never-ending demand-supply issue of the employable pool, the FM group has initiated various models like HTD (Hire, Train, Deploy) managed service (Outcome based staffing model) MDP and semi-managed services through which we help our client partners with a customised solution to their staffing need.

Proactively established in-house, the various centres of excellence (COE) to train and prepare the fresh graduates to enhance their employability quotient which enhances the candidate pool significantly to our client organisations for selecting the right ones.

These are a few of the methods we have adapted in addition to the conventional Interview processes, Psychometric assessments, Personality profiling, and technical assessments through our high-end technology platforms which are AI and ML-powered. All mid to senior-level hiring goes through our in-house expert's evaluation.

What challenges do you face while scouting for the candidates?

Though we may argue that there is an increase in the unemployment rate for the skilled, experienced, and competent talent the demand is way too higher than the supply.

Pharma/healthcare unlike IT, telecom, and other developed sectors is highly conventional and looks for the best match to their requirements rather than settling for close ones with attitude to learn and upskill. This creates a great deal of vulnerability and amounts for significant efforts in identifying, screening, shortlisting, and selecting the right candidate.

The one in demand largely lands up with multiple options and creates Vaccum for the ones who have not been on their preferred list. The candidates are also looking for various aspects before selecting their next assignments in terms of culture, rewards, job security, progression options, and organisation structure. Small and mid-size firms largely end up struggling to attract the best as they do not generally fulfil the candidate's requirements on all parameters.

Mid and senior-level candidates generally prefer attractive locations to settle either in metro or a tier I city. Tier-II and remote locations could well be a problem in attracting the right and the most relevant ones. Companies who can afford to pay the premium cut but with certain difficulties whereas the struggle will be stronger for the ones who cannot afford to offer these premiums.

The latest automation in large organisations has created a great deal of skill mismatch and the jobs are changing drastically, ready talent for such requirement is an uphill task and cannot be filled easily. Hence manufacturing talent is the only way forward through our COE's for training and upskilling.

Companies like FM group realize this and hence are creating our avenues to ensure we keep the supply of such talent consistent. Most organisations in the pharma sector are not planning and assessing well for the future needs, hence are unable to foresee the changing skill requirements, this enhances the challenge and creates the firefighting situations.

How is technology helping to come out with potential solutions in the recruitment process?

While job portals are in use for some time, the use of digital sourcing had increased by 50 per cent social media platforms including Facebook, Linked-In, Twitter, Instagram are helping in the recruitment process. Unlike in the past when the screening of CVs was done manually, modern platforms like AI-enabled ATS are helping in shortening the process. However, for mid and senior levels network and headhunting works well.

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