

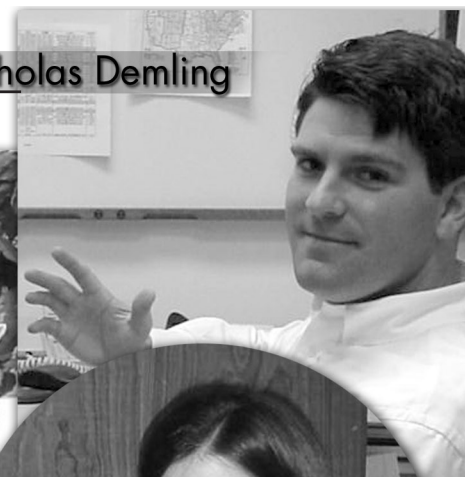
*Pharmaceutical Careers*

# Pharmaceutical Consulting Job Climate

Nicholas Demling



Dave Hands



Gail Condon



While the career paths of statistical graduates and senior statisticians go in many different directions, the number of clinical research statisticians who choose consulting as their career path is growing. To one who has never considered consulting as a career option, the perceived instability and uncertainty of working from project to project may have kept them away. However, the benefits and payoffs of consulting can outweigh these concerns.

*Amstat News* talked to MedFocus, a leading clinical research consulting and staffing firm, to find out where the pharmaceutical statistics job market is today and where their career counselors feel the biostatistical market is going.

## **Q: From your perspective, what is the current state of the job market for clinical research statisticians?**

**Dave Hands (Managing Partner):** Outstanding! To state the obvious, employment in the pharmaceutical industry has done well despite tough job markets elsewhere. Specifically, the sheer volume of statistical data, resulting from increasing clinical trials has kept biostatisticians quite busy. We see that many of the statisticians that we are assigning to pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies are complementary to existing staff statisticians rather than “replacements” of statisticians leaving their current jobs.

**Nicholas Demling (Manager of Business Development):** This can be answered on different levels. From a consulting standpoint, companies have definitely raised the bar. They are demanding to see candidates with PhDs and true pharma experience now more than in years past. American education is weighed heavily on

*MEDFOCUS, a statistical consulting firm, answers Amstat News questions on the job climate for statisticians*

as well. The individuals who have the PhDs seem to have been in the industry for years and are usually already in managerial positions with large pharma companies. I believe that the consulting industry created this problem. What is the incentive to continue on with your PhD when you have a master's and you are making \$50-\$60/hour and recruiters are calling you nonstop for new opportunities?

From a full-time employee (FTE) standpoint large pharma has also escalated the credentials of new hires so that there is not as long a ramp up time as in years past. And as always, communication skills, both written and verbal, are a large factor. Large pharma expect both consultants and full-time employees to be able to interact on different levels outside of their immediate clinical departments.

**Q: Statisticians coming right out of the academic world might appreciate your advice on how to obtain their first job in pharmaceutical clinical trials statistics? Can you help them?**

Dave Hands: Admittedly, we find that the consulting side of the current job market holds treasures for statisticians with real clinical trial experience. We find that senior level statisticians do not understand the true value of the consulting side of the employment field around them. However, many of our clients do hire PhD graduates from well-known university programs as consultants. My advice is to look to firms like ours while focusing on CROs at the same time to "break into" a career in clinical research statistics. Remain geographically flexible for your first job. Your first job will set the path for your career and if relocating to be a part of a successful organization is necessary...then do it.

Nicholas Demling: Yes, the best bet is to gain experience as an intern on clinical trials from a hospital, CRO, or pharmaceutical company prior to graduation. Take communication workshops for writing, language skills, and body language. This will enhance your professionalism during the interview. Perception is reality, over the phone or in person.

Gail Condon (Manager of Recruitment): Be flexible and willing to work in a team environment, and don't be afraid to take initiative with a project, or express your opinion or suggestion for an analysis plan or design. Give input, but be willing to take direction as well. Communicate clearly and directly, and observe professional etiquette when emailing or phoning coworkers and supervisors.

**Q: What are the hiring managers asking for right now in their requests to you for candidates? Has it changed in the past six months to a year or do you foresee it changing at all?**

Dave Hands: Hiring managers at the larger pharmas are looking for a diverse mix of experience. In most cases, a minimum of two years at a CRO or pharmaceutical company is required. Senior-level statisticians are commanding multiple consulting offers from both large pharmas and growing biotechs. At the same time, our largest global pharma clients are also interested in PhD candidates and are increasingly willing to mentor and develop these candidates.



Gail Condon, David Hands and Nicholas Demling

In addition, there is a growing opportunity at the smaller biotechs for senior-level biostatisticians who are looking to be in a more independent, entrepreneurial role and to even manage other statisticians. The financial compensation for these senior-level candidates is phenomenal.

Nicholas Demling: There really seems to be a big push for PhD candidates with strong experience and American education. I think it has changed somewhat in the last six months because clients can no longer afford the training time to ramp up. Everyone wants that drug or device to get filed ASAP without compromising safety and efficacy to the public and to be able to state their reasoning to the FDA.

Gail Condon: Our hiring managers ask to see experienced statisticians with at least a master's degree, the title "Statistician" and on average three years' work experience, preferably with a pharma company. They expect candidates to communicate well, be professional, and to treat the client like a client. Programming experience and protocol design are also required elements of any of our managers' expectations.

**Q: Let's talk about consulting versus permanent jobs in pharmaceutical statistics. First, WHY would a talented statistician want to take a contract position rather than a permanent position?**

Dave Hands: I could answer this question with one simple word, money, but by doing so I would be omitting the other fantastic opportunities that consulting offers. Besides an opportunity to propel oneself into a much higher income level, the dynamic experience that comes from consulting projects can not only add excitement to a statistician's career, but can turn a drab resume into a complete story of career diversity. We love to see a consultant who has worked in four companies, for example, on multiple therapeutic teams and in an array of different settings. Often this type of resume is seen to be representing "job skipping." We feel the exact opposite in the consulting world.

Nicholas Demling: As a contractor you will make more money, and have the opportunity to work at different companies, different phases, and different therapeutic areas. That really allows you to progress in your career with varying experiences that allows you to bring a lot to the table for the client.

Gail Condon: Contract positions offer statisticians more flexibility and more opportunity to work with several top pharma companies, not just one. Candidates often perceive contract jobs to have less security and lower benefits than permanent jobs, but it is not the case for consultants.

**Q: In line with that last question, why would a Director of Biostatistics approach a consulting firm to hire a contract statistician rather than trying to hire the same statistician as a permanent employee?**

Dave Hands: Flexibility. Talent. Time. While the phases of clinical trials last years, the priority of projects at the pharmas and biotechs can change. Consultants offer a Director of Biostatistics the advantage of flexibility—no concerns about over employing or under-employing their current staff. Also the advantage of “time”: consultants are able to come in quickly and make an immediate impact. “Top priority” projects and trials cannot wait for the development of an up-and-coming statistician. A consultant offers the benefit of cutting away the potential for time lost on an important study. Finally, the “talent” that can be found from a consulting firm can mirror the immediate need that the director has on a moment’s notice.

Gail Condon: We handle all employee issues such as benefits, salary and contract negotiations, and performance reviews, which leaves them time to handle their daily tasks. Consultant level statisticians have the previous experience in the industry that make them more self sufficient and independent, which is definitely worth a manager’s time and budget. It makes for an easier interviewing experience for the candidate as well as the hiring manager when they don’t have to discuss benefit issues, salary negotiations, visa issues, etc.

**Q: Is there any truth to the so-called rule of thumb that “too many jobs on a resume is a bad thing”? How does that rule apply to your niche of placing pharmaceutical and biotechnology contract statisticians?**

Nicholas Demling: Yes, some truth. Typically, you would like to see 1-2 years as a contractor at each one of the clients the consultant has worked for. Sometimes that is not the case. Budgets run out, and projects are completed. Hiring managers have to realize that as a fact! And sometimes when a company says they only need somebody for six months, they mean it.

Gail Condon: Rarely do we get that kind of feedback from a career consultant’s resume. Hiring managers understand and perceive that consultants will often list many job locations in a short time span, knowing they have the transferable skills to perform the job, but also having the advantage of exposure to many different companies’ business styles, statistical analyses plans and protocols, and hence the experience of a consultant. Permanent job seekers with a new employer listed every six months, for example, will raise an eyebrow, but not contractors.

**Q: So the job market for consulting statisticians is not only robust, but the benefits to statisticians who choose consulting are great. How do you feel the opportunities for consultant statisticians might change in the next 6-12 months?**

Dave Hands: We see the market for clinical research statistician consultants as continuing to be strong for at least the next year.

As our biotechnology clients advance into later phases, their need for consultant statisticians is growing quickly. While they still employ a small staff, these innovative companies are looking for more than a “soldier” statistician, they are seeking “generals” so to speak. The biotechs are a logical next step for senior biostatisticians who feel they want to take a greater leadership role in bringing a drug to market.

Gail Condon: In the pharmaceutical industry, the opportunities will only increase. It seems to be its own economy, unaffected by other trends or markets. There is so much in the pipelines that pharma companies will offer tremendous opportunities for the experienced statistician.

**Q: Here’s a loaded question for you: What are the reasons a consultant statistician is not offered a position with one of your pharmaceutical or biotech clients—if their experience is in order? Can you follow that up with some advice?**

Dave Hands: A good consulting firm will understand the “environment” of a client before sending a candidate for an interview. If the experience is there and the statistician is not offered the position, it is sometimes felt that their “attitude” during the interview wouldn’t be a good fit for the pharmaceutical or biotech team environment.

Advice? Consultants and senior statisticians have a reason to feel proud of their achievements. Yet they are expected to come in as an experienced member of a team that is already in place. My advice is to be confident, not overpowering in an interview.

Nicholas Demling: Someone in that organization may have worked with them before and may have had a personality conflict. This may get to the hiring manager, and he/she will pass.

The hiring manager may feel that they are overqualified and are intimidated by their experience.

Sometimes the sponsor may hold out for a local candidate.

The candidate changes their rate at the last minute.

Don’t burn bridges in this industry. It is a small world! Have solid references and make sure that your rate is in accordance with the position.

Gail Condon: Most often it’s a communication issue, whether a language barrier or the inability to answer a question clearly. The advice I offer all my interviewing candidates is to ask “Did I answer your question?” It demonstrates the desire to be understood clearly, and also gives your interviewer a chance to clarify his or her question. My candidates say it’s the best interviewing advice they receive, and they tend to use it in future interviews and on the job.

ASA appreciates the time MedFocus took to give our members this insightful information into the world of statistical consulting. MedFocus provides clinical research contract staff to pharmaceutical and biotech companies, and is headquartered in Chicago and has offices in Connecticut, Indianapolis, New York City, Houston and Florida. For more information, call 1-800-256-4625, or visit their Web site at [www.medfocus.com](http://www.medfocus.com). ■