

A Day in the Life of...A Public Health Analyst

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Thursday September 16, 2010

11:57

Melanie Sinche:

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the first of OITE's online career chat series, "A Day in the Life of..." I am pleased to kick off the series with today's guest, Dr. David Kosub, a Public Health Analyst at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the NIH.

11:57

David
Kosub:

Hello

11:58

Melanie Sinche:

Dr. Kosub is a PhD-level scientist with a degree in immunology from UT Southwestern in Dallas. In his current position, he conducts research on pressing public health topics and prepares briefings on them. Additionally, he has contributed to reports to Congress, including a report on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Dr. Kosub, welcome to the program!

11:58

David Kosub:

Thank you very
much, Melanie.

11:59

Melanie Sinche:

I'd like to start out by asking how you came to make your decision to

pursue a career away from the bench.

12:03

David Kosub:

It began in graduate school, when I was doing research in HIV/AIDS and I got interested in how 'political' the research and virus were .

12:05

David Kosub:

I soon sought out information on how decisions were made in the field and that led me to NIH/NIAID. I got in contact with someone here who told me more about science policy and public health at the government level, and that seemed very interesting to me.

12:05

Melanie Sinche:

And from your CV, it looks as though you began your work with NIAID as a contractor?

12:06

David Kosub:

Yes, I started as a contractor with Kelly Services.

12:06

David Kosub:

I highly recommend this route (the contractor route) for anybody interested in making the transition.

12:07

Melanie Sinche:

What is it about this approach that led to success for you?

12:07

David Kosub:

Being a contractor allows the potential employer an opportunity to 'test' a young, fresh, scientist straight from the bench because it's very hard to get that information and to hire for a federal

position.

12:08

Melanie Sinche:

Readers: what questions do you have for Dr. Kosub regarding his career path?

12:09

[Comment From Marc]

Do you recommend this approach (contractor) for those with non-science backgrounds (e.g., folks with MPH's)? What vendors is NIH using for contractors at this point?

12:10

David Kosub:

I definitely recommend it for anybody interested in coming into the federal government, regardless of background. Some personnel services contracting agencies include Kelly Services, LTS Corp, Booz-Allen, Henry Jackson Foundation, SAIC and more.

12:10

[Comment From Laura]

I was wondering how you transitioned from working as a contractor to your current position?

12:11

David Kosub:

Here is the secret info for becoming a federal employee...start as a contractor because you gain the necessary skill set, do the appropriate work needed for the job, and when a fed position becomes available in your office that you contract with, you are the perfect person for the job.

12:12

David Kosub:

The work I did as a contractor was what the federal position was made from.

12:12

[Comment From Marc]

What do you do on a daily basis? What skills have

contributed to your success?

12:13

David Kosub:

I always chuckle at this question because no 2 days are ever the same, and that's what makes my job great.

12:14

David Kosub:

For example... one day I'll be writing about tuberculosis, then the next developing a briefing document for the NIAID director on an issue critical to NIH operations and the next working on a report describing how NIAID has collaborated with other ICs on various activities.

12:14

David Kosub:

Now on a day-to-day basis, to be specific, I read and respond to a gazillion emails, go to various meetings, address whatever hot button issue is going on, all in the span of 7:30am-4:00pm.

12:15

David Kosub:

I'll be working on about 5 different reports at any given time. Everything I do has something to do with improving the mission of NIAID, and relevant to immunologic or infectious diseases.

12:15

[Comment From Audrey]

What kind of work did you do for Kelly Services?

12:16

David Kosub:

I was a "public health analyst" with Kelly Services as well, but I was more focused on program evaluation...meaning, I was trying to identify gaps, opportunities, threats, and ways to improve the programs that NIAID supports and funds.

12:17

David Kosub:

I also did some science planning work and reporting (which is my main focus today)...these are critical areas to NIH and scientists are heavily desired for them.

12:17

David Kosub:

At least in my opinion!

12:17

[Comment From Emily]

7:30-4: does that mean your work hours are somewhat flexible?

12:18

David Kosub:

VERY flexible, depending on your boss...but for the most part you will do a 40 hr work week.

12:18

David Kosub:

You can do the typical 8 hr day, or flex schedules, tele work, etc.

12:18

Melanie Sinche:

And what skills do you view as most critical skills required for your position?

12:18

David Kosub:

The most critical is the ability to write well, and I cannot stress that enough.

12:19

David Kosub:

I am not a science writer by trade but I do a LOT of science writing and the ability to

communicate well with others through writing is very important.

12:19

David Kosub:

NIH even gives awards to its employees based on their ability to translate difficult scientific concepts to understandable language. Other important skills include: the ability to learn quickly and adapt, project management, critical thinking, all the things you, as researchers, currently do!

12:19

[Comment From Laura]

What kind of experience would someone need for this kind of position - i.e., school, how many years of background experience?

12:20

David Kosub:

Background experience is a funny thing...everybody in my office who does something similar comes at the job from a different way.

12:21

David Kosub:

I received my PhD in immunology and spun my research/education into being an "immunology translator"...I could take the difficult research areas and findings that NIAID funds and translate them into why they're important.

12:22

David Kosub:

There is no one educational track that people have and that's what makes it interesting, because people thrive on each other's knowledge to get the job done...we all work together.

12:22

David Kosub:

Plus you'll have opportunities to do many on the job trainings to improve your desired work/focus area.

12:22

[Comment From Phil]

Did you ever take classes in public health?

12:23

David Kosub:

No, and I asked my boss who hired me if i should...she said "Don't waste your time because you already have all the necessary degrees."

12:23

David Kosub:

Public health is an interesting field in that regard. Your scientific knowledge (in whatever area) will suit you well in this field because it's so broad and you can design it however you want it to work - at least, at the NIH.

12:24

[Comment From Laura]

How is the work life balance? Do you find yourself working evenings or weekends?

12:24

David Kosub:

Here's the scoop on work life balance...

12:25

David Kosub:

When it comes to a contractor, my boss said, "Don't work more than 40 hrs/week because we won't pay you for it," so I was like "Ok, easy enough" ...especially coming from working 60-70 hr. lab work weeks.

12:25

David Kosub:

I can leave work at 4pm (my chosen time) and have a life afterward (including weekends) and be super happy...I don't have to rush into the office at 3am b/c a freezer fails...so nice!

12:26

David Kosub:

You'll find that your work-life balance is great when you're out of the lab. As long as I get my work done here, my boss is happy.

12:27

Melanie Sinche:

That depends on the occupation, of course! And there is variance within occupations as well.

12:27

David
Kosub:

Definitel
y.

12:28

David Kosub:

but I have found most people that work in a similar area (eg tech transfer, science writing, leg affairs, global health) will tell me something similar...all depends on your work load I guess.

12:28

Melanie Sinche:

Have you met anyone working in policy who went through the AAAS fellowship process?

12:29

David Kosub:

Many people, as well as fellows through other programs like the Presidential Management Fellowship.

12:29

David Kosub:

I work with 2 from AAAS in my office as well.

12:29

Melanie Sinche:

FYI, to all readers--I will post information on both of these programs after the chat ends. It will be posted on the OITE blog site.

12:29

David Kosub:

But it is important to note, that though those fellowships are very good and helpful, they're not the only way into science policy/public health at NIH.

12:30

Melanie Sinche:

Thank you for stressing that, David, and you are a case in point!

12:30

David Kosub:

I still HIGHLY recommend looking at the contractor route for anybody interested in the transition.

12:30

[Comment From Guest]

How far do you think you can go with an MPH degree at a place like NIH, or is a PhD/DrPH vital?

12:31

David Kosub:

I see people with all sorts of degrees here, I have a colleague at NIDCR who does something similar to me (she's a health science policy analyst) and she has an MPH.

12:31

David Kosub:

A PHD/MPH is not necessary, though if you're considering getting more letters after your name, in addition to the ones you already have, I'd wait until you get in as a federal employee, because the NIH could pay for your education.

12:32

David Kosub:

NIH Student Loan Repayment Program (for those interested) There are also people I work with,

including management level, that have not pursued a graduate degree, though it has taken them more time than if you did have an advanced degree.

12:32

[Comment From AU]

What if you are already a postdoc at NIH? How easy it is to get into a non-bench position?

12:33

David
Kosub:

It
depends.

12:33

David Kosub:

I have a colleague that I helped get a job here coming straight off the bench but you really have to make that decision, because there is no way you could do 1/2 time lab, and 1/2 time in a policy office...just way too much going on in both areas and each needs your full attention.

12:34

David Kosub:

But that being said, it's doable. The big thing you need to do as a post doc is start networking!!! Talk to people like you're doing now because you never know who you'll meet. I would not have my job had I not sent out emails, made phone calls, etc. The more people you talk to, the more info you'll get. You might find the right office where the supervisor is thinking "Hey, I need someone with a background in whatever" and this is a post-doc who has that knowledge.

12:35

Melanie Sinche:

How did you come to hear of the opening via Kelly Services?

12:35

David Kosub:

Here is another
big secret...

12:37

David Kosub:

The only way I knew about my eventual Kelly Services job was because I made contact with the then boss of my current office. I talked to her on the phone, brought her in to give a talk at my school about what she did, and afterward we had an 'unofficial' interview, where she mentioned this contract option. I had never heard of that before but she gave me the scoop. It's much easier to hire for a contractor than it is a fed and she could bring me on as soon as I defended. So coming right out of grad school, no post doc, I started here as a contractor (and since have become a federal employee). I never would have known about the contract position had I not met and talked to the right people. Some contract positions are advertised but in most cases, they're not. But a contract job is also very safe here at NIH. The NIH likes to transition their contractors to federal positions, if they can.

12:37

[Comment From Dave]

How supportive were your mentors of your career move?

12:38

David Kosub:

Good question and I know that can be a touchy subject.

12:39

David Kosub:

I knew almost from the get-go that I did not want to be a PI when I grew up. So I told my then grad school mentor about my career aspirations and he said he'd help me. I explained to him that I wanted to get my PhD to learn how to analyze, critically think, develop and answer questions, etc which are all important skills for the work that I do.

12:40

David Kosub:

If you don't have a mentor who supports you leaving the lab, it does makes things difficult. However, you must remember, this is YOUR life and YOUR career so you have to do what it takes to get out.

12:40

David Kosub:

If your mentor isn't supportive, then you'll have to find

another support group (eg OITE).

12:41

[Comment From Laura]

What about if you're looking beyond just NIH (i.e., other areas of the country)? Where are the other opportunities for public health analysts?

12:41

David Kosub:

So many
opportunities...

12:42

David Kosub:

Look at various non-profit organizations (for example, I was in school in Dallas and the American Heart Association was based there), I talked with people there about public health and met the person who started the Go Red campaign.

12:42

David Kosub:

Also check out local and state health departments, I know the DC and MD Depts. of Health have Public Health Analyst positions available right now.

12:43

David Kosub:

Check out various hospitals, universities, and you can also think about doing a long-distance work option.

12:43

David Kosub:

I worked with someone regularly in my 1st year here who lived in PA, saw her only once but we worked well together. Also, think about elected officials who have an interest in health...they're not always in DC and go back to their districts regularly where public health concerns may be brought up.

12:43

[Comment From Govini]

I am currently looking for non-bench positions, policy analyst, etc. I've applied for many jobs, but many times, I receive an e-mail saying that I don't have the required skills. How would you suggest framing my CV. Are there certain keywords?

12:44

David Kosub:

Buzz words are very important and I'll be happy to share my CV to give you an idea of some.

12:45

David Kosub:

Training, project management, led a group, started a program...I put all those in quotations marks for you fill in the blank on the specifics but you want to use things like that...also you want to highlight activities that you've done outside of the lab.

12:46

David Kosub:

For example, I knew I had an interest in public health going way back so I organized a public health fair in Dallas, I also talked to kids about HIV/AIDS, judged science fairs, etc. Basically you want to prove that you have an interest in whatever area and show that you've done things to prove it.

12:47

David Kosub:

Also, you want to highlight all your writing, be they articles in hard-core science publications, op-eds in newspapers, science blogs, editing other peoples manuscripts/grants, whatever. Your ability to write is CRITICAL.

12:47

Melanie Sinche:

These are excellent examples, David. Thank you for offering, to share your CV as well! After today's conversation, we can discuss how best to share that.

12:48

David Kosub:

Sounds good. I am also available to talk to people off-line if you have more questions. but keep those questions coming now ;)

12:48

[Comment From Laura]

From what I've heard in the past, it sounds like a lot of analysts have backgrounds in lab science; however, my background is more in psychology (although more in public health now because of my current job), and I'm wondering if there's opportunities there too?

12:49

David Kosub:

Let me give an example to answer your question:

12:50

David Kosub:

One of my colleagues has a PhD in neuroscience but now she works in our office focused on HIV issues...the point is you can have a variety of backgrounds and still translate the core skills that I mentioned into a successful job. So if you're trained as a psychologist you definitely have an interesting way of thinking and viewing the world and approaching problems, I would stress that when interviewing.

12:50

[Comment From Vernon]

How do you include (highlight) writings other than science pubs in your resume/CV?

12:52

David Kosub:

Have a separate section for "non-scientific publications/writings" or something like that. In there you can bullet exactly what you've done..and consider everything you've done, even the smallest thing...I like to link to specific things if they're on the web, in my CV...this provides direct access for the reader of your CV to see the documents you've developed.

12:52

David Kosub:

In my CV, I have something called "Selected Reports Contributed to" where I highlight that info.

12:53

[Comment From Vernon]

Is there a better way to apply for jobs than through online portals? Seems I get very few responses for policy jobs after applying online.

12:54

David Kosub:

I guess you want to use every mechanism possible, but I still think the best way to get the job is to meet the potential employer in some capacity...for example, information interviews are great. If there is an area/field that interests you, find people working in those areas and talk to them....the more they see your name the better.

12:55

David Kosub:

You need to do everything it takes to compete with everybody else out there. Your degree will get you to the door but you need to show those other skills to go through the door.

12:56

[Comment From Laura]

What is most fulfilling for you about your job? Who do you think you are making the most impact on?

12:56

David Kosub:

I love that 2nd question actually. To answer the first one first though...

12:57

David Kosub:

I love the quick-paced aspect of my job. I do a lot of quick turnaround reports and I know I'm doing a good job because they keep giving me more and more to do of them. That keeps me on my toes. When H1N1 hit last year, I was working on all sorts of quick turn around things.

12:58

David Kosub:

I really feel like I'm making an impact to the public at large...after all, your tax dollars pay my salary. I have to develop an understandable, usable, reliable, relevant work-product, which will probably eventually go to Congress, and that in turn helps them realize how important

NIH/NIAID is, and keep giving us money...in turn allowing scientists like yourself to keep working and developing the cures/diagnostics/treatments, etc that will eventually benefit the public. I also love the variety of work I do, I sit in an office that overlooks how the entire NIAID functions, which to me is very cool. I see the forest, not the trees, in essence.

12:59

Melanie Sinche:

In this last minute, I'd like to thank Dr. Kosub so much for sharing his insights about this exciting career field for scientists. Thank you!

1:00

David
Kosub:

You're
welcome.

1:00

Melanie Sinche:

Finally, I have received other questions off-line about assistance with CV reviews, writing courses, interview prep, networking tips, and others. Please refer to the OITE website (<https://www.training.nih.gov/>) to take advantage of all of the services available to you right here at the NIH! And be sure to sign up for the appropriate listserv for your group, as you will then receive notices about events like this and others, including tomorrow's International Opportunities Expo. Don't miss it!

1:00

David Kosub:

And again, I am happy to talk to people more off-line. I am always accessible and will be happy to answer questions or get you in touch with others to continue that networking that is so important.

1:01

Melanie Sinche:

Thank you for offering that, David, as there are a few lingering questions. I will forward these on to you and post your responses on this site.

Cheers!

1:01

David Kosub:

There are scientists and researchers all over the NIH that are no longer working on the bench. Get out there and meet them!

1:01

David
Kosub:

Thanks!