

<http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org>



The Job Market

Club Biotech: How Students Can Make a Difference

Sometime in the year 2000, Andreas Pichlmair and myself, both students of veterinary medicine in Austria, realised that our experiences of our country's scientific landscape were remarkably similar. We agreed, for

example, that it can be difficult for students as future scientists to understand, and break into, Austria's fragmented and sometimes inefficient science community. Could we do something about it? The idea of a student platform named "**Club Biotech** (<http://www.clubbiotech.at/>)" was born.

"The club's development was very often a thrilling trial-and-error evolutionary approach, as no one involved in it had ever done anything similar before."

Before Club Biotech went public and started its activities, we spent 6 months talking with established scientists about what we should consider in starting our organisation, and how they might be able to support us. Now, almost 2 years since its foundation, the club is operating on various levels to achieve its goals of collecting and passing on essential information about the life sciences in the Vienna area, bridging the gap between students and professional scientists, and encouraging young people to take a closer look at the world of science.

Club Biotech distributes information on scientific events in our area, gathers information on internships and research student jobs for undergraduate students who would like to gain some extra experience and get a step ahead in their scientific career by working in a lab during the year, and counsels young students on how to approach a scientific career. Club Biotech also organises trips to biotech companies in the Vienna area and holds smaller scientific meetings.

In addition, Club Biotech has created a new, high-profile lecture series called "The Club Biotech Lectures." Approximately every other month, we invite very well recognised and distinguished international scientists to give a lecture about their field of study that we hope will stimulate and motivate young people. Club Biotech has attracted the crème de la crème from all over the world to discuss their scientific contributions. Past speakers include prion researcher Adriano Aguzzi of Zürich, leading cloning and stem cell expert Alan Colman of PPL Therapeutics, renowned immunologist Josef Penninger of Toronto, and British scientist Tom Blundell, one of the world's top protein structure analysts.

It might seem difficult for a group of students to invite such eminent scientists to speak, but in our experience the fact that we are young seems to give us a special charm in the eyes of these top researchers. Using the sponsorship money we have raised, we are able to pay our speakers' economy airfares and accommodations. After the lecture, Club Biotech members take the speaker to dinner at one of the nice restaurants in town--perhaps the best part of the event for us, as we can ask all kinds of questions in a relaxed atmosphere!



Andreas Pichlmair and Andreas Bergthaler, co-founders of Club Biotech.

Besides these public events, Club Biotech does extensive networking behind the scenes. We are in touch with the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, various public and private institutions and agencies, various Viennese universities, numerous biotech and pharma companies, biotech consultancies, and international student clubs that share Club Biotech's visions and goals. By covering a wide area, from science to business to politics, we can share our opinions on specific topics and lobby, as well as talk about new collaborations. Systematically making such contacts has helped raise Club Biotech's profile and has very often proven to be of great help later on. Through such networking activities, Club Biotech has been quite successful in inspiring companies and public institutions to support us financially.

It certainly seems as if Club Biotech's activities are filling a gap between students and scientists from academia and business, because the momentum of this fledgling organisation has increased steadily, as has recognition and interest from the media, with repeated coverage in university journals, newspapers, radio, and news Web pages. Already we have an impressive track record, with more than 300 members and prospects. In total about 1000 people have attended various Club Biotech events, our **Web site** (<http://www.clubbiotech.at/>) has received more than 10,000 unique visits, and we have managed to raise a small five-digit sum.

So, what is the secret of Club Biotech's success? Not too surprisingly, it soon turned out that the characters involved were the most important factor. It is the people who determine whether something is going to be a success! They definitely need to be extremely motivated and dedicated, with the personal intention of making things better. Creating such an organisation is quite time-consuming, especially in the beginning, so it is essential to get together a circle of people who will push the uniting idea forward. In our case, the two founding members were joined over the first few months by an inner circle of four more active members. The early days are also when you are most likely to encounter people who are suspicious and doubtful about your ideas; it is then that working in a team of like-minded people is especially valuable.

Even though at the beginning of the club's development we tried to follow a kind of master plan, it was very often simply a thrilling trial-and-error evolutionary approach, as no one involved in it had ever done anything similar before. Some things (e.g., sticking up umpteen posters far into the night) were certainly a pain and didn't seem to pay off right away. But the rewards came in seeing our ideas materialise and even induce admiration in others.

Once Club Biotech was off the ground, it became important to show some consistency and continuity in our activities, adjusting them as we learned from our experiences. For example, we found that for our public events it was best to try to stick to the same time and day of the week. We also came up with a standard poster layout to make our publicity easier to recognise from a distance. But we don't want to stand still and are keen to implement new ideas to win new audiences. For example, we would like to start a journal club in which experienced students volunteer to discuss scientific papers with their younger counterparts (i.e., advanced pupils and first-year students) to stimulate interest in and fascination for the world of science.

Right from the start we realised that communication was crucial to Club Biotech; what use are the best events and information if no one knows about them?! Thus, we have always emphasised public relations and advertisements for all our activities, using word-of-mouth recommendation, the Internet (Web site, mailing list), press releases, articles, posters, handouts, flyers, and so on. To facilitate recognition, Club Biotech created its own logo, and we make sure we use it whenever possible.

Having started within the University of Veterinary Sciences, Club Biotech already spans several Viennese universities, and in the midterm we would like to include other Austrian universities.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that initiating and contributing to something like Club Biotech might return manifold benefits that

sometimes cannot even be estimated beforehand. Any of the various contacts with peers, professors, leading scientists, and businesspeople that I have made; the experience of working with the media; the practise in logistics, time management, and planning ahead; and the leadership abilities and extra social skills that I have developed might be of critical advantage in my future career. Above all I have simply found it satisfying and enjoyable to see how, as an individual student, I can support other people?s endeavours and thereby help make things a little bit better.

Andreas Bergthaler is a 24-year-old final-year student studying veterinary medicine with an emphasis on biomedicine and biotechnology. You can contact him at Club Biotech, University of Veterinary Sciences, Veterinaerplatz 1, 1210 Vienna, Austria. E-mail: andi@pathol.unizh.ch (<mailto:andi@pathol.unizh.ch>)

[Cancel](#)