Career Profile – Jeff Sunman, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?
I am a patent agent in the Biotechnology and Pharmaceutical Patents group at Alston & Bird LLP. I began this position in June of 2010.

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?
I earned my doctorate in pharmaceutical sciences, with an emphasis on pharmacology, from the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Did you do a postdoc?
I first completed a two-year T32 postdoctoral fellowship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, primarily working in the lab of Dr. Roy Hawke in the Eshelman School of Pharmacy. I also completed a five-year postdoctoral fellowship in the lab of Dr. Steven Akiyama at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

What are your main daily responsibilities?
As a patent agent, my typical responsibilities shift from day-to-day between drafting patent applications, responding to arguments and requests from patent offices, managing and tracking my docket of cases, and communicating with our clients.

Patent agents perform many of the same tasks as patent attorneys with the primary exception that agents are not permitted to litigate cases. Patent agents do not, however, need to attend law school or pass a state bar exam to file and prosecute patent applications. Patent agents are certified to practice by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office after passing the USPTO Registration Exam, also known as “the patent bar.”

What are the keys to success in your career field?
Many factors can contribute to your success as a patent agent or patent attorney. First and foremost is your ability to write. You must be able to critically analyze both scientific documents and legal arguments in order to draft applications and prepare responses. Organization is critical for managing your docket of cases and tracking your deadlines. Your ability to work under those deadlines is also vital. Finally, interpersonal skills are essential for assisting your clients and communicating with colleagues.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?
Patent law was an attractive career for many reasons. The most important factors were my basic interests in law and writing. The more I invested myself in learning about patent law, the more I enjoyed talking to agents and attorneys about the career and the field. As a patent agent, I was able start a career that satisfies both of my interests without having to attend law school. Being a patent agent in our group at Alston & Bird also affords an excellent work-life balance, security, and benefits.
What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?

My best advice for obtaining a job in patent law is to plan ahead and set yourself apart. Like most other non-bench science jobs, the number of graduate students and post-docs trying to enter patent law has continued to grow. As such, you need to take steps to set yourself apart. Passing the patent bar is a major investment in time but will differentiate you from the majority of your peers. Additionally, it will tell a potential employer that you are sincerely interested in the career and that you will be able to contribute more quickly than others with no experience. Also, take advantage of opportunities at local universities and in Research Triangle Park to attend seminars and symposiums that are specifically focused on patent law. Networking at these events and learning about current issues in patent law can be invaluable when applying for jobs.