TALENTMARK
THE LIFE IN SCIENCE

RECRUITMENT IN LIFE SCIENCES

THE BALANCE BETWEEN DOING IT YOURSELF AND OUTSOURCING

Recruitment in Life Sciences: balancing in-house efforts and outsourcing

"Engage an agency? We can find the right candidates ourselves!" This is a common response within Life Sciences organizations. And in some cases, it's true. For standard roles, companies often succeed in hiring staff directly. Yet, time and again, Talentmark is approached to recruit specialized professionals. Why?

In March 2025, together with the Dutch Association for Pharmaceutical Medicine (NVFG), we conducted a survey among 34 respondents from 31 pharmaceutical organizations. The results speak volumes: 61% of comanies are actively engaged in recruitment. In fact, 14% of respondents spend two full days per week on talent acquisition. What stands out: many organizations struggle to find truly suitable candidates and to attract Generation Z.

Key recruitment challenges for pharmaceutical companies

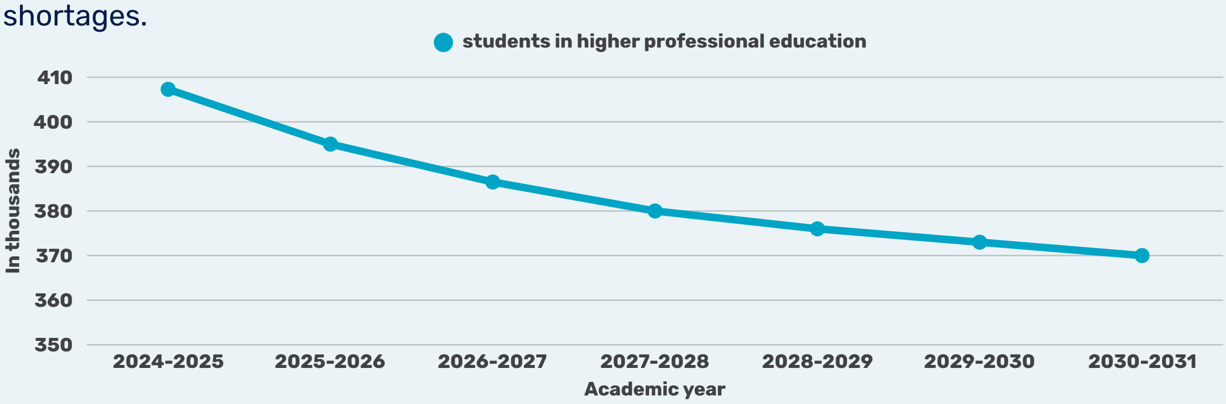
The NVFG-Talentmark survey highlights two main recruitment challenges for the pharmaceutical industry:

1. A shortage of qualified candidates;
2. Difficulty engaging young talent, especially Gen Z.

This combination puts pressure on recruitment processes, disrupts team building and poses a risk to continuity in both production and innovation. Below, we elaborate on these bottlenecks, based on survey results and current industry trends.

Too few qualified candidates

A significant share of respondents (44%) cited the shortage of suitable candidates as their biggest challenge. This comes as no surprise: an ageing workforce combined with declining student intake in higher professional education is creating serious labor market shortages.



For example, in the 2024-2025 academic year, 449,200 students are enrolled in higher professional education. By 2031-2032, the number is projected to drop to just 368,000, a steep decline with major consequences for the availability of highly educated talent *(Source: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, The Netherlands)*.

Internally, teams are also under strain. Many companies have limited recruitment capacity and small HR departments. 61% of the respondents are actively involved in recruitment and 14% spend on average two full days per week on it. Not full-time, but substantial enough to distract from core activities such as production, research of strategic development.

Gen Z is not (yet) engaging

The second major challenge lies in attracting young talent. Increasingly, pharmaceutical companies report difficulty connecting with Gen Z. This is partly generational. Gen Z explores opportunities differently, moves faster and places greater emphasis on purpose, flexibility and autonomy.

Insights from Human Ingredients 3 - an event where HR and TA professionals in Life Sciences discuss current topics - show that young professionals want:

- Fast and direct communication channels, like Whatsapp;
- Attention to societal relevance and impact;
- Clarity about their role and responsibilities;
- Personalized development, with coaching rather than micro-management;
- An onboarding process that feels like a warm welcome, where they feel seen and supported.

Moreover, Gen Z tends to stay with one employer for an average of just 2.8 years *(Source: Human Ingredients 4)*, compared to much longer tenures among previous generations. The shortage of candidates and the disconnect with Gen Z reinforce each other. The smaller the talent pool, the more important it becomes for employers to be attractive and visible. And for this generation, 'visibility' means far more than posting a vacancy on a job board.

The challenge for pharmaceutical companies is therefore twofold: capacity and reach. Without specialist support, recruitment quickly becomes reactive, time-consuming and frustrating. That is exactly why organizations turn to agencies, not because they cannot do it themselves, but because they know where to best focus their energy.

Why pharmaceutical companies outsource their recruitment

Although many organizations prefer to manage recruitment internally, the NVFG-Talentmark survey shows that a significant part of the pharmaceutical sector opts for partially outsourcing the recruitment process. Three key motives stand out:

1. Better access to qualified candidates

In a tight labor market, reach is everything. Organizations often lack the networks, data sources or time to identify candidates. Recruitment partners provide access to databases, proactive sourcing strategies and direct connections with job seekers.

At Talentmark, this includes a database of more than 60,000 Life Sciences professionals, ranging from vocationally trained Operators to regulatory specialists and senior management.

2. Working with specialized recruiters

The pharmaceutical sector is complex. Understanding processes, quality standards (such as GMP) and job dynamics is essential in assessing candidates. Thanks to their experience, specialized recruiters can make faster and more accurate matches on culture, ambition and expertise.

3. A faster and more efficient recruitment process

In pharmaceutical companies, recruitment is often handled (partly) by internal teams alongside other responsibilities. This causes delays and unclear processes. By working with an external partner, these bottlenecks can be resolved. For example, Talentmark can deliver three carefully selected, interview-ready profiles in a short timeframe.

Companies do not outsource recruitment because they cannot do it themselves, but because they want to do it faster, more targeted and with greater results.

Criticism of recruitment agencies: where does it go wrong?

Almost every pharmaceutical organization (91%) has worked with a recruitment agency at some point. Of these, 44% look back on the experience with dissatisfaction. A striking figure that shows collaboration does not always deliver.

Where does this dissatisfaction come from? Respondents pointed mainly to:

- Being presented with unsuitable candidates;
- Feeling that the recruiter does not understand their organization;
- A lack of connection between client, recruiter and candidate.

In a specialist sector like Life Sciences, this frustration is understandable. The difference between a good profile on paper and a successful placement often lies in subtle nuances. This is precisely where generic agencies fall short: lacking sector knowledge, missing access to relevant networks or focusing too much on speed over quality.

Yet the need for support remains high. While companies are critical of external agencies, the importance of professional recruitment has never been greater. This is reflected in the heavy internal workload (61% are actively involved in recruitment) and in the main reasons to outsource: better candidate access, sector expertise and efficiency.

Talentmark responds to this need with specialization, a personal approach and a proven Life Sciences network. Several of our recruiters have worked directly in the pharmaceutical industry themselves. At the same time, we take this feedback seriously: later this year we will conduct further research into the root causes of dissatisfaction, to ensure that collaboration continues to add real value for both clients and candidates.

Outsourcing roles is more popular than ever

Despite criticism of recruitment agencies, research shows that more than 50% of pharmaceutical companies outsource their commercial roles. Recruitment outsourcing remains popular, especially in a sector where commercial pressure, product knowledge and regulatory compliance converge.

According to McKinsey, more and more pharmaceutical companies are outsourcing commercial activities, such as deploying entire sales teams (CSOs) and medical departments. This trend is continuing: IQVIA predicts that the proportion of outsourced commercial roles among large pharmaceutical companies will increase in the next five years.

The reasons are clear. Commercial roles, from medical advisor to sales manager, require not only subject-matter expertise, but also strong positioning skills, client context awareness and compliance knowledge. This combination makes recruitment complex, especially under time pressure. Many organizations therefore deliberately leave this recruitment to specialized agencies. Not only to save time, but also to ensure the right match in roles that directly impact revenue and reputation.

This demonstrates that trust in recruitment agencies has not disappeared, but has become more critical. Particularly in commercial positions, where the difference between success and a poor match is quickly visible, companies prefer quality via a specialized partner over the risks of going it alone.

From insights to action

The survey highlights a fundamental challenge for the pharmaceutical sector: qualified candidates are scarce, young talent is difficult to engage and internal capacity often falls short. At the same time, many organizations remain critical of external agencies.

This may seem contradictory, but it is not. The need for support continues, as long as the support is high quality, understands the sector and adds value for both client and candidate.

That's why pharmaceutical companies increasingly choose specialized recruitment partners with proven expertise, networks and industry knowledge. At Talentmark, we understand the unique context of Life Sciences. We work daily with pharmaceutical organizations, from scale-ups to multinationals, to turn these challenges into sustainable solutions. With a warm database, specialized recruiters and tailored approaches, we help companies recruit faster, more effectively and with a greater impact.

Would you like to learn more or have a conversation?

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