



One for the Entry-Level MSL Candidates

"Do you ever work with candidates looking to break into their first MSL role?" is an extremely common question we get asked. The answer is "yes!", but they just unfortunately aren't as common as the MSL roles requiring experience. It's probably no surprise to you that there's A LOT of interest and competition for these highly coveted break-in MSL roles, but no worries- we're here to help you navigate the hurdles and questions as you explore your new career path!

My hope is that this can be a general guide for those who are just getting started in their MSL job search, or for those who are exploring the role and trying to decide if it's right for them.

FIRST AND FOREMOST- DETERMINE IF THE MSL ROLE IS RIGHT FOR YOU.

I encounter people who often hear about the MSL role and decide it sounds glamorous (travel, flexible schedule, competitive salary, company car, etc...) and choose to pursue it for the wrong reasons without TRULY understanding the role. As you likely guessed, most of the time those aren't the candidates who land the job.

-DO YOUR HOMEWORK. There are SO MANY resources online that can educate you on the ins and outs of the role to give you a baseline.

Here's some basic questions you need to ask yourself to get started:

- Do you enjoy high-level scientific communication?
- Are you a skilled presenter/do you ENJOY presenting?
- Are you comfortable building relationships from scratch and having to potentially reach out to strangers cold?
- Are you someone who enjoys and will not get burnt out by travel?
- Do you have a high risk tolerance?

If any of those boxes give you hesitation to check, this might not be the best avenue for you to pursue. I would also recommend learning how the MSL role fits into the broader scope of the Medical Affairs world as an added step. It is critical to educate yourself on the role and make sure it's aligned with your skills and interests. You know yourself better than anyone else, be honest about where you land.

-USE YOUR NETWORK. See who you know through alumni network, MSL organizations, LinkedIn groups, personal LinkedIn connections, etc.. Try to find a couple of people that have made the transition into the MSL role who you can ask for 10-15 minutes of their time for an informational interview. This will allow you to learn more from someone who has made the jump successfully and can give you a different perspective to solidify it's the right path for you. (I highly recommend doing as much homework as you can before you reach out, as to not spin another person's wheels unnecessarily if it's information you could've just found on Google first.)

NOW THAT YOU'VE DECIDED TO PURSUE THE MSL ROLE...

You determined the role was right for you and you're not sure what's next? Let's get started!

-UPDATE YOUR RESUME/CV. Since you just realized this is the path you want to trek, I'd assume your resume/CV isn't tailored for the MSL role, YET. It is critical to get it updated and in a good spot so if a job does magically appear you can act swiftly and get your name in the hat. Now, I'm not saying this will be the last time you update your resume; it's likely there will be a number of iterations as your job search goes along, and honestly it can pay to take the time to update it for specialized roles if you have experience you can add in. Those things will help you stand out to HR and hiring managers. I have had candidates excluded from processes if they failed to include key words in their resume (example: you're applying for an oncology job and fail to mention the word oncology anywhere in the document). If you have no idea where to start, we've put together a couple of templates on our free resources page you can use for inspiration (www.pharmafinders.com/resources). I also recommend if you have a really nice MSL friend, to ask if they might be willing to share their resume with you or be willing to take a look at yours

-UTILIZE YOUR NETWORK. You've likely done this if you followed the earlier advice, but if you knew from the womb the MSL role is what you're destined to be and were able to skip that step, NOW is the time to engage your network and get to making new friends in the Medical Affairs space. This would be the time to alert your friends who have made the MSL jump that you're ready to begin actively applying for jobs and you'd really appreciate being kept on their radar. Additionally, I would engage with recruiters who specialize in MSL roles. They can keep you on their list so if/when a break-in role come across, you've already been introduced.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR APPLICATIONS AREN'T GOING ANYWHERE:

Submitting your resume everywhere and getting zero traction? Getting interviews but not moving past the first phone/video interview?

-DID YOU ACTUALLY UPDATE YOUR CV? If you have spot on experience and you're not getting any hits on your resume, it might be that it still needs work. Get a second pair of eyes on it and be open to feedback. Don't get your feelings hurt if someone has some constructive criticism for you. There are a ton of styles and personal preferences when it comes to resumes and sometimes it can take a couple of passes to get it where you need it to be, don't get discouraged!

-ARE YOU OVERVALUING YOUR EXPERIENCE? I say this with all the care in the world - just because you're a super smart, can-learn-anything human doesn't mean that you're the best candidate for a Senior MSL role. Make sure the roles you're applying for are well aligned with YOUR experience. Can you come in and immediately contribute to the team with your research experience, therapeutic knowledge, clinical experience, industry experience, etc... I'm not saying definitively that you can't get a job outside of your defined therapeutic/scientific/clinical scope, but it does make a much stronger case for a company to bring on someone without the formal MSL experience if they can connect some dots on where you can add value from the jump. Also, if you're applying for things out of your scope, you're likely not as strong as the other bazillion entry-level candidates who are applying with those skills and the others with MSL experience that you're also competing with. I know that can come across like all the odds are against you, they aren't! I suggest employing a strategic approach as you're applying and targeting companies where you feel like you can make a strong case for yourself and stand out from other candidates. You can always just mass-apply for everything you see, but don't get too defeated when your stats get skewed.

HELPFUL HINT- check in with your network and recruiters first before you apply directly. If you have a LIVE human that can vouch for you, your chances are likely going to improve!

WHAT IF YOU'RE GETTING STUCK AT THE 1st INTERVIEW STEP:

If you are getting interest in your resume and not moving past the first interview, it's likely an issue in your interviewing style, communication and/or preparedness. We've got a few things to unpack here, but this is where that "educate yourself" thing I mentioned earlier can really come in handy. If you're unable to articulate (confidently AND concisely) why you are 1) interested in the MSL role, and 2) why you're a good match for the particular role you're interviewing for, you aren't going to move on to the next step. Period. You can't expect to be able to answer those questions well if you don't even really have a strong understanding of the job. It's critical you're well versed in the lingo and ins and outs of the job. Gotta do that homework!

Additionally, you should be prepared to discuss what it is about this specific company you're interviewing with that you're excited about and where you can connect those dots on the ways you can immediately come in and contribute. (Remember, they're taking a chance on you as a brand new MSL, so show them why it'd be worth their time!)

Another critical factor is to be mindful of attitude and enthusiasm. I have seen many experienced MSLs get beat by entry-level candidates because the hiring manager saw the potential of the ambitious, energetic aspiring MSL and the eagerness they had to show their skills. There are times where experienced candidates can think the "experience will speak for itself" and they come across as lackluster or uninterested and lose the opportunity.

HELPFUL HINT: Every single contact at a company is a first impression. Do not take anyone for granted and treat everyone with the same energy and effort. I personally think this is a great philosophy to live by.

ADDITIONAL POINTERS:

ENABLE YOURSELF, BE RESOURCEFUL:

Don't just show up and expect others to do the work for you. You need to show initiative and put effort into your job search as well if this is what you really want. The candidates I have seen make the jump have all advocated for themselves by putting in consistent effort and a positive attitude.

KEEP TABS ON YOUR APPLICATIONS: Who/What/When/Role/Therapeutic Area. An email inbox folder, notepad, or a spreadsheet will work; whatever level of organization works for you! This will help you avoid duplicating efforts and can help greatly if you're working with recruiters to see where you've already applied and when. It can also be useful if a company comes back to several months later and you've been applying away and might have forgotten where or for what team you applied for initially.

EXPLORE CONTRACT MSL ROLES:

Contract MSL positions are a great way to gain experience and there will be some potential to be brought on permanent with the company. Many very reputable pharma companies seek for contract MSL teams. Yes, of course there is risk with a contract position, but there is risk in any pharma/biotech industry position. It's all part of the very dynamic pharma industry environment that keeps us on our toes! IQVIA, Syneos, TMAC (The Medical Affairs Company), and TriNet Pharma are a few of the contract MSL organizations I would take a look at to get started (not an all-inclusive list of agencies).

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL:

My mantra for my candidates (and myself too!) has always been to "focus on the things you can control". It's literally all we can do, so let's put our energy into where we can improve our odds and make the most of our efforts. Don't wind yourself up thinking about your competition, timing, or your lack of "formal MSL experience"- you can't change those things. You **can** change how much research you've done on the products, territory, role, and competitive landscape for the drug so that you're showing up the interview the MOST prepared you can possibly be. It's a much more productive and positive exercise to channel your energy into those things.

I know it's easy to go down that dark spiral of "what ifs", but save yourself the trouble and just remember to "focus on what you can control". Your effort and your attitude are both within those bounds and they deserve your attention. You want to be able to walk away from each interview knowing you left it all on the table and gave it YOUR best effort. That doesn't mean you're going to land the job. Sometimes there are just better candidates in the mix, but that's OK. Practice is important and the more you use your interviewing muscles, the stronger you'll get. Give yourself some grace and don't get beat down if you don't land the first job you apply and interview for.

This can be a process, so buckle up and prepare for ups and downs- YOU GOT THIS!

Best of luck in your job search!