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LABORATORY LEADERS SURVEY AND RESULTS 2022

Top challenges faced by lab leaders along with actionable solutions

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INTRODUCTION

After navigating a global pandemic, laboratory leaders face re-establishing their workforce in a new climate of risk and opportunity. Thriving amidst skills shortages while driving productivity and efficiency will require re-evaluating and upgrading existing talent strategies to successfully recruit, retain, upskill, and empower laboratory workers.

In May 2022, Synergy and SRG asked a variety of laboratory leaders to assess their concerns and expected challenges over the coming year. We found that while leaders had clear objectives in place to overcome operational constraints, that staff and skills shortages often undermined the pace of innovation and remained key concerns.

The highest-ranked challenges listed by laboratory leaders reveal ongoing concerns surrounding talent management and efficiency in the lab.

1. Skills & expertise gaps (75%)
2. Attraction & retention of staff (66%)
3. Ability to achieve quicker results (58%)
4. Problem-solving (58%)

Laboratory leaders are most concerned about skills & expertise gaps (75%), as well as staff attraction and retention (66%), as they continue to compete for skilled staff in an increasingly challenging market.

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Coming in joint third on the threat list for laboratory leaders objectives are the ability to achieve quicker results (58%), and problem-solving (58%). Interestingly, laboratory leaders displayed lower levels of concern for quality management systems, and health and safety systems. This may reflect resilience in the areas following the disruptions of the pandemic.

To illuminate the perspectives behind these views, we asked respondents to expand on the wider context behind their laboratory's challenges. Leaders highlighted facing significant hurdles with staff knowledge and experience, as well as difficulties surrounding recruitment and retention.

One respondent explains how a lack of staff expertise can compromise digital success as they reveal their primary challenge lies in, "[the] introduction of new digital technologies into day-to-day work and skills of new staff". This illustrates a shift in priorities away from resilience and agility (which was key throughout the pandemic), towards optimising candidate pathways where new staff are not only hired, but upskilled and empowered to succeed.

CHALLENGE 1: SKILLS AND EXPERTISE GAP

Heightened productivity and diagnostics demand over the course of the pandemic, exacerbated pre-existing talent shortages and increased the competition for skilled laboratory workers. Meanwhile, increases in digitalisation across the sector are increasing the need for not only digital skills, but critical thinking and flexibility to improve problem-solving, and streamline processes as they evolve.

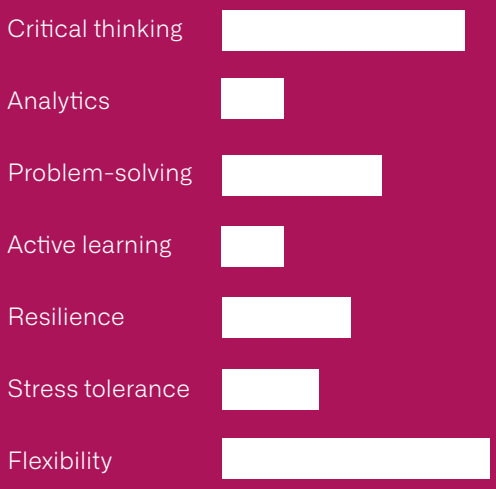
Skills and expertise gaps are a concern for 75% of laboratory leaders and are a major concern for 33% of this group.

Surveyed leaders describe how skills challenges can limit their competitive advantage, with one leader explaining their challenge as, “meeting very diverse and growing demands of clients with finite equipment resources and limits to the knowledge and experience of staff”. Others divulge general technical and expertise gaps that block efficiency in the laboratory as new digital technologies are introduced.

The highest priority critical lab skills were flexibility (58%) and critical thinking (50%), with problem solving (33%) and resilience (25%) following behind. The survey results indicate existing analytical strength, with only 8% of leaders prioritising analysis as a critical skill.

These findings emphasise a shift away from the resilience-oriented environment of the pandemic, towards one where sustainable growth and innovation are key. To drive success in the long term, leaders are focusing on building a workforce of critical, yet flexible problem-solvers.

Which of the following critical skills gaps are your highest priority to solve?
(select top 3)



SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE THE SKILLS AND EXPERTISE GAP

Carol Jennings

Synergy Operations Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience

41% of laboratory leaders said upskilling is critical for innovation. However, upskilling initiatives can place additional work onto the shoulders of managers on-site, and when staff upskill and leave, the laboratory is left at a continual skills deficit.

1. Inspire and align staff according to their strengths and potential

Cultivate career pathways where staff have the opportunity to realise their ambitions in the laboratory, and tailor mentorship and upskilling according to staff interests that complement operational objectives. Carol Jennings describes how Synergy work to tackle the skills gap challenge:

"People want to see development and a career pathway. In particular, young graduates are hungrier than ever for development opportunities. As an employer, Synergy's view on dealing with these issues is proactive. We don't like to look at our people as numbers. We recognise our staff as individuals, and offer constructive, realistic staff development and training opportunities to help them grow".

SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE THE SKILLS AND EXPERTISE GAP

2. Explore external services that provide access to dynamic skill sets

While external service providers like contract research organisations (CROs) are often off-site, on-site service providers can help expand teams under OPEX budgets, enabling labs to increase headcount while benefiting from deploying expertise on-site, and freeing up scientific teams to focus away from the bench. Carol expanded by stating:

"Employees should have a quality-focused mindset – this is something Synergy instil through training courses aimed at improving quality, soft skills, and problem-solving on the spot. People don't come out of university with all the skills required for the laboratory. We have mentors and coaches within the business who relate to that and support our expert teams to be solutions-oriented."

3. Share ownership of managerial workload

Upskilling initiatives can inadvertently place pressure on managerial workloads, especially in situations where turnover is high, and laboratory teams are regularly retrained.

Tool to get started:

Overcoming resource constraints in laboratory workflow management

CHALLENGE 2: ATTRACTION & RETENTION OF STAFF

Synergy provides managed scientific services, which means that their on-site teams can work alongside permanent employees to solve problems, drive new efficiencies and most importantly, return time for core science.

High turnover in laboratory environments can disrupt project timelines. When members of staff leave, potential incomplete knowledge transfer can add to the additional burden of finding, recruiting, and onboarding a new member of staff consuming time and resources across the laboratory.

50% of lab leaders were strongly concerned about staff attraction and retention, with a total of 66% of leaders describing themselves as concerned about the issue. Interestingly, no leaders said they were unconcerned although 33% described themselves as only slightly concerned. Respondents describe challenges surrounding the costs associated with recruitment and difficulties in retaining staff through to project completion. A surveyed lab leader explains:

"[the] recruitment of staff and especially new graduates coming from the COVID era where COVID testing labs were recruiting new graduates at elevated salaries has in turn priced out smaller laboratories, as graduates with no experience have elevated and unrealistic salary expectations". Another leader providers their perspective saying, "the key challenge is to recruit and retain the skill set required for the test we're performing".

Laboratory leaders concerned about staff attraction & retention

SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE ATTRACTION & RETENTION OF STAFF

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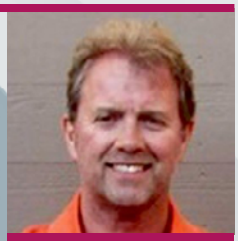


Grant Dench

Synergy Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience

Laboratory leaders face the time-consuming task of navigating the disruptions surrounding recruitment and attrition while ensuring business continuity. This task can place strain on project timelines and contribute to an inefficient recruitment cycle where last-minute hires leave before project completion.

1. Empower staff to add value through job crafting

Job crafting refers to making small changes within the boundaries and conditions of a job to draw on strengths and improve the quality of work. Research conducted throughout the pandemic found that 92% of employees who job crafted during the pandemic had more job satisfaction and a 29% decrease in their stress levels.

In the laboratory, job crafting can offer leaders an actionable strategy to enhance employee experience and limit turnover. Carol Jennings commented:

"Every employee will have their own learning style, and no one wants to be thought of as an FTE. By recognising individual abilities and supporting development through job crafting, we uphold our duty to our employees and invest back into their career trajectory to ensure they can make the impact they aspire to in science."

SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE ATTRACTION & RETENTION OF STAFF

2. Optimise recruitment

Optimal recruitment processes are a fundamental first step when it comes to reducing attrition in the long term. It's important to take the time to understand candidates' long-term ambitions, and how and if they align with your organisation.

When recruitment processes are rushed out of time pressure, it can be difficult to optimise this critical first step, meaning that sometimes poorly matched new hires fail to settle into teams, driving a cycle of high turnover that can sully corporate image. Grant Dench advises:

"Creating an environment where staff can expand their scientific knowledge and experience while being fully employed is important. This alleviates some of the retention hurdles employers face when hiring staff for specific roles and timeframes. By hiring staff on a permanent contract, and offering a position with clear progression opportunities, we provide our clients with the benefit of quality workers who are dedicated, experienced, and committed."

SOLUTIONS TO TACKLE ATTRACTION & RETENTION OF STAFF

3. Invest in permanent staff or supplement your workforce

Moving away from upskilling alone, improving and optimising the overall employee experience can help minimise turnover, and strengthen your employee value proposition (EVP), to help you attract expertise. However, with expertise in such high demand, it can be difficult to fill all job requirements. Having a viable alternative to supplement your workforce can make the difference between surviving and thriving as a lab team.

Working with scientific service providers can return time to your lab managers, and permanent team, enabling your people to focus on the science that inspires and drives them in the laboratory. To accomplish this, you must work with the right external service provider to ensure on-site scientific workers are experienced enough to accelerate, and not stall projects. Carol Jennings said:

"If you are manufacturing a quality product, or developing a novel entity or compound, you need to trust your staff to preserve that quality through discovery, development, and manufacture. At Synergy we provide access to quality professionals, and are benefited through our relationship with SRG, meaning we can rapidly hire top candidates with a quality-focused mindset to support our clients in the best way possible."

Tool to get started:

How to boost staff retention in the lab through job crafting

CHALLENGE 3: ABILITY TO ACHIEVE QUICKER RESULTS

While 41% of respondents cited increasing efficiency as the most important factor in achieving laboratory innovation, 58% of respondents were concerned about their ability to achieve faster results, making operational efficacy a key priority alongside team management for leaders today.

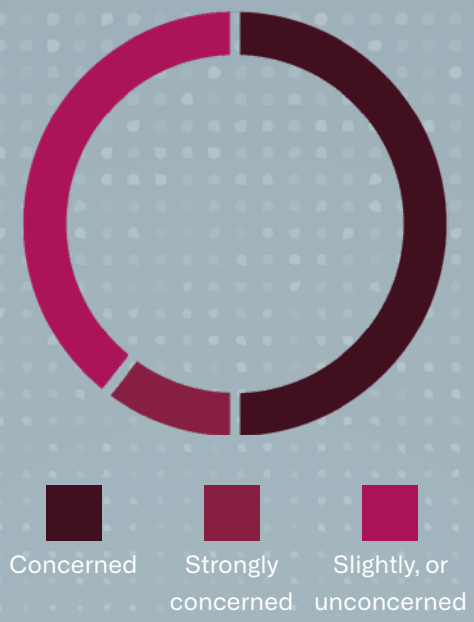
Interestingly, just 8% of leaders say they are strongly concerned about their ability to achieve quicker results. However, the issue is still clearly pertinent for many, as 50% of respondents agreed that their ability to achieve quicker results is a concern in their laboratory.

Surveyed leaders disclosed challenges surrounding “robustness in route development”, as well as routine laboratory work including “operational activities in supporting laboratory housekeeping” consuming too much time.

To help understand what strategies are already being employed in the laboratory sector by experts today, we asked our surveyed leaders about the methods they are already or have considered using.

When asked to consider the following statement, ‘I am using, or will consider using the following strategies to improve lab productivity’, leaders agreed or strongly agreed that improving data analysis and statistics (58%), investing in new equipment (58%), and lean lab methods (50%) were important.

Laboratory leaders concerned about the ability to achieve quicker results



CHALLENGE 3: ABILITY TO ACHIEVE QUICKER RESULTS

Additionally, 25% of lab leaders agreed that outsourcing increases laboratory productivity.

We also asked laboratory leaders about the top 3 laboratory tasks that take their teams away from core delivery and add time to delivery timescales.

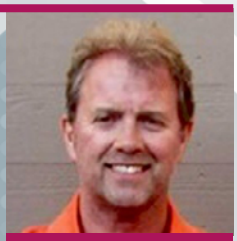
Sample admin (58%), receiving samples (42%), and report preparation (42%) were listed as having the most impact on time and delivery. Sample preparation was also a concern for one-third of lab leaders, while machine preparation and machine maintenance were of little concern to respondents.

SOLUTIONS TO ACHIEVE QUICKER RESULTS

Carol Jennings

Synergy Operations Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience



Grant Dench

Synergy Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience

Over half of laboratory leaders are concerned by their ability to achieve quicker results, making more efficient and streamlined laboratory workflows increasingly integral.

However, the fundamental, yet routine tasks that make up 'laboratory housekeeping' consume a substantial proportion of laboratory staff's time, adding to delivery timeframes and reducing time spent on innovation, and core science. Leaders need a new approach to power business continuity and increase efficiencies across the laboratory.

1. Refocus core staff on high-value projects

Routine laboratory tasks can consume the time of core staff, disrupt timeframes and limit the opportunity for innovation. Carol Jennings, explains:

"There are several things an employer might opt for to improve efficiencies in the laboratory, with every staff member having a finite amount of time for a multitude of tasks including HR, routine activities and bench work. By using an external team, it can help lift some of the more routine tasks away from core staff, enabling them to refocus on high-value projects, avoid disruption, and achieve quicker results."

SOLUTIONS TO ACHIEVE QUICKER RESULTS

2. Actively counteract attrition

High rates of attrition across the laboratory sector are of concern to 66% of our respondents, as they continue to threaten business continuity and delivery timescales. Carol Jennings commented:

"Business continuity is fundamental to laboratory research, and attrition is a major challenge in the sector. If you're spending 2 years training an individual for them to leave, you lose a major asset. What's more, you hinder the momentum of the research. However, if you reflect on your team, and their challenges, and tailor actionable solutions you can overcome attrition and improve continuity. In science, where things are ever-evolving, it's about having a flexible and agile approach to staff retention in the laboratory."

3. Reduce time spent on recruitment

Recruitment processes can add additional time to already strained workloads, overloading laboratory managers and affecting the course of work in the laboratory. Grant Dench explains:

SOLUTIONS TO ACHIEVE QUICKER RESULTS

"Even with a recruitment agency, employing staff as a scientific business is time-consuming. Recruitment companies will still send you a range of CVs to look through, and then you have to interview candidates, which takes one of your senior members of staff, if not yourself, away from your daily duties. By using an external team you gain access to workers that are pre-screened, trained and experienced from the start – enabling more time for core science and avoiding time-wastage."

Tool to get started:

Outsourcing pharma: 5 questions to consider

CHALLENGE 4: PROBLEM-SOLVING

Problem-solving, or the ability to proactively amend issues as they arise, is an additional area of concern for leaders borne out of other issues including skills and expertise gaps, as well as challenges surrounding recruitment and retention. In a mixed-skills workforce where more experienced employees are taken away from core science to support and train new hires, who then leave the organisation, there is little chance to embed problem-solving and critical thinking practices.

Half of all respondents (50%), said they were concerned about problem-solving in their laboratory workforce, and an additional 8% of laboratory leaders said they were strongly concerned. Interestingly, no laboratory leaders said they were unconcerned, although 41% said they were only slightly concerned.

When asked to discuss the context behind their response, laboratory leaders mentioned skills and expertise gaps, as well as retention issues impacting abilities to problem solve in the laboratory. One surveyed leader explores issues surrounding problem-solving in their laboratory, "[Our] main issues relate to problem-solving where chemists do not have experience, or broad-based analytical backgrounds to investigate analytical issues (e.g., equipment failure)." Additionally, the respondent highlights that "there are also gaps in the ability to write unambiguous effective procedures".

Laboratory leaders concerned about problem-solving

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Carol Jennings

Synergy Operations Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience

Grant Dench

Synergy Director

Over 30 years' Life Science and lab experience

Critical thinking, a key component of problem-solving, was noted as a priority skills gap for 50% of laboratory leaders. This means that leaders are likely facing critical thinking skills shortages, alongside problem-solving challenges. To amend this issue, laboratory leaders must strategise the ways in which they enable, promote, and implement critical thinking and continuous improvement to develop a proactive workforce.

1. Rethink candidate pipelines

Skills gaps including critical thinking gaps and poor problem-solving aptitude are rooted in communication gaps between industry, and academia. Bridging this gap means working together with academic institutions, whether that be a university or college, and empowering educators with the knowledge, and resources to effectively bridge these gaps before candidates enter the job market.

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Carol Jennings, explains how apprenticeships can both improve social mobility, and enable companies to cultivate problem-solving skills early on:

"While we have graduates, other individuals such as those who take apprenticeships can be from diverse groups and may face hurdles in beginning their scientific career. While companies may overlook alternative career pipelines, apprenticeships can offer an opportunity for long-term investment, where apprentices benefit from industry exposure and training, and companies benefit from additional support".

2. Drive continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is at the heart of problem-solving, where procedures and workflows evolve over time, becoming continually more sophisticated and efficient. Achieving continuous improvement can often rely on access to experienced experts in a given field, who have the breadth of understanding to deliver nuanced recommendations to make a difference.

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Grant Dench commented:

"Problem-solving in the laboratory is a multi-faceted issue that needs a holistic response. Employing people who have a broad base of knowledge is key, ensuring they have the ability to overcome problems that arise across workflows. It's beneficial to have team leaders who are regularly trained on HR, lean methodology, personnel, and operational management, so you can build a more proactive workforce, actively problem solve and employ critical thinking. To bring together a continuous improvement strategy, it helps to have an operational team who are constantly reinforcing and enabling the success; it's a team effort, and something we take seriously when deploying scientific teams to our clients' labs".

3. Enable soft-skill development

Soft skill development is rarely part of a scientist's academic experience, with hard and technical skills being the main focus across college and university. Successful problem-solving relies on effective communication; without it, ideas can fall flat, no matter how strong a person's critical thinking skills may be.

SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Carol Jennings said:

"Staff need troubleshoot and think for themselves. Unfortunately, people don't always come out of university with workplace soft skills, or the ability to solve problems on the spot. We bridge this divide at Synergy by actively mentoring and coaching our staff to help guide them towards being more solutions-oriented throughout their careers."

SUMMARY

In summary, the 2022 lab leaders survey revealed a number of insights and shared challenges across laboratories in the UK and EU.

Key findings:

- Operational inefficiencies and skill gaps are curbing innovation and productivity in the laboratory.
- Looking to the future, leaders aspire to improve productivity by investing in data analytics, new equipment, and lean lab methods, however, the efficacy of these strategies will rely on the right talent.
- Leaders believe that skills and expertise gaps, staff attraction and retention, the ability to achieve faster results, and problem-solving, are the major challenges holding back laboratories today.

Establishing a successful laboratory in the current market will mean taking actionable steps towards not only repairing skills gaps but improving employee value propositions and powering retention in an authentic, representative way.

Alongside this, driving operational efficiencies and keeping pace with competitors will mean ensuring that employees are flexible and ready for change.

SUMMARY

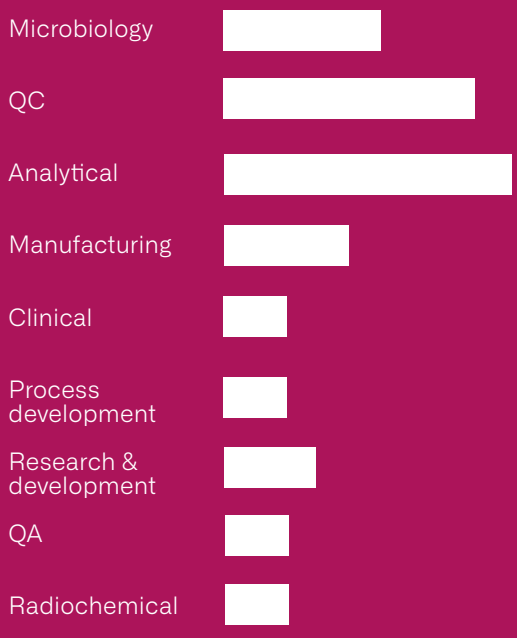
Whether you choose to improve your internal processes and training in conjunction with your own leadership team, collaborate with a recruitment specialist, or decide to use external scientific services like Synergy, it's important to be proactive in tackling key challenges to ensure your lab remains successful by achieving its objectives.

About the survey

Insights from Synergy's Lab Leader Survey were derived from an online survey conducted over the course of May to June 2022, which polled 11 laboratory leaders on their concerns, strategies, and challenges in the lab.

Which sector do you work in?

What type of work does your lab do?



synergy

Who are Synergy?

We'll lead our experts in your lab, so you can lead the way in science.

Synergy finds, trains and manages integrated teams at your onsite facilities. Executing established scientific processes, and using our experience and analytics to make them more efficient, we'll help you get back to what you do best.

Whatever your scientific goals, we'll deploy the team that gets you there.

For a discussion about how Synergy can expand your lab capability email:

synergyqueries@srgtalent.com

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