SPIN Statistical programmer account, Andrew

During the final year of my mathematics degree at the University of East Anglia, I was contemplating a future as an accountant with other avenues such as teaching and further study also open. After weighing things up, I was keen on the latter but unsure as to what I wished to study further as a lot of my course was pure theoretical maths. I enjoyed an applied stats module above all others as I had an aptitude for numeracy and logic. With a little research at the careers office and a review of a PSI magazine I found in the mathematics department I discovered that there were a number of career paths in the pharmaceutical industry for an applied statistician.

After graduating I saved for a year to study for a medical statistics MSc at Southampton University starting in 2000. This course was a very gratifying experience and really set me up well for my future career. In looking for a job I put myself forward to companies as a statistician as that is what my teaching had mostly been but some advertised for statisticians or programmers. Quintiles were the company that gave me my break as a statistical programmer after my MSc was complete in 2001, which was both exciting and daunting as I knew they were a big company, the biggest Contract Research Organisation in the world.

The first few weeks were a steep learning curve for me in terms of SAS programming as my MSc only really scratched the surface here. However, I soon found that through perseverance and applied logic that this was a task that I could handle and even enjoy as I understood more and more. I did not know what to expect as far as day-to-day work was concerned so I was pleasantly surprised to find I was not chained to the desk all day. There were meetings of many varieties; department, programmers, team and one-to-one meetings. This was quite different from previous office jobs I had taken that involved one meeting on day one then get on with it. The amount of support and teamwork were a major factor in helping me learn and develop personally as my confidence grew with each interaction, especially when asked to present to others. I also remember that my first actual project task was to review a statistical analysis plan, which I associated with the role of statistician. However, I soon learnt that the roles of programmer and statistician overlapped considerably at Quintiles.

I was made to feel welcome by my fellow members of the biostatistics department in which the statisticians slightly outnumbered the programmers. We sat in groups of four that tried to have a mix of skills and experience so that you would hope to be able to ask a query to one of the other three. I also had the chance of meeting other statisticians and programmers of my age working in pharmaceutical companies and CROs as I attended the PSI ITIT course in 2002/2003 after just over a year in the industry. This entailed six, two-day visits to host companies taking us through the industry drug process from molecule to marketing through various stages. A great learning and social experience, one personal memory is staying in a converted mill in Lanarkshire, Scotland, while attending a data management session. I have also had the opportunity to attend external

training courses and conferences over the last four years. The best being a programming conference that was held in San Diego over four days and I had the chance to meet American colleagues from my company.

During my time in the industry I have developed my SAS programming so that I am now confident with my coding as well as looking at others code and helping them. I draw great satisfaction from producing a table or figure that either has some complexity aesthetically or a statistical component to it. I have ensured that I have kept in touch with the statistics that I learnt at my MSc by being part of a statistical working party at Quintiles and going on a refresher stats course for programmers. Another part of the job that I am increasingly involved with is contact with clients and colleagues at other sites. This requires a good level of communication over phone and e-mail mainly but face-to-face does also occur.

I have also had the chance to work with other departments within my company such as Data Management and Medical Writing and had an interesting opportunity to work directly with HR to help process some data for them.

To sum up, I am very happy in my role in the industry as a statistical programmer. I think there is enough variety of work experiences and feel I have developed a core skill I am proud of.