



Name: Colleen McKiernan, PhD

Position: Senior Patent Agent

Affiliation: Intellia Therapeutics, Inc.

Location: Cambridge, MA, USA

Pronouns: She/Her

Please briefly describe your current role in your position

Protect innovative science to facilitate entry of therapeutics to the market.

What is your terminal and/or current position in academia?

Postdoc

How did you hear about your current position? Was it a career option that you were aware about during your educational process?

When I was a postdoc in the late 90's, I spent much of my time going to seminars because I found everyone else's work to be more interesting than mine. I wanted to know a little about a lot, rather than a lot about a little. I had started working in labs the summer after high school, so I did not know what one did with lab science training other than more lab science. I started talking with anyone who would talk to me about what they did at work all day-- biotech, consulting, big pharma, patent law. Patent law appealed to me in that I would be learning new things all of the time, but I would never have to stand at the bench (or deal with failed projects). Writing is less painful if you are not writing about your own work with all of its emotional attachments.

I began my career at a law firm and have bounced between law firms and in house positions at biotech companies throughout my career. I have not gone to law school and have never felt the need to go. Not going to law school is somewhat limiting in regard to career options, but I prefer to stay close to the science. Four years of night school, even if someone else is going to pay for it (many law firms do, and biotech companies will often provide subsidies for work-related courses), does not appeal.

How did you end up working at your current affiliation?

Cambridge/ Boston biotech is a small community. I reached out to some former colleagues who were already at my present company.

How long have you been working at your current affiliation?

Many years

What type of position is your current job?

Hybrid (Remote & In-Person)

Is your role more a managerial or individual contributor role?

Individual Contributor



What are the defined roles of your position?

Draft and prosecute patent applications, perform freedom to operate and patentability analyses, work with groups across the company to ensure confidentiality of disclosures (meeting presentations to clinical filings) and protect trade secrets. Work with scientists in relation to external collaborations and partnerships. Interact with multidisciplinary groups and various departments including clinical, business development, and manufacturing.

What are your day to day tasks that you perform in your position?

Writing, reading, meeting with scientists and colleagues, collaborating with external patent counsel regarding patent and freedom to operate matters, more writing and reading, reviewing presentations regarding disclosures, reviewing agreements and research plans, interacting with external collaborators in relation to science and patent filings.

What do you like best about your job?

Getting to see all of the cool new data without having to do any of the experiments myself. The most interesting work is at the intersection of two fields, and both science and law are changing all of the time.

What do you dislike about your job?

The Supreme Court has made some horrible decisions in patent law. A good patent becomes a not so good patent overnight. And the legislature and US Patent Office have made things worse in some cases.

At my immediate, present job, there are too many meetings.

If your job is outside of academia, what is similar and what is different about your current job and your terminal position in academia?

Research is collaborative. You spend your days in rooms with other people, although your project is typically you own. You are told that your time is not important.

Patent law, especially at a law firm, is mostly people sitting in rooms alone billing out their time in six minute increments. (It is not as bad as it sounds, but it is a different way to think about time.) Time is money in the most literal way. It is less social. There can be long hours, but they can be more under your control.

How did your academic education prepare you for your current position?

I worked in many different types of labs (neuropeptide, splicing, small G proteins, protein targeting), and the breadth of knowledge is useful in understanding the breadth of topics that I need to work across in patent law. I am not afraid to ask questions.

What skills do you wish you learned during your educational process that would better prepare you for your current role (e.g. machine learning, management skills, etc.)?

I have never wanted to manage anyone. (Teach, yes, manage, no.) Being a patent agent, rather than an attorney, I have been able to avoid managing people. I wish that I had been a better writer when I finished my training, Is there anyone who did not want to be able to write better at the end of training?

Do you have any recommendations and/or tips for early career microbial ecologists looking for jobs similar to yours?

It is easier now to find people to talk with about what they do. Reach out through LinkedIn or other professional organizations. People like to talk about themselves. It is good to have questions though, to be able to express what interests you and what you want to know. Particularly if you are going to take the time of someone who has billable hours, do not take more than 30 minutes of their time. No job is forever. If you take a job and do not like it, skills are transferrable. Scientists are smart people.