

Swiss-Scandinavian Bio-Business Seminar

In the second of three interviews following the 6th edition of the seminar held in February in Zurich, **Matthias Steger**, Global Head of Research and Technology Partnering at F Hoffmann-La Roche, explains that, like any relationship, a research partnership must be built on strong foundations



You hold a key position as Global Head of Research and Technology Partnering at F Hoffmann-La Roche. What are the main objectives of this role?

My team is responsible for research and technology collaborations in Roche's Pharmaceutical division. The Roche Partnering department is a strategic department that reports directly to the CEO.

What sort of strategies do you employ to ensure that research and technology partnerships are productive?

For us there are various aspects. One is to define the strategic want very precisely with our internal stakeholders from the research department with whom we work very closely. Secondly, for our landscape analysis we look at which potential external institute or companies may address these needs best. And finally, crucial for us is alliance management, which is a key part in making sure that the collaboration is successful.

Which companies are Roche partnered with? How have such partnerships optimised your success?

We have more than 150 partners. It is all about close interactions between our scientists and the external researchers, I think that makes a successful collaboration. It has optimised our success by way of bringing in technology that has been developed outside and that we bring either internally, with a technology transfer option, or that we just have an arms-length agreement access to. Either way works well for us. But this is just a technicality: what really optimises our success is the enriching dialogues and exchanges that our scientists can have with external parties.

Are there any particular external partners that you would like to mention?

Over the past few years we have set up various collaborations in the stem cell research area. For example, we had a very successful partnership with I-Stem, a French institute just outside Paris that also included a bi-directional technology transfer. We also have very successful collaborations, also in the stem cell area, with some Harvard affiliated institutes and hospitals.

To what extent do you believe that healthcare and biotechnology companies should work together to aid their research and development strategies? What are the main advantages of bringing in external partners?

I think the main advantages are really that, now scientists have realised that 99 per cent of innovation happens outside of where they are working, we all are opening our minds and being receptive to innovation that is taking place externally. And that is why I think different parties should work together, ultimately with the one goal to bring treatments to patients for unmet medical needs

Can research partnerships present challenges? How can these be overcome?

Yes, sure, many challenges! It is like a marriage; it is not always easy: on a personal level, one can occasionally encounter false/wrong expectations, and so on. They are all there when people work together. And how can these be overcome? In fact, it actually comes down to how we set these projects up: with a very clear frame of mind about what we want to achieve in this specific collaboration, and also share this with our partners so that we go in with the same expectations of the project, and accordingly structure an agreement that allows us to act if things go wrong. Therefore it is important that we have agreements in place for

both parties. This way, they know that if things go well we have already thought about the impact, and equally that we have a way of solving problems or working towards a solution.

And then there is the alliance management component that is also carried out by my team. We, in my research and technology partnering team, sign the collaboration, set it up and also manage it. This has many advantages for these kinds of alliances that have been shown to be really valuable in making a collaboration successful. This is the answer to how these difficulties can be overcome: you have someone very knowledgeable on what should be achieved, what we originally started out with, what has been agreed in a contract or agreement and how we then translate this into concrete results. All along this process somebody has been there, paying attention to the need to keep on track.

What do you think you gained from attending and speaking at the Swiss-Scandinavian Bio-Business Seminar?

I knew many of the people from the network already, so what was very important for us was finding but also managing collaborations. This sometimes occurs within a specific project, but in meetings that are not specifically set up for that project purpose, these discussions are very valuable to us. Also, hearing the views from other big pharmaceutical players as well as venture capitalists, which is how the panel was set up, is valuable.

We have a venture capital network that we work with, so for us it is very important to attend such conferences and to build on the network. Of course, speaking at the conference increases your chances of success in meeting someone you have not collaborated with because then people know who you are and what the ethos of the company is, and approach you accordingly.

Looking towards the future, do you believe research partnerships will continue to become more and more prevalent?

Absolutely. Bringing unmet medical needs and therapies to patients only results from collaboration. A good example that Roche has demonstrated is Zelboraf, a metastatic melanoma healthcare drug, which happened through a partnership.

Do you think it is particularly important for Nordic and Swiss biotech companies to form more partnerships?

Maybe this is too far-reaching but, from managing a large collaboration, culture matters. Swiss and Nordic cultures are similar, so all my collaborations with Nordic partners are very good because we understand each other. I cannot give you any firm rationale as to why this Swiss-Nordic collaboration should be fostered, but for me it is something that should be upheld and maximised.

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