



Life Science Executive Careers: The Past is No Indication of the Future

In early September, the **INSEAD Healthcare Club of Switzerland** hosted a panel of senior executives in Zurich, each with unique experience in healthcare industry talent scouting, recruiting and career planning. INSEAD alumni working as investment bankers, talent managers and business leaders (from companies like Abbott, Johnson & Johnson, Smith & Nephew, Concordia and Sonova) mixed with current students from Fontainebleau in an engaging discussion to reveal that industry changes as a result of complexity and specialization are putting a whole new set of demands on candidates' profiles.

The core competencies, experience, and soft skills required for an executive career in the pharmaceutical and other life science segments have changed in recent times, as have hiring processes. At the same time, candidates are not using traditional means of applying for jobs while they are still looking for an impressive job title for their CV, thereby rejecting lateral moves.

Meanwhile there is a growing pool of companies, who are all seeking to recruit the same type of executives. There is indeed a global and inter-industry "war for talent" and this INSEAD alumni conference, moderated by Arul Ramadurai, INSEAD MBA 05J, went deep into each panelists' territory, bringing diverse points of view in line with each other.

Key Takeaways

- State-of-the-art recruitment practices include a proactive 'talent scouting' model, thus moving away from the traditional job posting or headhunting selection processes
- Traditional headhunters are evolving to provide more value-added services including sophisticated evaluation tools. Some are evolving into broader talent management houses
- The fit on 'Traits and Values' has become a key selection criteria – elaborate processes have evolved to test candidate values and cultural match with the company
- Large corporates are good matches for smart people looking to build experience; biotech startups typically require previous experience and the right attitude – they stretch capabilities further, as everyone wears at least two hats
- Candidates are advised to conduct searches through multiple channels – the value of networking is not to be underestimated as is the ability to demonstrate learning agility



From l to r: Ludger Schwinn, Philipp Buis, Giacomo Di Nepi, Jana Herrmann, Arul Ramadurai

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Recruiting processes have changed dramatically. It used to be a matter of hiring the best candidate out of a self-selected group sending in applications in response to job advertisements or recruiting campaigns. Now big pharmaceutical companies like Roche are “scouting” for talent and filling a “pipeline” of selected candidates, building a relationship with candidates long before the actual job offer. “The biggest change is that we are more active in order to get the best candidates. We target and identify candidates with desired skills and experience,” said Jana Herrmann, Int’l Program Manager Attraction & Sourcing, Roche.

Big pharma is not yet at the point where it can create a job for someone but talent scouts stay close to their targets. That period of incubation can be one or two, even three years. If there is a candidate that has the skills, personality, and experience that a leading pharmaceutical company would want, there are almost certainly other recruiters that want him or her too, and not just in the pharmaceutical industry. “It is the candidate who is choosing today. It is not necessarily Roche that has the choice,” said Herrmann.

And this is the case despite the fact that a market leader like Roche receives 600,000 job applications a year over its careers website. “We have to reject a lot of them because they are not the right match,” said Herrmann.

Changes in the delivery of healthcare and technological innovation have affected the core competences required for senior managers and executives. One of the new core competencies for a top leader is that they can “lead transformation i.e. transform businesses, change perceptions, integrate technologies and change teams,” said Ludger Schwinn, Senior Client Partner, Korn Ferry International, who manages pharma and biotechnology global accounts. “We need a totally different type of executive that can deliver new kinds of services and products,” said Schwinn.

“Being a current MBA Student, it was an amazing opportunity to attend a large healthcare alumni gathering with talent search as a key theme with a great selection of panelists. Listening to the discussion, I got a good grasp of current employment trends in the industry and how INSEADers naturally stand out. The do’s and don’t session was particularly useful. I met up people I knew and made additional connections with industry professionals.”
Artem Raskin, INSEAD MBA Candidate

On the other hand, the emergence of digital health and new drug delivery systems (for example, smart pills, patches and patient outcome systems) has shifted pharmaceutical and biotech companies into

Internet-time. “Speed is one big change. Clients are looking to fill positions quickly and are less patient” said Philipp Buis, Partner, Jauch Associates, who has been a boutique executive search consultant for over ten years.

The War for Talent

Since the middle of August, Qualcomm has been seeking a director of pharmaceutical business development, preferably one based in Switzerland but other European locations are also acceptable. The [job ad](#) illustrates panelists’ comments about “fierce competition” for talent.

The person should have extensive sales experience in healthcare or pharmaceutical industries, along with recent experience in beyond-the-pill-pharma initiatives, and comfort working in industries with a high level of health & safety regulation. The “preference” in education is an MBA and an MD.

It is a profile that is also in demand in pharmaceutical and medtech industries, according to the panelists.

But Qualcomm is not a pharmaceutical company. It is not even a medical device systems manufacturer. It is a wireless chipmaker. Its products are typically found deep inside smartphones and networking equipment. The world’s fourth largest chipmaker is competing in the same talent pool that was once the sole territory of pharmaceutical manufacturers.

There is much more competition for medical and scientific-based talents than there used to be, according to Giacomo Di Nepi, now Non-Executive Director at GeNeuro whose career has spanned management consulting, big pharma, launching and growing a startup, to his current board and advisory activity. “Biotech startups are more attractive to smart people, and there are more biotechs than there used to be. Not all people are right for it though; deep, previous experience is a necessary asset in a startup, but only if coupled with a strong drive and willingness to roll up those sleeves. It can be a tremendous experience, which will further stretch and broaden your capabilities – everyone needs to wear at least two hats!” said Di Nepi.

Biotech startups have a unique set of challenges. They are typically founded by young scientists but the startup CEO is going to be very different to the CEO that will take them to the next level. “The board should help with this process,” said Di Nepi. “Startup founders need to be ready to give up some control to someone that can attract capital, commercialize products and manage business challenges,” added Buis. Not being able to do this rapidly enough is often a cause of failure, according to Ramadurai.

Multi-Cultural and Cross-Functional

Another big change is the degree of international experience required for key positions. Panelists agreed that regional experience in at least two to three different continents is ideal. “Emerging markets are important for growth, so we must recruit from a wider range of countries than we have in the past. We are very open about where the candidates come from,” said

Hermann, explaining that people Roche hires have to understand diversity & inclusion well and how to work in multi-cultural teams.

Another trend is the increased demand for commercial executives with solid market access experience (including economics, pricing and sales strategies).

Furthermore, managers have to know how to make diverse multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural teams work together. “Functional silos are merging together more and more,” said Schwinn. And team members should have cross-functional know-how. “Medical talent has to understand marketing and marketers need to have medical and regulatory know-how. You should not separate medical and marketing into silos; and concerning compliance, what really matters is always having a modus operandi that is correct with physicians,” said Di Nepi, agreeing with Schwinn and adding yet another important trend: the need to have the values to operate ethically and understand compliance.

Compliance to a wider range of regulations is putting pressure on Talent executives to evaluate traits that are not necessarily evident in a CV. “Values and ethics evaluation and testing are integrated into the hiring process,” said Roche’s Hermann. Determining candidates’ ability to operate correctly in what are evidently grey areas is not always easy. Schwinn said that there is a proven way based on asking the right questions in interviews and following up through solid referencing. It is not a matter of being able to handle papers and forms. “It is more of a mindset,” said Buis.

Certain personality traits are more important than technical expertise. “Competencies and technical know-how used to be the buzzwords, but now it’s more about potential,” said Buis. Schwinn added that (1) leadership abilities, (2) humility, (3) curiosity and (4) agility are desirable characteristics in candidates of any age, providing an example of a 62 year-old recent hire for a senior leadership role where the initial requirements were for someone younger. This also showcased the value-add of Executive search professionals, who are not afraid to challenge role profiles and some pre-conceived notions of customers.

Not Your Father’s Job Search Strategy

Both employers and headhunters have changed their approach and not everyone is adopting the same tactics to the job search process. A quick poll of the audience showed that INSEADers and friends of INSEAD do not necessarily find a new job by uploading their resume to the careers portal of pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device companies, nor do they respond to jobs advertised on Internet job boards, not even LinkedIn was a common tool.

Herrmann’s description earlier of cutting edge talent scouting as a recruiting practice is one side of the story. Korn Ferry’s evolution illustrates another aspect of change. Wikipedia still describes it as an executive search firm, but according to Schwinn, the firm generates over 40% of global revenues outside of executive recruitment. It is now a broad talent management service provider for global firms, including Fortune100 and FTSE 100 companies. He said that Korn Ferry considers itself a global people and organizational advisory firm, active in three areas: 1) Creating top talent strategies which enable delivery of business goals; 2) Building and developing the talent base; and 3) Filling talent gaps in Retained Executive Search and Project Recruitment (Futurestep).

It now offers advanced solutions for evaluation & testing of candidate fit. It is noteworthy that Korn Ferry’s search model is also different to other headhunters. It is a retained recruitment model specialized in board-level and C-level executives. Retained recruitment is a way of ensuring that the “right” candidate is found, as opposed to serving up candidates that might fit in order to get the finder’s fee.

“Insightful combination of views from internal talent scouts, executive search professionals and senior executives. The environment is fast changing, but it also seems clear that the basic fundamentals of successful talent acquisition remain a challenge, despite a rapidly changing market place where transparency and access to talent is more and more commoditizing. The assessment of personal capabilities and values remain an art with personal interactions and opinions being key to business success”

Markus Hofer, INSEAD MBA 02D, Russell Reynolds Associates

Job Search Tips

The discussion then moved on to dos and don'ts for candidates looking for particular jobs. Many practical suggestions were given, including:

- Do be visible on LinkedIn. Social media visibility is essential to be spotted by recruiters and headhunters. Roche is even considering halting posting and advertising open positions, giving exclusive preference to the scouting model
- Define and actively manage your professional and semi-professional network. Invest time in good times so that you can pull from established, active contacts when the need arises
- Do not limit the search to one channel. Utilize personal networks, executive search firms, and social media among others
- Do research to find your fit (be honest with yourself) and research the company deeply to see if it fits your expectations, values, and culture
- Communicate status changes to recruiters (but don't send CV updates every other week)
- Stay physically, mentally and spiritually fit and humble, remain committed to lifelong learning and be open to feedback; learning agility has become a key recruitment criteria for senior positions
- Don't be too focused on job titles – titles are use differently in different geographies. Finding the right role is about ensuring that there is a breadth, depth and scope match between the candidate and the company
- Manage failures – be honest about failures. Work out what your “derailers” are, and take steps to manage them. Be open about how far along the journey you are in managing them
- And last but not least: do consider lateral moves to take challenging positions that will move you personally forward

“The podium discussion highlighted the complex processes required to achieve a perfect match between a position and a candidate, together with the serious risks associated with wrong hiring decisions for both the company and the individuals. It was especially interesting to get insights from both HR in big pharma and from a biotech CEO. The exchange with the public showed for instance an interest in moves between big pharma and biotechs to understand the prerequisites/success factors...”

Francois Martin, Managing Director
Switzerland, RSA Group