

CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR SENIOR PROFESSIONALS IN CLINICAL RESEARCH

by Dr Kay Wardle

Introduction

Much has changed in the pharmaceutical industry in the last decade and many of these changes have had a significant effect on career development opportunities for clinical research professionals. We all have our own lists of the changes in dynamic that we have seen but let's consider just a few for the purpose of this piece. Among the many trends that are discernible are:

- a clear tightening of margins, which is driving pressure to consolidate and thus squeeze out cost
- the migration of the centre of the universe to the USA; the industry is now much more US-centric
- a significant shift in activity to Eastern Europe and Asia, particularly within the clinical field
- a significant awakening of the biggest pharma companies to the concept of outsourcing

Trends like these have an impact on career choices for clinical research professionals – and indeed others in the industry. They also have an impact on the recruitment industry. This year, for example, my company opened new offices in both the USA and Singapore.

The Impact on Career Choices

There was once a clear choice - for most of you – between big organisations and small ones. A career in a CRO was once regarded as "second tier". Many people would once have seen more opportunity and greater security in large organisations.

Consolidation has changed all that. Ask anyone once employed by Wellcome or SmithKline & French. Many people now perceive a greater risk in moving to a large organisation – or in moving from one large organisation to another. You become the new kid on the block; you forfeit some of your accumulated employment protection.

On the other hand small organisations have experienced a change in their appeal. For one thing there are now many more of them, thanks in particular to outsourcing and the rise of the biotech sector. For another, more of them are doing exciting work. They range from university start-ups through venture capital projects and biotech ventures to service organisations. Some of them can compete in the security stakes with their larger brethren now that there is no such thing as a job for life. And where they can't quite compete on security they sometimes offer things of equal or greater value. The people we talk to every day tell us that these include more interesting work, greater scope and more involvement.

The differences in opportunity in large versus small organisations are now less pronounced than they once were. There is more of a level playing field.

The appeal of university start-ups and biotech ventures is not difficult to see, but what about service organisations in the small business sector? Well, the range and character of them has undergone a big change – largely because of outsourcing.

At one time the sort of business functions considered for outsourcing would be confined to distribution, payroll, finance, operations or HR administration. Now the ambition and the scope have gone way beyond that. Even discovery can now be a candidate for outsourcing. Or discovery might be the only function kept in-house whilst outsourcing everything else – ergo the rise of the virtual organisation.

It's not hard to see that changes like that can create more opportunities in smaller organisations for clinical research professionals.

Mind how you go

The impact of the industry's US-centricity and its future aspirations in Asia Pacific are, perhaps, self-evident. One obvious corollary is that pursuing the top opportunities now means moving to the USA, to Asia Pacific or to another off-shoring venue. The UK and Europe are now effectively places for satellite operations. Europe is no longer the centre of the universe.

For some of you with the ambition and the capacity to make it to the top, that is probably the change with the greatest impact. Moving away from home may be out of the question for cultural or family reasons. However, the loss of such opportunities, whilst amounting to a limitation, is not the end of the world – as we shall see.

What shall I do?

Well, if you want one of the top jobs you can pack your bags and head for the USA or Asia Pacific. If not, there are other options. We talked to a number of clinical research professionals in the course of preparing this article. One was a medic, still working in this country, who had made it to a top job as a VP with global responsibilities for development in a well known pharma company. Another was a Ph.D. scientist who had climbed the clinical research ladder and made it to a UK-based VP role with global business responsibilities. So you can still do it. You just need to focus on what you want, what it takes to get it and how you find out about opportunities.

But let's take a step back before we get into that. First we need to be clear on what we mean by career development. To most people who talk to us it means simply promotion – ever onward and upward. Wiser heads tell us there's a lot more to it than that:

- Job expansion can be a form of career development
- Sideways movement into another field of interest can be another
- Downward movement, especially when a career is coming to a close, is increasingly seen as an attractive option
- Outward movement, especially for very experienced people, has its attractions
- Project work, if you haven't done any before, is a way of developing your career

What it takes

Whatever your preference for developing your career, you need a clear goal and a careful assessment of what skills you need to achieve it. You also need good timing. One of our contacts wanted to make the switch from drug discovery to clinical research after a few years. She did so by the age of 30. Much later and there was a risk of being typecast or over-priced and so not getting the break.

As well as all that you need sources of good advice and information. That means getting yourself well networked so that you always have someone to consult in times of need – and so that you get to hear of opportunities that might otherwise stay below the radar. So include recruitment consultants in your network. The better ones are always willing to talk to potential candidates.

You can't start too early planning a successful career. If you're aiming for the top you need to identify the skills you will need and get yourself into positions where you can start building them. Whether you plan to be a top specialist or a top strategist you're likely to need similar qualities. According to the people we talk to these include:

- Sound knowledge of business and the commercial imperatives that drive your organisation's clinical research (and other) needs
- Leadership skills and a real feel for getting the best out of people
- Communication skills, in particular the ability to connect with professionals from other disciplines and cultures – but, above all, the ability to listen and to assimilate data
- Finance skills – at the very least an ability to read and understand a balance sheet, a profit and loss account and an operating statement
- Determination, allied with sound judgment (to know when to drop something rather than plough on with it)

And if you're a non-medic pursuing a clinical research career alongside medics it's a good idea to start with higher qualifications. A Ph.D. will give you a better chance of developing a career path that eventually converges with that of the medics.

Some final thoughts

Some of the people we talk to tell us that they are content with where they are and do not want another promotion. What they are interested in is personal development rather than career development. They have arrived at a view that ambition should not be compulsory. Often their employers agree.

For these people the opportunity to learn something new, perhaps in the form of support for some form of advanced learning, has a greater value.

But there will always be those who want to reach the top and they can still do it. The industry's centre of gravity may have shifted to the USA but there will still be opportunities for those with the talent and determination to chase them down. Lest you doubt it consider the experience of one of my colleagues. He worked in a company that selected a medic as its first managing director, a pharmacist as its second, a human resources leader as its third, and a marketeer as its fourth. At the time this open-minded, not to say imaginative, approach to top jobs was considered unusual. Not any more.

If you are one of the truly ambitious ones you can still achieve your ambitions. All you need is clear focus, a clear career goal, the qualities needed to support your ambition, an effective personal network – and determination. What are you waiting for?

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