

CROs fertile ground for career growth

31 May 2012 | Opinion | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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Guest Column

Ms Susan McDonald is the Managing Director of RSA Singapore. She leads the RSA team in developing new and innovative recruitment solutions for RSA clients and candidates in the Asia Pacific region

Over the past few years, a significant shift has occurred in the depth and type of relationships that the pharmaceutical industry has with its third party contractors. From need-based tactical fulfilment of requirements, these relationships have progressed to high-level strategic partnerships. Companies that would previously have managed the entire development of a new drug in-house are now outsourcing key elements of their drug development process to third parties. This shift has not only created a host of new job roles within outsourcing firms but has also made them more attractive to executives looking to make the move, from in-house to contract partner.

"Contract partners used to face significant challenges in attracting the best talent or offering comparable packages as compared to big pharma. But outsourcing companies have evolved over time to become specialists, improving their

standards and systems to a level where they are often better than those operated by the pharmaceutical industry. Their increased capability to operate at a global level also offers more exciting opportunities for potential employees," says Mr Schwieter.

Until mid-2011, Herman Schwieter was general manager of Greater China for Invida, a leading commercialization services company in Asia Pacific. Prior to Invida, Herman worked for 17 years at Organon as a general manager, marketing manager and international product manager.

For many in-house experts, there are good opportunities in contract organizations. As big pharma increasingly retreats from specialist areas, the new breed of outsourcing firms have become logical places to develop and grow their career.

"In the past, contract organizations suffered from a perception of being less well financed, offering less support and having more supply complications," says Mr John Barnes. He is a general manager at Catalent Pharma Solutions, a leading provider of advanced drug delivery technologies and solutions in the UK. He previously worked at GSK.

"Increasing pressure on pharma to improve manufacturing efficiency or find partners to solve product development challenges has boosted the perception and value of the contracting firms. "The level of trust in contract organizations is increasing - and the cost of not moving R&D to outsourced partner is also increasing as the challenges of managing high fixed costs in the supply chains start to hit home," elaborates Mr Barnes. Ex-employees of 'traditional' pharma companies can bring valuable skills to contract research organizations.

"A big advantage of coming from pharma is that you are used to looking at the whole picture. This knowledge is needed in refining and improving systems and processes," says Mr Schwieter. "Industry contacts and referrals are also key to contract organizations, and executives from pharma tend to be more networked and have a better overall view of the industry."

For Mr Barnes, the experience of drug development and lifecycle management that ex-pharma employees have is vital. "Process knowledge is probably the most valuable area that I have brought over, he says, adding, "for instance, how to construct processes that are more manageable and that people can work to. In smaller organizations, there is less room for mistakes, so it is important to get things right the first time itself."

"Also, the culture is fast-paced and more entrepreneurial," says Dr Kureishi. Dr Amar Kureishi is head of drug development Asia at Quintiles. Prior to joining Quintiles, Dr Kureishi was vice president & head of global medical Affairs at BayerHealthcare Pharma. Moving to a contract partner organization has proved to be a dynamic and exciting experience for him.

"People generally make decisions faster as the focus is on finding solutions for the customer, and implementing these solutions as efficiently as possible. In pharma companies, there tends to be much more discussion, which can slow down the progress of an idea.

"Stepping out into a service company has provided me with a view of how things are done across many companies. I suddenly have a much broader exposure and am learning things that I wasn't previously aware of," says Dr Kureishi.

At Catalent Pharma Solutions, Mr Barnes enjoys seeing the tangible results from his work. "Because manufacturing is at the heart of what we do, my role isn't just another function of a major corporation, but is a value generating activity for the company. That's a real business responsibility with real consequences. As a manufacturing professional by experience, this is a very inspiring position to be in."

However, taking a position in a contract organization is not without challenges and initially, people may find themselves well outside of their comfort zone.

"The speed of decision-making is at a different level," says Mr Schwieter. "The sense of urgency in small or mid-size companies is incredible - but this can bring the best out of people. There's also a greater sense of accountability. While decision-making is shared across a broad group of people within a pharma company, your decisions in a contract environment have more impact. This can be both an opportunity and a challenge."

For Mr Barnes, coming to terms with new commercial realities is a big part of moving to a contract organisation. "There is a level of independence and commercial acumen required to be able to make decisions which are sound for the business in a fast-paced environment."

Aside from the dynamic environment, fresh challenges and greater freedom, switching to contract organizations is likely to be

a wise strategic career move in the long term.

Mr Schwietert advises, "Working on both sides of contracting and partnering is going to become more common. You will be much better placed if you have worked in and understood both. Do it for your own development."

Despite being a convert to the working culture at contract organizations, Dr Kureishi cautions those looking to make the move to consider whether the new role is right for them. "I would advise potential candidates to look carefully at the role they will be moving to. In the service industry, there are many innovative activities going on such as consulting and strategic drug development. However, the core activity is still the delivery of contract research services."

The flow of specialized R&D personnel and general managers from the pharmaceutical industry into contract organizations is a very real trend and looks set to continue and grow over the coming years.

Speaking about the future of partnerships between pharma and contract organizations, Mr Barnes says, "Relationships will become broader and cover more complex technology as the contract service sector gains pharma companies' trust. By improving its understanding and breadth of capabilities, the outsourcing industry can satisfy its customers' needs more effectively."

"The winners in this field will be those organizations capable of partnering through the use of specialist technology. This technology will provide the marketplace with innovative ways to bridge the gap between novel APIs discovered via the R&D pipelines of the pharma industry, and patient efficacy offered by technologies supplied by companies in the service sector that have demonstrated innovation in their manufacturing methods."

Talking about the future of the pharmaceutical industry, Dr Kureishi concludes, "I think strategic partnerships will be very important, especially in the field of drug development. Companies that focus on their strengths while partnering in other areas are very likely to thrive in the changing and increasingly complex pharma landscape."