

A fresh look at recruitment



Nathalie Rowell, head consultant at ViridisPharma

Hastened by global recession, new business models in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries have opened up space for a fresh take on recruitment – and, indeed, a different breed of job candidate, as *Peter Mansell* finds out
Photos: *Magnus Rew*

Increasingly, life sciences companies must address a dizzying range of stakeholders and weave them into a coherent business strategy. This calls for an open-minded, far-reaching approach to filling complex niche roles.

“International headhunting with a progressive mindset” is how Nathalie Rowell, head consultant at executive search company VirdisPharma, describes the business she set up three years ago in Oxford.

With a background spanning research, biopharmaceutical patent law, and stints as an executive search consultant in the IT, telecommunications and car industries – not to mention coming from a family of medics – Rowell herself is well aware both of the specific challenges facing life sciences companies and the need to think outside the box.

The demand is for cross-functional roles with a 360-degree perspective on today’s pharma environment. So you need to be doing a lot more than “just looking on Google or LinkedIn”, Rowell insists. And with money tight, a dedicated, in-depth, flexible search strategy is just part of the picture: it has to be efficient and cost-effective too.

While other boutique recruiting agencies are “not really looking outside the UK and Europe”, VirdisPharma’s business is 90% global, stretching as far afield as Latin America, the USA, Australia, Russia, Eastern Europe and Taiwan. It spans all corners of the life sciences industry and jobs, which range from middle management to the top ranks. That could be R&D, production, marketing, medical, supply chain, quality, health economics, business intelligence, life cycle management or regulatory affairs – and at a “serious level”. These days, Rowell stresses, an international mindset is a given. The major biological hubs, for example, are spread as wide as Singapore, Denmark,

California and Scotland. People are now prepared to relocate from anywhere.

The founding philosophy of VirdisPharma is “to take stock of changes in the industry”. That includes not only globalisation but a growing emphasis on factors such as pharmacovigilance, new media and health economics and technology assessment – and yet always going back to the key ingredient, the patient. There is no pharmaceutical industry if there is no patient. The old career trajectory of transitioning from sales to marketing to business unit head to general manager is long gone.

General managers still need to understand sales. But far more important is an awareness of pharmaco-economic conditions in the countries they oversee, government affairs, public relations and “which door to knock on”. In other words, a more strategic outlook, leaving business unit managers to concentrate on driving the bottom line.

A 360-degree view

Recruitment agencies need to consider the same “360-degree angle” as the industry – “you have to do everything”, Rowell comments. New paradigms like patient-oriented marketing – such as for Alzheimer’s disease, where the focal point may be families communicating through blogs – are a very different proposition from a sales kit.

Most life science companies “have the idea” yet don’t always have all the competencies in-house. So it makes sense for them to partner with a business like VirdisPharma that will create for them a safe, comprehensive recruitment value proposition.

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◀ focused way”, and with a closer eye on budget; by looking, for example, for individuals who are a step ahead of the game and who will help solve the issues of today and contribute to the business of tomorrow.

These trends are also good news for more mature professionals who may see their career petering out once they hit a certain age. Companies now want people who can “hit the ground running” and focus on moving the business forward, Rowell comments. Moreover, demographics are reshaping the job market. For many of us retirement at 65 is no longer an option: that gives companies the benefit not only of accumulated experience but of employees with the financial stability to bed in and teach a more skittish younger generation about loyalty and commitment.

The recession has also brought some pressure to push salaries down, although

pay scales in the life sciences are still higher than in most other industries, she says. Rowell makes a comparison with aerospace, another heavily regulated, “inward-looking” industry that relies on highly educated staff – but where pay levels are 20% lower.

The trend is shifting away from sign-on bonuses and golden parachutes, yet quality and uniqueness demand a premium, therefore new ways of rewarding and retaining talent are emerging.

ViridisPharma’s strategy is to keep things tight, ethical and efficient, with minimal overheads and a highly focused team of well-paid staff instead of 20 employees “on student salaries” who will jump ship as soon as they have sufficient experience. ViridisPharma usually works for fixed fees agreed from the outset rather than a percentage, where there is an incentive to push salaries up.

But recruitment has to be three-way (clients, agency and candidates). With the sharp practices that have given some recruitment agencies a bad press of late, she stresses “you have to be a good client” too. Before considering external recruitment, companies should, for example, make sure the budget for new staff is in place, the brief is well thought-out and in-line with the real needs. For a recruitment process to lead to a hire, communication and feedback are paramount. For candidates to remain genuine and engaged, research time-lines and interview skills must be respected.

ViridisPharma lives up to its motto: “whatever it takes”. And one of the company’s key objectives is to take some of the “us and them” mentality out of the process – and, by doing that, limit the inherent “risk factor” in recruitment to a minimum.

First, though, “you have to know the client really well”, Rowell emphasises. Just talking to the human resources manager on the phone isn’t enough. You need to be meeting with the line manager and sometimes some of the team, and you need to “know the unpalatable”, so the candidate can be realistic about their fit, in the company and their future, with the company.

For the time and money invested, it is in everyone’s interests to make recruitment as exact a science as possible. And to that end, ViridisPharma “runs the extra mile”.

For more information go to www.viridispharma.com