PHARMACEUTICAL CONSULTANCY: A VIEW TO A SKILL

Drug discovery is a serendipitous business. Consulting is not. To 'add value' in a world of changing business strategies and new technologies requires a comprehensive and carefully honed skill set.

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Ask any consultant what is at the top of the strategic business objectives of a company, and you will typically hear a similar message — "Develop, maintain and evolve a position of 'thought leadership' and transmit the concept clearly to the industry in question".

The pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries use consultants for several reasons, such as internal resource constraints, a lack of data to populate their own business models or substantiate hypotheses, confidentiality, or a need for an independent opinion. As an example, consider a project to identify, on behalf of a biotechnology company, potential licensing partners for the further clinical development of their portfolio of lead compounds.

The client's objectives could conceivably be as follows: first, to have an independent evaluation of their research and development (R&D) portfolio, including an assessment of future commercial potential and competitive threats; second, to identify key clinical development and commercial risks in developing the portfolio further; and third, to identify potential licensing partners. The final product from a project of this type might be a short list of licensing partners for the client to approach in final deal negotiations.

Another scenario might be a pharmaceutical company that is interested in acquiring a small biotechnology company with a novel technology platform and a limited number of lead compounds in clinical development. In this case, the client's objectives might be for independent due diligence to be carried out on the company's lead compounds and technology platforms with respect to: the scientific rationale behind the technology platform; the level of innovation and competitive advantage within the platform; the clinical development status of any compounds; future commercial potential; and the competitive landscape. In this case, the result might be a document that allows the pharmaceutical company to raise funds or get board approval to complete the acquisition, and fund its future expansion.

To gain competitive advantage in addressing projects of this nature, consulting firms need proprietary methodologies that have been developed around positions of 'thought leadership'. To develop such techniques, consultants require comprehensive industry knowledge and insight, coupled with superb project-management skills. Of course, a consulting business also needs people who are adept, not only at completing the project objectives, but also at winning the projects in the first place. One of the biggest problems that faces any consulting business-development team that is proposing a new concept or methodology for tackling industry issues is to establish scientific credibility in front of the client, while negotiating the best possible commercial return for their services. The time between initial interactions with potential clients and a signed business proposal can be many months, and during this process, scientific pedigree is only part of the required skill set. A successful consultant also requires several attributes that do not traditionally sit well with someone who has a strong scientific background: good listening, influencing, communication and people-management skills.

Overall, this is a rare skill mix to find. The other elements in the 'make-up' of a good consultant, which are often mistakenly seen as being of secondary importance, include the commercial awareness and 'helicopter vision' that can only really be fully developed through extensive practical experience. For these reasons, consulting organizations tend to recruit into categories of ascending responsibility and competence — from those with entry-level academic qualifications, through to those required to be fully integrated consultants who can manage the business process from development through to project delivery.

Three types of position are available as a standard in consulting organizations. First, junior consultants, who are typically qualified to degree level, with a grounding in biochemistry, molecular biology, pharmacology or some related discipline. Their main focus within the organization would be on project work and information gathering/data analysis. Second, senior consultants, who have either moved up the ranks from the consultant position or are brought in with Ph.D. and postdoctoral experience, coupled with some form of project/line-management experience, ideally acquired from working in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. Their focus is on project work, project and team management, and, to a lesser degree, client-focused business development and building industry viewpoints for the organization. Finally, principal consultants, whose main activities include those of the senior consultant, with an emphasis on business development, the fostering of thought leadership and the building of a sustainable business unit around an area of expertise. Principal consultants typically have extensive industry experience (ideally Ph.D. qualified), project-management experience and, above all, good business-development skills, as they are the individuals who feed the pipeline of projects to be managed and executed by the senior consultants and consultants.

Superior scientific credentials are only part of the skill set that is required to operate effectively within a pharmaceutical and biotechnology consulting organization. Indeed, the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries themselves are now realising that, when looking for research scientists, they also need to interview their candidates for other aptitudes, such as project and change management. The concept of 'thought leadership' is as much about innovative thinking and communicating a clear and executable strategy as it is about understanding the scientific basis that underpins the industry. It is this combination of skills that can turn scientific theorists into business winners.