

BRIDGING THE DRUG DISCOVERY GAP

A conversation with **WERNER LANTHALER**, CEO of Evotec



Evotec provides a wide variety of services to biotech and pharmaceutical companies, from drug target identification through to IND submission and beyond. Just over a year ago, the company established its BRIDGE initiatives: partnerships with investors and academic groups that aim to bring research from academia into commercial development. The first bridge was LAB282, set up with the University of Oxford, followed by LAB150 in Toronto, Canada, with MaRS Innovation and its 15 affiliated hospitals and universities. Evotec plans more BRIDGES in the coming months.

Why did you set up these BRIDGE initiatives?

We realized that there was a tool missing between academia and the pharmaceutical industry — one that facilitated the systematic, unbiased and comprehensive translation of science. A lot of academic data cannot be replicated in commercial systems. A large part of the problem stems from invalid data points that accumulate from the start of the commercialization process. Eliminating invalid data is good for academia and for pharma, to ensure that nobody focuses on the wrong assets going forward.

In the past, there have been individual licensing or material-transfer agreements between an institute and a pharma company. We realized we could bring this arrangement into a more structured form — into umbrella agreements that we call BRIDGES (Biomedical Research, Innovation & Development Generation Efficiency). With BRIDGES, we aim to eliminate the invalid data points right from the start, accelerate slow academic scouting and research processes, and build sustainable companies.

How do you eliminate the invalid data?

The important aspect is to find out very fast if an idea works.

To that end, with the academic partner and our scientific experts from Evotec, we create a path towards the critical experiment in a work plan. The idea is to keep focused on these critical steps. Otherwise, in academia, people often want to keep trying as hard as they can to succeed on one experiment, and don't proceed to the next. Essentially, we're putting academic science into a commercial drug discovery workplace, where experiments are executed on the same platforms used by pharma and biotech companies.

Is getting stuck on the wrong experiment what drives up the cost of discovery?

Yes, this can push up the financial cost, but importantly this will also create an opportunity cost. Because if someone is working on the wrong asset, they will not be able to replicate the experiments. If this happens multiple times, it is a waste of resources and attention. It is important to have an unbiased halt sign so that people know to stop an experiment.

How does the BRIDGE initiative work?

We invite academic scientists to present a proposal to a committee. In the example of

THIS IS A WAY TO CREATE A BRIDGE OVER THE FUNDING VALLEY OF DEATH.

Oxford University (LAB282), the committee has access to around \$15 million, which is there to run the critical experiments, and then continue depending on the outcome. We guarantee that the scientist gets an answer on whether his or her proposal is accepted within four weeks. The committees consist of Evotec, academics, the University's technology transfer office, and a funding partner. In the case of LAB282, the funding partner is Oxford Sciences Innovation (OSI), a local venture fund. At LAB150, it is MaRS Innovation, a non-profit biotech support conglomerate in Toronto that is affiliated with 15 local hospitals and universities.

When reviewing project ideas, Evotec brings drug discovery and development expertise in almost all relevant disease areas, including respiratory disease, neurological disease, diabetes, fibrosis, pain, oncology, inflammation and infectious disease. This expertise allows us to say what the critical experiment is, and also if there is a market need. Therefore, a scientist gets a very rapid technical and market assessment of his or her

project. And later, if the data are positive, there is already a mini consortium of support available, which helps the scientist to get to their first venture money or larger grant application.

And once you've validated their ideas, they can go forward with startups or licensing?

Yes — but they're not greenhorns anymore. They come with data, an Evotec process validation, and with financing experience — which gives them a totally different momentum than if they were a new startup. This is extremely valuable, because many projects experience a 'valley of death', where people struggle to find financing for their scientific project to progress into the venture-capital chain. This is a way to create a BRIDGE over the funding valley of death.

Do you plan to start more such projects?

In the next six months we're going to build another two to three BRIDGES. One will be in the US and one will be in Europe. This is very much a global rollout.



#RESEARCHNEVERSTOPS

BUILDING BRIDGES TO ACCELERATE DRUG DISCOVERY

A new paradigm to translate early stage drug discovery from academia to commercialisation

- ▶ BRIDGE is an integrated fund and award framework to tap into exciting academic science to generate partnerships with pharma and biotech
- ▶ We are developing an integrated framework from academic research to PoC involving all key partners

