

A YEAR IN LIFE SCIENCE SEARCH

Bianca Coulter, CEO of Coulter Partners, Takes a Look at the Dynamic and Evolving Life Sciences Sector



Between 2012 and the end of 2015 about 165 biotech companies charged through the IPO window – much more than prior years. Even though this charge has dwindled, many companies seem to have the magical combination of cash and well stocked pipelines, making it feel very different from the last few biotech “downturns.” Capital is still available and appetite from pharma to acquire assets and collaborate has never been greater. In the following article, Bianca Coulter, CEO of Coulter Partners, provides answers to why her firm is best suited to identify the next best-in-class leaders to serve the ever changing life sciences industry.

With wisdom gained through more than 25 years of board level global executive search, Ms. Coulter is regarded as a trusted advisor to the life sciences industry. She has appointed chairmen, board members, CEOs and built the leadership teams of ground breaking early stage, mid cap and global multinational businesses in more than 20 countries. Ms. Coulter leads an exceptional multilingual team of more than 50 people, many with PhDs or MBAs and all with deep sector knowledge. With this team she channels judgement and considerable expertise to bring so much more to the recruitment process from both client and candidate perspective. Ms. Coulter spent 10 years with Korn Ferry, where she was a partner firstly in financial services and then in global healthcare. She subsequently built a healthcare practice for another American search business, before founding Coulter Partners in 2003.

Each year in January several of our senior team go to San Francisco to meet with many of our clients around the JP Morgan life sciences conference. This is a magical kick off to the year and is a great way to take the pulse of the sector and hear predictions about the year ahead, as well as take briefings on numerous new mandates and meet with great candidates. It is a significant investment - hotel prices soar to \$400-900 a night and flights are booked out a year in advance - but our commitment to the sector demands that we constantly learn and listen, keeping in touch with client strategies and needs, the industry trends and outlook. In Jan 2016 the mood was less ebullient than in January 2015. People were discussing pulling their IPOs and stock markets were crashing. A lot of conversation revolved around the impact of the Chinese market news, and whether capital markets challenges would continue.

One of the key things we have learned at Coulter Partners, in over two decades of life science search, is that these cycles can cause pain in some quarters but that the calibre of people in the sector, and the quality of endeavour always mean that new models emerge, solutions are found, scientific and medical progress is made and money comes back, even if sometimes from different sources. Between 2012 and the end of 2015 about 165 biotech companies charged through the IPO window – way more than prior years. Even though this charge has dwindled,

the great news is that many companies have the magical combination of cash and well stocked pipelines, and this feels very different from the last few biotech “downturns.” Capital is still available and appetite from pharma to acquire assets and collaborate has never been greater.

Our larger clients (major pharmaceutical companies) are in highly acquisitive mode (assets, technologies and companies) and also involved in ever more complex collaborative relationships around scientific and drug development endeavour. They are competing for talent in certain key areas which also keeps us very busy globally!

A Dynamic and Evolving Industry

Some of the most exciting aspects of the market segment we serve relate to how truly global it has become and how fast it is evolving. Our challenge has been to build a search model to support our clients; to help them find the leaders they need to succeed in such conditions. When we seek the rare skill sets our clients often require, a key assumption from the very start is that there will be a relatively small number of candidates and that they may be in any of at least 20 countries - let alone numerous types of organisation! Innovative science is boundary-less and can emerge in so many contexts:

- big and mid cap pharmaceutical companies, which ostensibly have vast resources to invest and huge

numbers of people driving innovation, yet whose size and complexity seems so often to slow progress and cause inefficiency

- small cap, even tiny biotechs, whose apparent ability to drive innovation forward more efficiently is often counterbalanced by the distraction of having to raise money through laborious, leadership distracting venture rounds/IPOs, fraught with stress and subject to the vagaries of the capital markets roller coaster
- academic research institutes, universities, hospitals, with their own challenges
- and some additional surprising places.

Talent: Where and What Shall We Find?

Searching for the leadership needed to bring patient benefit from scientific and medical research today involves not only competing for the obvious, “visible to all” stars, but finding the hidden, often confusingly labelled, constantly evolving profiles... and understanding what you are looking for and where it is located, is only part of the battle. Like all the highest selling computer games, the terrain is constantly changing in unexpected ways, and it’s a challenge to keep up!

There is also considerable risk in that some of the most sought after skill sets are wrapped up in people who lack the more rounded business leadership skill required to build company success, develop viable products and compete successfully. It is all very well that to achieve a specific goal a team may take on a “difficult” character, who is tolerated despite their dangerous personality in order to get to the desired short term outcome, but at what risk to the longer term sustainability of a business model? Beware what you wish for. The pursuit of the specialist, the competition for unusual profiles can bring differentiated advantage but has its challenges – both in terms of search and later in terms of how to manage the acquired talent to ensure successful medium to longer term outcomes.

To be able to help our clients we have to be honest as well as customer service focused. We have to be prepared to push back, to warn, to advise as well as champion. When I meet recruiters who are incentivised by reward schemes that are based on how much they “sell”, commission on

placements, targeted on numbers of placements and revenue, I question how much advice goes into their client partnership. We know that in shoot outs we sometimes lose because we are not prepared to say “yes sure we can find exactly that skill set for exactly that price -no problem,” if there is a problem!

A Search Team That Adds Value

So we hire people who are sophisticated in their ability to advise – both the corporate client and the potential candidate. Our consultants and researchers have to be able to understand the evolving landscape in which our clients are operating, and to persuade busy people to share their perspectives to help us unearth the non-obvious and gain insight into performance. Our team have to be able to make the person they are speaking with feel they are getting something out of the relationship with us. If they are not seeking a new role themselves, or hiring at the time, what can that benefit be? It has to be learning, access to networks for the future, advice on longer term career strategy, market insight etc. We need to add value or the conversation is yet another “take with no give”.

This means that what we do is not easy. We earn our reward. And we need to hire exceptional people to find exceptional people. We have to be motivated to do the tough, challenging searches. The upside? It is absolutely fascinating and I have not been bored since 1995!

Perspective: The Senior Associate

On a week-to-week basis, senior associate Zubair Yusuf works on multiple projects at various stages of search. He observes that ‘it gives you a different skill set: multi-tasking, being able to manage a solid workload, time management and critically looking at research strategies.’ This is part of what makes executive search at Coulter Partners so exciting for Zubair. He can be working on early stage assignments one day and be interviewing candidates the next. Key to this is his ability to strategize, a skill he feels has come with hands-on project experience and involvement in life sciences search. Factors such as whether a project is location/language specific, international, targeting a highly visible or “hidden” profile, seeking a competed for rare skill set, for a well-funded or high risk client, are just some of the

factors that determine the pace and difficulty of a search. The goal, always, is to find the best quality candidate.

What is crucial here is 'the focus not only on qualifications, but also on personality and cultural fit,' says Zubair. It is part of Coulter Partners' search DNA not only to understand the client's aims and goals but to look extensively at the culture of the organisation and what is to be matched/changed. This, in turn, allows the company to further screen candidates so that a placed candidate will be successful in the long term, not just the short.

The Search Process

The process begins with a very detailed briefing with all relevant stakeholders and then a kick-off meeting between researchers, consultants and the project co-ordinator, during which strategy, resources and tools for a new assignment are set. The researchers then draw up a plan, with a great deal of input from senior experienced colleagues, pulling together towards the ultimate goal; helping the client make the right choice of a qualified, motivated candidate that meets the chemistry of the organisation professionally and personally. This is underpinned by Coulter Partners' understanding of the organisation's research focus, vision and goals for the future. This planning phase gives the team a clear outline of the relevant companies and individuals that should be targeted – as candidates and "KOLs" for the search.

Zubair notes that for a CSO role, for example, he will be looking for scientific credibility and relevance, so a physician/PhD, and a proven track record of taking science from discovery to the pre-clinical stage and possibly up to IND stage. Finding these qualifications is part of the mission – further evaluation and screening is more for personality fit and match between the culture and goals of both organisation and individual. Coulter Partners places emphasis on a potential candidate's career aspirations – whether they want to work at a big pharma, to continue as leader of a big team, to branch out into smaller biotech – trying to match them up with the short, medium and long-term goals of the client.

Team Diversity

While it lends credibility to have scientists and PhDs in the Coulter Partners team who can 'help understand the

finer details of science and R&D,' Zubair also praises the 'really good mixture of individuals, both with and without science backgrounds.' He points out that 'a lot of industry knowledge can and is definitely gained in the workplace.' That invaluable depth of knowledge underpins quality service. 'We're very highly networked with the scientific community globally and when we meet clients, we can give them accurate insights into the current marketplace: what are the hot areas, what are the trends, the financing climate in North America/Europe, what's happening with M&A etc.'

Coulter Partners' global network has been built on the principal that 'every conversation we have externally is a meaningful conversation, and every relationship is approached in a responsible and respectful manner.' The focus is on maintaining relationships through a two-way conversation, deepening understanding, particularly of candidates, and looking to the future. This knowledge-sharing has also played a role in the healthy pace of the company's growth. Opening new offices across Europe and the USA has given the team access to different perspectives within executive search and an insight into cultural differences and the various ways in which clients work. 'Sitting in the UK, you can have conversations in which you're really drilling down into what the market looks like. You can pick up the phone and learn – and share opinion.'

The team is greatly aided by its language capabilities, with Spanish, French, German, Italian, Czech, Bulgarian speakers to name a few examples. Previously Coulter Partners could penetrate markets without necessarily having an office location, such as in Germany, where the company knew the market inside out and could offer fluent German speakers. But it also meant that when the Frankfurt and Berlin offices opened, the team hit the ground running because the company had already established a reputation there and handled many searches for roles in Munich, Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg etc.

Global Perspectives

Having offices in the U.S. has aided progress significantly. An important market for any sector, the U.S. is particularly crucial for pharmaceutical, medtech and biotech companies. It is also a faster pace recruitment environment.

Zubair notes, 'in the U.S. the employment conditions are very different to Europe, so for example a person sitting in Switzerland may have a six month notice period, while in the U.S. it's two weeks. You can fill roles more quickly so the approach used is slightly different.'

What is particularly effective at Coulter Partners is that with these multiple offices the company still works as one team with a single P&L, which is key when searching for highly specialised roles. "Team work underpins everything at Coulter Partners. Our CEO started the business with a conviction that removing barriers to sharing knowledge productively was the key to success. She has been proven right and we will never compromise on this core value" says Zubair.

Innovative Science

One of the current focus areas for Zubair is immunology. In a field that needs highly specific expertise, there is definitely a shortage of experts, especially because the belief in the immune system as the key tool in cancer treatment has only emerged relatively recently. He notes that the industry moves in waves, and right now immunology is 'deemed a new frontier within cancer therapy.' He sees modifying cellular therapies, along with CRISPR and gene editing technology, as part of the trend towards personalised medicine, but questions 'whether or not it's a sustainable, affordable way of treating major populations.' 'What's amazing about it is that as science advances, there's always going to be a next hot area to look into.'

Coupled with this is the 'constant learning' executive search at Coulter Partners requires, where 'every day you're working on exciting new aspects of the market.'

Although he is continually learning about new therapy areas, technologies, treatment approaches, devices, etc., experience built up through the years and through working with highly knowledgeable colleagues means that Zubair can 'get a strong sense straight away, or pretty quickly, of how a search is going to work, even whilst I'm being briefed.' He can also strategize with a client on the spot and is able to advise them when they need to broaden their scope, all of which adds to the client's confidence in Coulter Partners' market knowledge.

One Team, One Goal

There is a strong people-centred approach, both externally and within the company. Zubair is clear on the importance of communicating and speaking to a broad range of people when it comes to assignments, but he also highlights the training and communication between Coulter Partners team members. A new part of his role is allocating projects with Managing Partner Sharon Shields. To do this effectively he has had to deepen his understanding of the company's workload, pipeline and people's capacity. He is also very involved in mentoring; 'I spend some of my day asking individuals how they are doing and giving advice either broadly or on a particular project.' This investment in every team member is testament to the emphasis on team work. 'Everyone works together and each of us is focused on the overall goals of the organisation. The project co-ordinators are the backbone of the project, the researchers are there to identify and scope talent and the project managers are there to guide through the research. So every single person on the team is vital for the success of the project. That's what I love about my chosen career!'