

The Relational Advantage

Kenta Biotech is developing fully human monoclonal antibodies against life-threatening hospital infections, using their proprietary MabIgX platform. They have a promising lead-product candidate in clinical development and several product candidates in preclinical development.

“You need special clothing and various other protective measures to enter the labs,” explained the receptionist during the company tour. In this business that’s routine, but the infections Kenta Biotech is targeting are especially deadly: highly resistant to antibiotics, they kill up to 50% of victims despite hospital intensive care. However, we are here on a brighter note, to chat to one of the few female CEOs in Swiss Biotech about the HR challenge for small start-ups. Violetta Georgescu is a pharma professional with over 20 years experience and a welcoming smile. What she tells us, is clear evidence that people skills can be a critical asset – even when you’re creating the life-saving drugs of the future in sterile laboratories.

It all started in 2005 when Berna Biotech decided to spin out their monoclonal activities and appointed Georgescu to build the firm. I asked her if it would have been easier to get investors in the US. “Maybe, but investors here can also recognise a good opportunity,” she replies. Evidently: for Kenta found private investors who put in CHF 15 million. Deciding to rent labs and offices at Berna Biotech operations were up and running in no time. Many of the additional employees required were hired through the founder’s networks. “There is definitely a war for talent,” she says and explains that the big focus of research into monoclonals in the past was mostly in the US. Obviously a small start-up can never compete with big pharma on fringe benefits and salaries but Kenta has its own unique strategy. Kenta is using people skills to add value for the company and employees. This starts during the interview process. Looking at both professional qualifications and soft skills they take candidates through a multiple selection process that involves all the people the candidate will be working with. “If anyone has reservations, then we continue the search,” she explains. In other words, at Kenta, human chemistry is as important as scientific qualifications. The result is a close-knit motivated team of 16 with almost no employee fluctuation. “People in a start-up feel the pressure more than in a bigger company and in R&D work, discouragement is inevitable. We can’t avoid that, but a strong team rebounds much better,” she says.

Kenta’s management is also convinced that the company performance is very much a product of the individual performance and motivation of each employee that needs to be sustained beyond recruitment. So the company’s annual milestones are broken into individual goals for

each employee. So everyone knows their precise roles and responsibilities. Kenta has also established a feedback culture of honest praise or constructive criticism. Regular progress meetings ensure that all know whether the company is on track.

How important is the Bernese location to your company and candidates? “From the applications we receive, we know that people really want to move to Switzerland, even from relatively attractive places like Munich or San Diego in the US. Work permits are absolutely no problem and cultural integration is not hard, even though the international community in Bern is not as big as Basel or Zurich.”



From left: Christophe Hammer, Regulatory Affairs; Verena Gafner, Clinical Development; Holger Koch, Research Scientist; Wolfgang Schuette, Chief Medical Officer; Bea Fluri, Assistant; Violetta Georgescu, CEO; Michael Rudolf, Chief Scientific Officer; Stefanie Fas, Research Scientist; Hedvika Lazar, Clinical Development; Markus Haake, Head Preclinical Research; Aniko Fels, Assistant; Sandra Jampen, Technician; Markus Tarkóy, Head Process Development; Marianne Wyss, Technician; Lea Schott, Technician. Not on the photograph: Laurence Blazianu, Head of Business Development.

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