Stefan Schmidt, CEO, evitria

[We] deliver solutions that address the most challenging aspects of modern antibody development

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Stefan Schmidt traces a dynamic career from early biotech ventures in Germany to senior leadership roles at AstraZeneca, Lonza, and now CEO of evitria, a specialised Swiss CRO focused on complex antibody development. Evitria is expanding its technology and global reach to become a key partner in bispecific and engineered antibody development. Backed by private equity, the company is well-positioned to strengthen its role in biopharma innovation.

Can you walk us through your career journey and how it led to your current role at Evitria?

My career started in Bavaria, where I trained as a biochemist and worked at the Innovation and Start-Up Centre for Biotechnology near Munich. I joined GPC Biotech, a rising start-up during Germany's biotech boom, before moving to AstraZeneca in Sweden. That shift from start-up to big pharma gave me a global view of biologics and drug development.

At AstraZeneca, I worked on protein delivery across global teams and witnessed the company's shift from small molecules to biologics after acquiring MedImmune. I also went through structured leadership training and earned an MBA during my seven years in Stockholm.

After that, I moved to Barcelona and re-joined the start-up world, working with a biotech focused on plant-based biosimilars. The project combined innovation with cost-efficiency and benefitted from Spain's increased public investment in biotech at the time.

Returning to Germany, I joined Rentschler Biopharma, eventually becoming Chief Scientific Officer. I focused on GMP manufacturing, implementing single-use technologies and helping bring complex biologics to market. This laid the foundation for my transition into large-scale operations.

That led me to Switzerland, where I joined Lonza to lead BioAtrium, a joint venture with Sanofi. As Head of Operations (COO) I oversaw the full build-out of a large-scale GMP biologics plant in Visp—hiring the team, installing systems, and bringing the site online. It was a major leadership milestone.

After five years, I was approached by Evitria to become CEO. I was drawn to the entrepreneurial energy and the chance to shape a specialised CRO focused on early-stage antibody development. One of my first major activities was relocating the company into a customized facility to enable future growth.

Today, we support clients from early antibody screening to late preclinical production, often contributing to IND-enabling studies. We see a broad range of molecules and advise on design, manufacturability, and scale-up. Our work is frequently cited in publications, reflecting the strength of our science.

Personally, I find this role incredibly rewarding—combining deep science, global client engagement, and the fast pace of biotech innovation.

The antibody therapeutics landscape has evolved dramatically in recent years. How do you characterise the current market dynamics, and what trends are most significantly impacting your client requirements?

The past year has been especially transformative for the antibody field. Historically, the development pipeline was dominated by classical IgG antibodies. Today, however, we are witnessing a significant shift—approximately 50 percent of our current portfolio consists of highly complex molecules. These include bi-specific and multi-specific antibodies, often augmented with additional functionalities such as interleukin domains or scFv regions.

These molecules are not just structurally complex—they represent a paradigm shift in therapeutic strategy. By targeting multiple biological pathways simultaneously, they hold the potential to reduce resistance in oncology and unlock novel modes of action. We have observed the rapid evolution of this class of biologics, from early BiTE formats developed by Micromet (now part of Amgen) to more sophisticated constructs like CrossMabs from Roche. Companies such as Genmab,

Merus, and Incyte are actively expanding the landscape with proprietary platforms.

One critical factor driving this innovation has been the need to navigate IP restrictions, prompting many developers to engineer new scaffold formats and molecular architectures. At evitria, we have responded to this momentum by securing licences for key enabling technologies. For instance, we recently licensed a bYlok® from Lonza, which supports more precise heavy/light chain pairing. We also partner with ProBioGen for specialised glyco-engineering applications and maintain collaborations with groups like Genovis and Biofidus.

This approach reflects a core philosophy at evitria—we do not attempt to build every capability in-house. Instead, we cultivate a high-performing ecosystem of best-in-class partners, enabling us to offer a highly integrated solution to clients without the inefficiency of fragmented outsourcing. Our role is to provide scientific leadership and seamless coordination across these networks.

What specific competitive advantages does evitria bring to this increasingly complex market environment?

Our differentiation starts with the way we collaborate—with clients and partners alike. We go far beyond transactional engagements to form strategic, consultative relationships. Many of our clients are small biotechs or virtual companies with deep therapeutic expertise but limited biologics know-how. We become an extension of their scientific teams, offering insights into molecule design, expression strategies, and manufacturability.

We are also well known for our operational excellence. Swiss precision defines our delivery standards. Clients receive detailed proposals within 24 hours, and communication is seamless and responsive throughout the engagement. Furthermore, our production strategy often exceeds expectations—we routinely deliver additional material beyond what was ordered, allowing clients the flexibility to explore extra experiments without incurring delays or reorders. This ‘science-first’ mentality supports more efficient research timelines.

The transient expression platform that forms our technical foundation offers unique advantages for complex molecule development. It is robust, cost-effective, and built for scalability. This forms the backbone of our service offering, allowing rapid production of a wide range of antibody formats.

That said, we are constantly evolving our internal R&D to stay ahead of emerging client needs. For example, we are actively developing a novel recombination technology aimed at solving one of the key bottlenecks in bispecific development—namely, how to efficiently test large numbers of

parental antibody combinations. Our goal is to give clients the tools to evaluate hundreds of configurations quickly, optimising for affinity, epitope binding, spatial configuration, and other biophysical properties.

Parallel to this, we are investing heavily in miniaturisation. As AI-driven antibody design gains traction, there is an urgent need to validate large panels of in silico-generated molecules in real biological systems. We are positioning ourselves to be the bridge between computational predictions and experimental validation—producing tangible, testable candidates at scale and speed.

How do you envision evitria's role evolving within the biopharmaceutical development ecosystem?

Evitria's goal is to become the go-to partner for complex antibody formats—especially bispecifics and other engineered molecules. We have already built a strong reputation in early-stage antibody production, but there is room to grow both technologically and geographically.

We are investing in capabilities like high-purity expression systems, glycosylation engineering, and a proprietary recombination platform. Our transient expression system allows for dynamic control over plasmid ratios, enabling rapid, precise development that is hard to achieve with stable cell lines.

Today, we are a team of just over 30, mostly based in Zurich, operating out of a customized facility with space for scaling, automation, and future technology upgrades. Commercially, we are active in key biotech hubs including the UK, Boston, San Diego, Toronto, and Germany. Our distributed model keeps us close to innovation while benefiting from efficient remote collaboration.

We work with a diverse client base—about a 50/50 split between large pharma and smaller or mid-sized biotech companies. Big pharma often outsources projects that are complex or capacity-constrained, while virtual or early-stage companies may rely on us entirely. Increasingly, academic groups are also turning to us to translate research concepts into functional antibodies, as they often lack internal biologics capabilities.

As a specialised CRO, we have become an essential link in the development chain. For many clients, we act as their primary scientific partner—not just a vendor. And given our private equity backing and affiliation with Atlas Antibodies, we are in a strong position to continue expanding, either through internal development or acquisitions.

How do you assess Switzerland’s position within the global biopharmaceutical landscape, and what advantages does this location provide for your operations?

Switzerland is incredibly unique in that regard. The density of top-tier pharma companies, especially around Basel, is extraordinary — it is probably second only to Boston globally. That naturally fuels a constant cycle of innovation. You have people leaving pharma or academia, founding start-ups, and building entirely new approaches and companies. And it is not just a numbers game — many of these ventures thrive and scale.

There is strong support from the government as well, especially for start-ups — funding programmes, incubator spaces, and dedicated bio-centres in places like Lausanne and Basel. We have even seen companies relocate from elsewhere in Europe to Switzerland simply because the conditions here are more favourable.

On the talent side, the universities are producing a steady stream of well-trained graduates who want to participate in this ecosystem. That said, there is a ceiling — the population size does impose some limits. At Lonza, for example, we had to recruit internationally just to meet staffing needs.

Still, Switzerland’s location at the heart of Europe, multilingual culture, and high quality of life make it very attractive to foreign talent. While there are natural concerns about immigration, I have found that people are genuinely welcomed here — especially when they contribute to the economy and innovation landscape.

And lastly, not being in the EU has its advantages. Switzerland can collaborate on grants and research projects but avoids some of the more bureaucratic burdens that can weigh down start-ups in EU countries. It is a very start up-friendly environment.

Looking forward, what are the primary strategic objectives you are pursuing over the next two years?

Continued growth, both organic and strategic, is our main focus. The fundamentals of the market are strong, and a return to more balanced investment conditions would support faster acceleration.

More specifically, we want to cement our position as a top provider for complex antibodies — bispecifics, multi-specifics, and beyond. That space is growing fast, and there is no clear market

leader yet. We believe we can be one of them.

We are also watching trends like AI-enabled drug discovery and the potential reduction of animal testing requirements — both of which could reshape how preclinical validation is approached. We want to be at the forefront of those changes.

Finally, while we are currently a 100 percent service company, we are exploring product strategies, potentially in collaboration with our parent company Atlas Antibodies. There is opportunity there — especially in offering well-characterised antibody reagents or platforms directly to the research community.

It is about staying creative, responsive, and ideally a step ahead of where the market is going.

What message would you like to convey to potential clients and partners who may be unfamiliar with evitria's capabilities?

Switzerland continues to demonstrate that concentrated expertise, supportive infrastructure, and collaborative culture can create outsized impact in global biotechnology development. Organisations seeking partners for complex molecule development should recognise that technical excellence, operational reliability, and strategic insight remain the fundamental determinants of programme success.

Evitria's positioning within this ecosystem, combined with our comprehensive partner network and client-focused approach, enables us to deliver solutions that address the most challenging aspects of modern antibody development. We remain committed to advancing the scientific frontiers that will define the next generation of therapeutic interventions while maintaining the operational excellence that our clients require for competitive success.

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