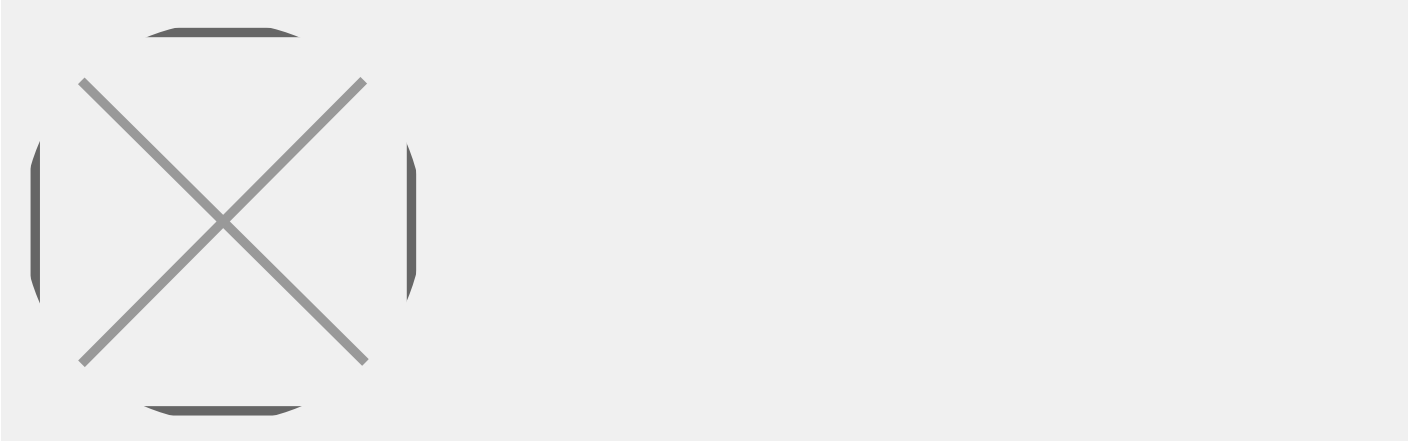
Interview with Kata Mazalin, General Manager Hungary, Assign Group



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Tags: Assign Group

Assign Group started in 2002 as a small local CRO company founded in Austria; monitoring and doing minor project management only. Why was Austria chosen as the headquarters?

First, it was simply the location of the CEO who had been living there for a while, bein the medical director of a European large pharmaceutical company. Also, it is geostrategically located in the middle of Europe and many companies have their Central European headquarters there. It is on the boarder of Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Pharmaceutical companies like Eli Lilly and Boehringer Ingelheim, but also CROs like Quintiles have their headquarters there.

As for Hungary, it is for similar reasons: we are in a central location and can provide a good choice for conducting clinical studies. Unfortunately for the Hungarian population but fortunately for the pharmaceutical industry, Hungary has high prevalence rates of certain diseases. Hungary is often a leading country in terms of the number of patients affected by very serious diseases in areas such as oncology and cardiovascular. Moreover, Hungary has a centralized healthcare system which means that for oncology for instance, we have big centers where we can conduct clinical studies with an easy access to patients. Doctors are also well-educated and speak English. Last but not least, Hungary is one of the oldest biotech and pharmaceutical industries in the world with a long tradition . Nowadays, however, almost all of the companies except for Gedeon Richter have been bought out by multinationals.

In less than 2 years you have expanded your market to Western and Eastern Europe and conducted clinical studies even in South Africa. What was the vision behind your

international strategy?

It was at a time where we had growing international projects and we thought it was going to be a good investment and good idea to build on the potential of those destinations, not only with local partners but by being present there ourselves.

We are still expanding. Today, we have the first affiliates have been established in 2006 in Hungary and Poland. Then came Berlin, Germany followed by the UK and then another German office in Munich. We recently opened up a Benelux office which covers the Netherlands and Belgium; And another one in the Czech Republic. With our steady Scandinavian partner we can cover the Nordic countries like Sweden, Norway and Finland, the Baltic countries and Russia.

What was the element that has changed in Assign Group to be able to expand to such extent in less than 10 years, enabling you to already reach American clients?

With our American partner we established a tight cooperation, though our focus is currently in Europe. We are trying to grow in big markets like Germany and France and do also not exclude Asia.

Assign group is the only midsized company offering complete clinical development services. Who are your competitors?

This is our specialty and it is very rare, I do not know of any other company that offers this wide spectrum of services. Assign Group has a size of about 200 employees. However, we are able to offer a full service project, meaning all kinds of work necessary in a clinical study. Within the company group we are able to provide not only the usual monitoring, regulatory and project management services but also data management, biostatistics and pharmacovigilance and IMP handling and central lab logistics.

Because of this our competitors are both the mid-size and the global large CRO companies. .

Who are your targeted clients and how do you reach out to them?

Our main target for the moment are small/mid-sized pharmaceutical and biotech companies that have managed to receive funding to carry out more advanced research, because we are just a perfect match for them: since big CROs can be too expensive and too far away. As for the big CROs, small biotech companies are more risky and they may not value them enough nor take them seriously. But we do. We prioritize according to their needs.

Right now, your main focus lies in oncology, representing half of your therapeutic areas, How do you explain the strong focus on this particular area?

We operate in many different therapeutic areas but it is true that we have a strong focus and a lot of experience in oncology, which is my specialty for example. Our second focus is on vaccines. We do have the traditional anti-infective vaccines but also cancer vaccines. You must bear in mind that oncology trials are always the most difficult, complex and the toughest to manage. So if you are good in oncology trials, you can most probably manage other trials as well..

In 2007, you decided to establish a partnership with IMP handling and Central Lab. How successful have these partnerships been, and what did they bring to the growth of the company?

IMP handling and logistics services are another not very frequent company to deal with. Thanks to these partnerships we are able to offer full service projects and do not have to be dependent on external partners, renewing contracts and face ever-changing agreements.

For a CRO, there is no doubt that the quality of your people remains one of your key assets. How do you go about finding and retaining these human resources?

We do have a strong focus on training. We offer regular training mostly in Vienna, as well as internal training and utilize external educational opportunities. When a freshman joins the company, we provide them with a mentor which has proven to be very effective. We also try to provide proximity and medical sessions for the more scientific questions about therapies, diseases and backgrounds.

Right now you are conducting clinical development in 30 countries with 200 employees. How do you manage such a team?

We recently realized that our company is growing so much that the old structure could not handle the current operations any longer. So, we created an executive committee, which I am a part of. We also have a matrix system with the COO leading a group of head of clinical project managers. The COO is in charge of the operational aspects and is reporting to the CEO directly. We use a Clinical Trial Management System and a CRM database, and try to centralize possible functions but we also have to follow local law and rules.

If we were to come back in 5 years, where would you like the company to stand?

In the past 5 years, we have experienced exponential growth. Even if we cannot match such levels anymore, I hope that we will still grow further. Hungary only has 10 people today, for example, and I would like this number to double or triple soon. I do believe this will be the case. We also hope to keep our family values despite the growth.

Do you have a final message for the readers of Pharmaceutical Executive?

I would like to say that we are one of those companies that are in the middle field: small enough to bend but big enough to be able to do anything. I want big companies to believe that we are an alternative and that they do not always have to go to our larger competitors.

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