Interview: Mirjam Mol-Arts â?? Director, Pivot Park, The Netherlands

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Pivot Park in Oss, the Netherlands, aims at becoming an inspiring campus for open innovation in life sciences. The CEO discusses the unique assets the park offers to companies and calls for an increased collaboration among private industry, academia, and government to enhance the countryâ??s global competitiveness.

You took over as the head of Pivot Park in October 2014 after directing the local MSD site for two years. What have been your top priorities since then?

The companies located at the park are our number one priority. We are interested in understanding what activities we can take care of so they can focus on their core business. Hence, an important part of my job is to interact with them to see what we can improve as well as to convince other companies to join us. In addition, we have been busy detaching from MSD. Pivot Park was launched in February 2012 as an initiative of the drug company in collaboration with five partners (the province of Noord-Brabant, the municipality of Oss, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, and the Brabant Development Agency); however, its legacy goes back to the Dutch drug company Organon, which started its operations in Oss back in 1923. In 2007, the company was sold to Schering-Plough, which later merged with MSD. To be a fully independent organization, we need to separate all systems from MSD, from drainage to utilities passing through environmental permits. Detaching will enable us to be a self-sustainable campus and hire local service providers, thus be more connected to the local community.

What other services does the park provide?

Besides renting buildings, labs and offices to private companies and organizations and providing services and infrastructure to the community, we rely on the Pivot Park Screening Center (PPSC), which offers drug discovery services in the field of assay development, lab automation, and High

Throughput Screening (HTS) to find new leads for drug development. The screening facility, established with an open innovation approach, includes state-of-the-art robotic systems and an extensive collection of 225,000 compounds. Today the PPSC is partner of the European Lead Factory (ELF), a unique public-private partnership that promotes new discoveries via open innovation and crowd sourcing. It is a great opportunity because it allows us to attract human capital and work with universities, which, in turn, gives us exposure. Along with the ELF, the PPSC also provides services to large companies and Dutch public institutions. Among others we collaborate with the Dutch Cancer Institute (DCI) and the University of Leiden on the Cancer Drug Development Initiative (CDDI). We run the screening and if new leads are identified the researchers at the university modify them into compounds to be later tested by the DCI.

What is the advantage of collaborating closely with such institutions?

The academia often has good ideas, but an idea only is not valuable. The pharmaceutical industry is not interested in ideas, they want something more concrete. In the past they wanted a proof of concept. Today, given the R&D crisis, big pharma is more interested in earlier phases of development to ensure they do not miss interesting compounds. Thatâ??s what we want to create with the CDDI. In this way, we can help the Netherlands do R&D, have compounds that can generate money, and close the virtuous circle.

Unlike other big science parks in the Netherlands, Pivot Park is not built around a university. What are the advantages of the campus in this sense?

We provide small companies with infrastructure and services usually only available to large drug manufacturers. We take care of waste management. We provide shared infrastructure, as the park has been established on the premise of open innovation and open access. Our screening service is accessible to anyone. The history of the site has always turned around pharmaceuticals, R&D, and chemical developments. We have the infrastructure to develop new medicines â?? thatâ??s the main difference. Academic infrastructure is built around science, but not around an A-to-Z product development. At Pivot Park we have the human capital and the expertise to bring a product to the market. On top of that, we also rely on good relationships with universities: some of the people working on the campus have been professors at the universities of Nijmegen, Leiden, or Amsterdam.

How would you like to position Oss among other science parks in the Netherlands?

We would like to build up a value chain. I think it is key to open up more and see how we can collaborate with other parks to create synergies. We are already collaborating with the Nijmegen science park. Nijmegen is more into medical technology, while we are more into pharma. Instead of being competitors, it would be mutually beneficial if we position ourselves as a regional center.For the future, we hope to have closer collaborations as well as to attract more students.

How competitive do you think science parks in the Netherlands are?

There is government funding, which provides opportunities to companies. One of the big challenges is that often, depending on the kind of subsidy, only a limited percentage of the projects is subsidized and only few projects are selected, as compared to much higher ratios in many Asian countries. More government support would help bring more products to the market. Also, the Netherlands is divided into separate provinces, each with its own financing, which often can only be used in the province granting it. We already have, for instance, companies in other provinces that are collaborating with the screening center and would like to establish a presence near-by to access the open labs. However, they cannot use public funds as they can only be used in their province. This definitely limits the range of action of a business.

Many complain about a lack of coordination in the life sciences sector. What do you think should be done to bridge this gap?

The sector needs means such as programs, subsidies, and funds that can help companies and academia get together. We had some programs which were initiated and organized by TI Pharma, an organization dedicated to establish and manage international public-private partnerships across the country, but most of these programs stopped or downsized when government funding dried up. My impression is that today competition is tougher and many research activities overlap among universities, creating redundancies and inefficiencies.

What unique features can Pivot Park bring to the country and the world?

We have some unique assets like the screening center and the pilot plants for chemical production and clinical trial material/finished product. We have two pilot plants, a kilo lab for API/NCE from lab bench to 10 kg, and a bigger pilot plant for clinical trial material/sterile fill finish products/marketed formulations. As a country you need to join forces to see how you can connect the different parts of your value chain and improve your innovative output. Also, we cannot be limited to the Netherlands, as pharmaceutical research is a world-wide development.

What are some of the achievement that have come out of Pivot Park that you are most proud of and that demonstrates the best of what Oss can achieve in life sciences?

BioNovion, which develops antibodies for cancer treatment and was started by three former Organon scientists specialized on antibodies. They made the bold step of starting their own company based on the technology they were familiar with; today, they have a very promising portfolio of checkpoint inhibitors and were recently acquired by Aduro Biotech. Another success story is ChemConnection, a self-funded company which exploits the parkâ??s pilot plant. They started using half of the four reactors featured with four people, and today they are using all reactors and have 32 employees.

You have had a variety of roles here in Oss. What motivates you and what makes this position something special to you?

I have been working on these premises for the past eighteen years, working for the Organon R&D organization first and for MSD later. There is an enormous deal of talent and expertise locally, and, it would have been a shame if everything would have gone lost when MSD decided to move their R&D facility. We have the people with the brain and the guts here to still translate innovation into products patients can use to have a better healthcare. It motivates me to know Pivot Park is putting companies in the right place to make this possible.

How will you define success for the Park in the next five years?

Weâ??d like to see more companies grow, add interesting parties, and become more international. We already have some international players on the campus, such as Quintiles and Acerta Pharma, but weâ??d like to see more. Weâ??d like to finally be a separate park with our own entrance and have a compound on the market that would not be out there without the existence of Pivot Park.

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