

Interview with Stig JÃ,rgensen, CEO, Medicon Valley Alliance Sweden-Denmark

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Mr. Stig JÃ,rgensen tells pharmaboardroom.com about the two-fold measures the hub for life science activities spanning Denmark and Sweden from Big Pharma to local Universities is taking to ensure continued growth and innovation within the Alliance.

As the CEO of Medicon Valley Alliance since 2005, can you please explain to our readers what is Medicon Valley Alliance and what are its main objectives?

Medicon Valley is a geographic area that is composed of Zealand (Danish region) and the southern part of Sweden. In the late 1990s, during the planning of the Åresund Bridge a decision was made to take advantage of the bridge and create a cluster, which is known as Medicon Valley today.

Medicon Valley Alliance (MVA) is not an industry association that takes care of the interests of the industry, rather it is an alliance that is trying to create the right environment to attract talent. As its name indicates, MVA includes all the major stakeholders within life sciences?? the three regional governments are represented in our board, as well as all the universities that offer life science education and research, major pharmaceutical companies, SME biotechs, medtechs, CROs, CMOs, and five science parks are part of our organization.

Although our main objective is attracting talent, we are also intent on expanding and sustaining our vibrant industry. We have a well-established, world-class pharmaceutical industry with companies like Novo Nordisk, Leo and Lundbeck. Regardless of this strong positioning, our politicians should remain concerned about how to preserve the jobs that the Danish pharmaceutical industry generates in our country, within the context of our globalized world. From MVA??s point of view, we believe we need to create and maintain jobs here since they will be the ones that continue growing our economy.

Companies like Novo Nordisk or Leo Pharma are global and as any pharma company they will analyze two main factors in order to increase their market presence: access to population and talent. Denmark doesn??t have a big population; we are a small country so the only arena we can compete in and be attractive in is creating access to talent, since talent is the fuel of our ecosystem.

The talent topic is all the rage today, but there are other countries that are almost trademarked for it, i.e., Singapore. The city-state has managed to establish world-class universities in a short period of time while attracting a number of outstanding academics like the President of Nanyang Technological University, Professor Bertil Andersson, who also happens to be Swedish. How do you deal with that?

Indeed, this is a big challenge for us. However, we have top-notch universities that are older than Harvard or MIT. Despite our long tradition of scientific acumen, we cannot sleep in our laurels and need to move forward.

On the other hand, there are many components in addition to importing talent. In order to succeed it is crucial to have the real environment, the right innovative culture and an entrepreneurial spirit. I believe that in the case of Denmark, having Danish pharma flagship corporations play a very significant role in stimulating entrepreneurship and innovation. However, to further foster talent we need to have job opportunities and superior framework conditions that are comparable to other parts of the world.

Having said that, the main challenge for Denmark and the Nordic countries is expanding the appeal of our countries for attracting talent and that is what we are trying to promote in our organizations agenda. Having a competitive talent strategy is intricate— job opportunities, living conditions, international schools, corporate/ personal taxes, efficiency in the public sector to facilitate procedures for investors— so with all of our affiliates we are trying to make this cluster flourish.

What will it take for Medicon Valley to stay competitive and attract talent?

Our main challenge for both, Denmark and Sweden is to maintain jobs. If jobs start moving into other parts of the world, we will enter into a vicious circle— with fewer taxpayers there will be less money for public investments in education and research, and consequentially less talent.

In Medicon Valley, as in all the other clusters in the world, we are competing for the same talent; therefore we have to have a distinct strategy that focuses on four different aspects.

First of all, it is necessary to focus on the most complex things. We cannot compete in terms of volume and economy of scale, that goes for clinical research, CROs, etc., hence we need to work together and collaborate. In this regard, Scandinavia has a competitive advantage since we are better at cooperating. Other countries have a very individualistic mindset and their culture revolves around competing with each other. Due to our collective culture, our mindset enables us to unite doctors, engineers, and business people to work together. All this disciplines collaborating and working in the same domain is where innovation will flourish.

Another area where we an advantage is convergence. We have the big technologies areas: medtech, IT, biotech, and nanotech converging into different sources and products.

The third area is clever networking since we would like to collaborate with the rest of the world. Our aim is to link ourselves with the best biotech hubs around the globe and strengthen our competencies. For this reason, we started an ambassador program, which consist of posting MVA—s ambassadors around the world, whose responsibility is to make alliances. Currently we have ambassadors in Japan, South Korea, Boston and we will soon appoint two addition ambassadors— one in San Diego and another in China.

To complete this strategy the fourth point is specializing, consolidate niches in where we have a strong heritage and build them up. That is the process we are in now— building up beacons, or areas with one shared headline in which we combine different strongholds and disciplines.

Can you elaborate further on the beacons you mention?

The Beacon Initiative is part of the project —Medicon Valley— a world-class life science cluster—
• The aim is to improve the attractiveness and competitiveness of Medicon Valley. The project is a collaboration between Medicon Valley Alliance and Invest in Skåne and is partly financed by EU Interreg IVA.

One of these beacons will be drug delivery. For this, we are running a process in the form of a consortium with universities and the leading companies to form a center for drug delivery. The center

will focus on membrane transport, specifically for biological and subsequent targeting. We will invest significant amounts to funnel different disciplines from the public and private sector and work together in the same shared environment in order to fertilize and stimulate this area, converge technologies and then link these beacons with the best centers around the world. With this plan, we want Medicon Valley to be known as the world center for drug delivery; the world center for targeting new compounds.

Drug delivery will be our first beacon but we are interested in having three to four more. Therefore, we are currently studying nine potential candidates and from those we will choose four to focus on. After the selection of the beacons, we will invest a significant amount of money (both private and public) with the aim of creating a world-class environment within a very specialized area, which will attract talent.

What would you like to be your final message for our international readers?

Everyone has their own sets of challenges and within this globalized world we need to find our own way. We cannot rest in our laurels; we have to be proactive. Since we are competing against the world, we have to be very targeted in what we want to build and find the right niche strategy. That is why MVA is proactively building our own future by processes, which bridge all our different strongholds between the public and private sector.

Although we are very open to collaborate with the rest of the world to create win/ win situations, we also want our flagship companies to keep expanding and being world champions. Part of this is of course maintaining their headquarters here in order to continue forging the Danish life sciences industry forward.

If Medicon Valley can be branded and recognized around the globe as a place of niche areas, while also being ranked among the top 3 in these respective niches, the MVA will be extremely satisfied.

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