

Careers Beyond Academia: Biotech Startup

Dr. Evelin Szakal is the Director of Business Development at Next Interactions, a California based biotech startup. After a PhD in Medical Microbiology and a postdoc at UCSF, Evelin transitioned into the corporate field. Evelin was involved as a Science Advocate for the online platform 'Science Exchange' where she facilitated outsourcing scientific experiments to core facilities and expert labs. Shortly after, Evelin co-founded a biopharmaceutical R&D startup 'TheraBioI' where she was responsible for managing the business operations. After 3 successful years at Therabiol, she stepped in her current position at a biotech startup, 'Next Interactions' that offers protein interaction screening services, where she is the Director of Business Development.



In this 10 question informational interview, Evelin will talk about her career path and the transition from academia to a leading a successful biotech startup.

1. Please describe your professional background?

I'm a Medical Microbiologist Ph.D. turned into Director of Corporate Development and later Director of Business Development in biotech. I'm currently working at Next Interactions, a small startup in Richmond, north-east of San Francisco. But I'm not a simple sales person. I'm responsible of coordinating marketing efforts to educate people about our new technology and services, thus growing our client base. I also oversee the finances, budget, cash-flow, and many more. It's a small startup offering protein-protein interaction screening with out new NGS-Y2H technology, and we have many clients from the agricultural field to medical science and drug discovery.

2. How did you decide this career path was best suited for you?

I liked biology, infectious diseases, vaccines and proteins, but doing research in the lab hidden away from people was not my thing. I get bored without enough human interaction. I'm also a great starter but I get tired from projects lasting for years. I knew myself enough that I was not the typical bench scientist, and I did a B.S. in Economics while I was doing my Ph.D. So it was clear that I wanted to be a "hybrid" (science and business professional).

3. What helped you setting your first startup?

The first startup where I was co-founder and #1 employee was TheraBioI. I received very good directions from my CEO Girish Vyas who was a fantastic coach and mentor. Now at Next, I'm also working closely with the CEO, Bernhard Suter. Being diligent and putting the extra workload was always helpful. Putting the company's interest first, and personal behind. Understanding that success lies in laser sharp focus on the goal and the prompt execution. Dreaming about doing

something and knowing how to do it is not enough. You need to take your time to actually execute, even if you are tired or not in the mood.

4. How did your skills as a PhD help you in this role?

The hard skills in research i.e the technical skills helped to be able to talk the science jargon in business meetings. Having presented my science to large audiences (3000 people was my biggest audience) in many international conferences helped to get over the nervousness when I gave my first business pitch to a small group of investors. In research you learn analytic thinking, statistics, which is helpful for strategizing in the short and long run and looking at possible case scenarios and outcome before making business decisions. But extra acquired skills in business management did help too. The soft skills. I took many business courses, workshops, seminars, webinars, I'm reading sales and marketing books constantly.

5. What were the challenges that you faced during the transition into this role?

Transition was very easy because I think I'm a natural in management. I had to learn a lot of new things just by being thrown in the deep water. Many times I was given a problem and all I had to do say - yes I can find a solution, and I did. That is the right attitude. Sometimes becoming a leader is a challenge if the team is not on the same page. The biggest challenge is to share the vision and get everyone on board. Otherwise the boat doesn't move forward or even sinks because everyone is paddling differently. It's like white river rafting. Converting team members of academic background into the industry mind set and working style was quite a big challenge.

I had to learn to let it go: being able to delegate tasks is difficult when one trusts only herself, but must learn to trust other's work.

I had to learn to be not afraid of failures and to be able to learn from my mistakes.

I had to learn to dare to ask the "stupid" questions, to negotiate deals, and dare to approach people, companies, vendors with requests. If you don't ask, they will never have a chance to say no, but at least you asked.

I had to learn to embrace criticism and use it constructively, as feedback is the breakfast of champions. One morning my former boss said: Evelin, you need to learn how to write emails, you really need to do your spell check and pay attention to your grammar. Otherwise it reflects poor on you and also on the company. So I learned it. I also pay attention to the subject line and the call to action, and I triple check the name I address my email to. In grad school they teach you all kind of things but not the art of sending effective and polite emails.

6. What is your typical day like?

Answer a lot of emails from early morning, making phone calls, present in meetings. Lots of admin paperwork, excel spreadsheets, Quickbooks, financial transactions, number crunching, quotations, contract documents, lawyer jargon. Lots of coordination between teams of people: who does what, how and when, for how long, and what does that cost for the company. I don't

go in the lab unless I need to know about a new workflow, so that I can talk about it to our customers.

7. What is the most challenging part about this role?

Planning well, so that things happen at the right time, especially financially. Startups are very sensitive to cash-flow, so that is always high priority. Prioritizing my own tasks is also very important so that those things that move forward the company are getting done first. Other less important items can wait, or if urgent, must be delegated, either in house or outsourced. The challenge is avoiding procrastination with easy tasks that are either completely useless or not important. It's basically sorting the rocks from the pebbles.

8. What is the most exciting aspect of working in a biotech startup?

Wearing many hats makes my days super exciting. I'm never bored. Having the high level responsibilities of decision making is an extra kick. People count on your experience. People expect you to be wise enough to make good decisions. You need to be wise enough to know what you don't know and seek advice from experts.

9. Any specific points to consider when choosing this career?

Business development is for people who are high energy, like the pressure and the dynamic aspect, and enjoy talking to and meeting many other people. In other words being "extrovert" does help although not a prerequisite. But organizational skills and a very good memory is also super helpful. Oh yes and must maintain diplomacy and avoid being too emotional on the job. Because business is business, never take it personally.

10. Any other words of advise

I read the book of Toby Freedman many times: Career Opportunities in Biotechnology and Drug Development. It's great work of concise and detailed description of the different job functions in biotech for those who are looking outside of the lab.

*-Article Contributed By Vidisha Raje, PhD
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