

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY: A CHAT WITH JOHN BURROWS

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BURROWS
BY JASMINE YANG (BDCS)

Last month, the Biomedical Discovery & Commercialization Society (BDCS) sat down with John Burrows, the Vice President of BioPharm at NovoNordisk, to discuss current and future trends in the pharmaceutical industry and how BDC graduates can leverage their skills in the post COVID-19 climate.

Q: In what ways have you seen the pharmaceutical industry change during the pandemic?

During the pandemic, we have seen a shift to value based communication. Our customers interact with us only when they really need to. The more social based interactions that happen when a sales rep or a medical liaison goes into a doctor's office to check in obviously aren't happening. My gut tells me that

over the next year and a half, we're going to go back to a "new normal" which will probably be a hybrid model. Although face to face interactions are valuable, this hybrid notion of virtual contact will remain as it can be effective for various situations, especially in a large country like Canada. During the pandemic, we've learned that we can operate within this type of a virtual environment and so the skills we're learning now, we're not going to give up. I think we're going to continue to work on this.

Another change is the pricing reforms that are going on in Canada right now through the PMPRB. This is the first time they've updated the pricing control guidelines and companies may see significant cuts in the prices they can and cannot

charge across a large part of their portfolio. In the business, when that happens, it means you don't have as much money to spend on things like advertising and employees. I would say this to anyone looking to get into the pharmaceuticals industry: make sure to do your research on companies and to take a close look at their pipelines. I believe that the pharmaceutical industry is still a very good industry to be in and that we're very well positioned to go into the future. Do your research and target those that have the best growth opportunities.

Q: How have you and your team adapted to maintain good communication and high performance while working from home?

We've learned through persistence and have come out the other side realizing how critical communication is. Even for myself, I will say it's much tougher to keep the energy high when you're getting up every day and staring at a box for 8 hours. Certainly, the uptake of technology has been accelerated. People that weren't technologically adept are becoming so out of necessity. As I said earlier, we know that this is here to stay. As an organization, we're now training our people more on how to use technology.

I'll say this as a people manager; I've got a team of 15 and they're spread out across the country. I've got parents with younger kids at home, trying to homeschool and work and at the same time. I've got people who are looking after elderly members of their family. I've also got young individuals that live by themselves and that's got its challenges during COVID. Sometimes it's more about focusing on the people and making sure that your people stay engaged. Empathy is really critical.

Q: What sort of restructuring do you see happening in Novo Nordisk in the next 3, 5, and 10 years? Which new departments will form? Which existing departments will grow? Which departments will be eliminated?

We've been through a journey that's seen a lot of shifts and we are all trying to guess where the future will take us but I would say that what we've seen in

the last few years, and this will continue, is growth in the Medical Affairs function. They are the group that takes the clinical data from trials, both our own as well as competitors', and synthesizes messages that can be used by the medical group out in the field or by the commercial group. It can be as simple as "Hey, we have a new study and here's what our drug did," or it can be more therapeutically related where the pathophysiology of the disease and how the drug works well is explained.

For Sales I could see, perhaps, a slight growth. It's a department that must continue to exist as a way for physicians to learn about our drugs. I



John Burrows, Vice President of BioPharm at NovoNordisk

think we will move towards more of a hybrid model where there are still a good number of people out in the field, but they'll probably be supported and augmented by a virtual sales force. This means we won't have to travel across

the country and it will allow us to get to areas we don't go to as frequently now.

Regulatory Affairs, which work on licensing or gaining a license for a new drug and maintaining licenses for existing drugs, is certainly more tied to the pipeline. If you have many new drugs in your pipeline you'll be hiring for people. That's never going away.

Marketing is another bigger group in any pharma company. They're like medical affairs on the commercial side.

Q: What skills (technical or soft) do you see becoming more and more important to have?

It's important to be able to converse in science. You have to have that basic knowledge of biology and pharmacology. Another thing is soft skills. I always say I hire for the soft skills. If you get your foot in the door to an organization, we're very good at teaching you product knowledge and even selling skills but what we can't teach are the soft skills. Problem solving, critical thinking, and analytical skills are great to highlight when you're interviewing. The questions that we often ask, and I know some people hate them but, something like "Tell me about a time when you've had to manage different priorities or when you've had to work with teammates that aren't as helpful as they should be."

I know you've all had to work through tough deadlines and those are the types of situations you have to draw on. You know what though? The soft skills you can work on too. It's often how we're hardwired right so it can be a little trickier, but with practice you can definitely improve on them as well. A good soft skill to have could be empathy and maybe it's an example of a story of how a family member or a friend has been affected by something and how you were able to help. Very few jobs in the industry are one person doing all the work and delivering the results by themselves so empathy and collaboration are very important. These days communication skills, both written and verbal, are also very important.

Q: What challenges do you see new graduates facing when it comes to finding a job during this economically challenging time and do you have any advice for them?

The biggest challenge for any new student now is just getting your foot in the door. I had a really good student who came in and did like a six month project. He wanted to stay but the only open role I had was an admin coordinator role. I told him that once he was full time, he could leverage that to parlay a jump into something else. Now he is a sales rep in our organization and quite frankly, he will probably be my boss one day!

So don't shy away from any opportunities to get into a company. If you can get a full time role, that opens

the door up to all kinds of other opportunities. Another thing: leverage LinkedIn. You can search for people from organizations you're interested in and send out a message. Not everyone will say yes, but I would hope that a good number of people will at least shoot you an email if not arrange a quick phone chat. Last thing: try to find a company whose culture is a good fit for you. The cultures in different organizations are truly very different. The most successful matches are those employees that really do align with the culture of that organization.

When you're at the interview stage, show that you are taking the effort, maybe ask questions about something you see on their website. That certainly tells me, as an interviewer, that you're interested and that you've got enough initiative.



IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE ABLE TO CONVERSE IN SCIENCE. YOU HAVE TO HAVE THAT BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF BIOLOGY AND PHARMACOLOGY. ANOTHER THING IS SOFT SKILLS. I ALWAYS SAY I HIRE FOR THE SOFT SKILLS.

