Interview: John Verhoeven – Partner, Eagle Rock Life Sciences, The Netherlands



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John Verhoeven, Partner and co-founder of Eagle Rock Life Sciences, a Dutch independent consultancy offering a broad range of services to both Dutch and international life sciences companies, explains how this fast-growing company helps clients of all sizes to reach new heights thanks to its experienced staff and fast, flexible service.



Eagle Rock Life Sciences has a very unique founding history. As an introduction to our international readers, could you please outline how the company came to be founded?

Eagle Rock Life Sciences' journey started when Organon was acquired by Schering Plough. I had previously worked in the Strategy & Business Development Department for Organon. After the acquisition, Organon was in somewhat of standstill and was not investing anymore, and, as a matter of fact, it was truly impossible to come with any new idea or development strategies that would require strategic investments. It was also quite obvious that the top management would be

dismissed, and a lot of its senior management left Organon and started their one-man independent consultancy company. With a group of colleagues from Organon gathering a profound expertise at different levels of the industry, we decided to join forces and to launch Eagle Rock Life Sciences. This extremely diverse expertise is now probably one of our main assets and provides us with a good overview of what our clients actually need to reach the next step – especially for start-ups or medium-size companies. We are able to offer an extremely comprehensive range of services to our clients, from strategy and marketing, to sales, legal compliance or regulatory affairs services, as well as R&D, manufacturing and medical affairs, with a special focus on quality management. We help our customers face each step on their path to success with professionalism. Thanks to the robust experience of our consultants both at national and international level, our clients also benefit from our broad scientific and business network, which usually helps to increase the likelihood of them being able to build close strategic partnerships off this network. As we say: “you never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

Despite only having been founded in 2011, Eagle Rock Life Sciences already boasts an impressive clientele including companies like Sanofi and Quintiles. What are the competitive advantages of the company which make it the partner of choice for the industry?

I think that the most competitive advantage of the company is the fact that we are “hands on” professionals who made their careers in the industry. We know what we are talking about. Our no-nonsense approach is appealing to our clients. We have a truly international network and we are fast in responding to requests and delivering results

In conclusion, we are able to speak the language of both sides of the industry; that of the mature pharmaceutical companies, as well as that of start-ups.

We are currently cooperating with clients from Brazil, Hungary, China, and Japan, amongst other geographies, but for the time being, we mainly focus on Europe, on such markets as The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, or the UK.

Considering your long-standing experience in the Dutch pharmaceutical industry first working for Organon and now for Eagle Rock Life Sciences, what is your current assessment of the Dutch pharmaceutical industry?

The Dutch pharmaceutical landscape tremendously changed since Organon was acquired. When Organon did unfortunately close its research activities in the Netherlands, this loss also fostered the need to increase the translation of Dutch fundamental research to applied and

marketable products, while many researchers from Organon moved to other Dutch companies. Dutch organizations of all sizes, from start-ups to bigger companies like Sanquin and Synthon clearly benefitted from Organon's expertise in this way.

Nevertheless, scientific translation from fundamental research to marketable products remains an issue in the Netherlands, like in many other markets facing a scarcity of funding. Researchers and universities are doing a great job, but they often are insufficiently connected to the international industry. On the other end, we do have a fantastic investor scene in the Netherlands, but quite often they seem to remain quite passive and prefer to wait for better ideas to come up without really bolstering their dawn. Helping start-ups to thrive is, however, not only related to funding, as bringing the necessary infrastructure and business expertise at the right moment to help young entrepreneurs move forward is at least as valuable as providing grants. This lack of support is currently filled by the province authorities, which massively invest in Science Parks and local incubators, while universities also increased their support to in-house incubators and cutting-edge laboratories to retain both world-class scientists and international students in their respective clusters. However, it takes more to cross the bridge from early science to more mature projects and it is this bridge that we help to cross, as well as in the partnering with pharmaceutical industry.

Finally, we have recently seen important deals between Dutch biotechnologies companies and international pharma companies, which I hope will not only benefit the investors, but also the researchers, allowing them to move forward to their next research ideas and projects.

Some say the days of big pharma in the Netherlands have passed with the end of Organon and many companies downsizing locally. Why is the country still attractive to the pharma industry?

On the one hand, we are a small country with only 17 million inhabitants. On the other hand, I deeply believe that the Netherlands stands as a portal for the industry in many different ways. As a historical trading nation, we are a gateway to Europe, while we remain well-entrenched in the international political scene. For example, we have been one of the founding States of the European Union. There is also a strong German connection, and our two economies are closely intertwined. Finally, the Netherlands offers a density of world class universities and research centers which may easily stand the challenge of others in the world.

The Netherlands has been mentioned as one of the most challenging EU markets in terms of accessing the patient and pricing. What is your assessment of the situation?

I would not say so. Market approval and clinical assessments are not only controlled by the European Medicines Agency in London in which the Dutch regulatory agency plays an important role, but mostly by the international authorities. Regulatory assessment truly starts when a company initially contacts the regulatory authorities regarding a specific treatment or product. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the opportunity to discuss with authorities at the earliest stage of the registration process is absolutely fantastic in the Netherlands and really helps companies to better design their registration programs and quickly prove efficacy and safety. The Dutch government rewards true innovations in an appropriate way, however, high prices are becoming a global issue.

Your own expertise is in strategy and business development for the biotech industry. What would you identify as being the main challenges that your clients face?

The main challenge is probably to find the best strategy to make money out of their research programs, and to do it in such a way that they are not completely dependent on investment funding. Finding the right-sized strategic partnerships and collaborations at the right time is therefore key to success..

Talent is at the heart of any consultancy. How do you recruit and retain the right people?

We are lucky to have a very experienced and mature team of consultants, and we are currently trying to figure out how to maintain this maturity in the upcoming years. Fortunately, we are regularly approached by new senior consultants who are excited to work with us. Our typical targets would be people who worked within the industry. Unfortunately, it is now more and more difficult to find such talents from within the international pharmaceutical industry in the Netherlands. In particular, we are interested in building relationships with entrepreneurs or CEOs who are currently taking part in local success stories, as they will be the future of consulting in the Netherlands in the years to come given their valuable experience.

What is your perception of the future of Dutch life sciences industry, and what role will Eagle Rock Life Sciences play within this future?

First of all, bringing together partners and stakeholders from academia, mature companies, start-ups, venture capitalists, and science parks is probably the best way to achieve further success, both at the local level in the Netherlands but also at a more international scope, including stakeholders from other European countries and the European authorities. Historically, pharmaceutical companies have been maybe too profitable and successful to truly look for

cooperation among them instead of just competing.

Nonetheless, the Dutch scene is still too much scattered to recognize a mid-term pattern. The oncology sector is one of the national areas of excellence, and we will probably try to deepen this expertise. Moreover, even if people have been talking about personalized medicines and treatments for many years, the process of turning these ideas into concrete innovations is currently ramping up. In a completely different perspective, health sciences are nowadays more and more looking for crossovers with the IT and eSciences sectors, and there are a lot of promising Dutch start-ups thriving on this interplay with companies like Apple, Philips or Google. Within this context, Eagle Rock will continue to help companies from any size to turn their ideas into success stories!

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