Interview: Christian Thernøe – Service Delivery Director, Life Sciences, NNIT Switzerland



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The Services Delivery Director for Life Sciences of NNIT Switzerland talks big data and highlights how this trend needs to be approached in order to create value for companies in the life science industry.

You first joined NNIT in 2010; you then moved to the FMCG sector for a few years before returning to work for NNIT as director of the Swiss affiliate, position you have now occupied for more than a year. What was your motivation to come back to NNIT?

The main reason for me to return to Denmark-headquartered NNIT was because it launched an IPO in 2015 and successfully went public. I felt that the company had reached a level of maturity which allowed to embark on an internationalization journey I wanted to be part of. Its management was willing to invest in what was needed to make this journey a success story and being part of this team created highly interesting opportunities for me, thus shaping an attractive work environment.

What are your key priorities as head of the Swiss affiliate?

Frankly speaking, they are all about growth. In the next two to three years I have high growth ambitions; NNIT has grown fast and in double digit figures for the past decade.. Whereas in Denmark, NNIT focuses on a multitude of industries, in Switzerland we focus on the life sciences sector and I believe there is substantial leeway to seize.

What is the role the Swiss affiliate plays within NNIT's global operations?

Switzerland is of utmost strategic value due to the affiliates proximity to some of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world. Ever since I joined NNIT Switzerland, we increased our workforce by ten employees to better serve CH-based clients, but also clients located in other European markets, so the Swiss affiliate is trying to drive growth in all of Europe outside of Denmark by bringing in best in class capabilities close to our clients.

For many companies the Swiss affiliate represents the "brain" of their operations. Can NNIT's swiss affiliate be a brain for the company?

Some of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world are located in Switzerland, thus we are naturally at the heart of a network of utmost strategic value in many aspects; it allows us to hire senior personal with extensive expert knowledge for instance. Furthermore, by working with the pharmaceutical companies here in Switzerland, we maintain a leading position for our clients and simultaneously remain leaders in our field. One example is where we help our clients developing highly innovative technological and patient focused solutions—such as smartphone applications tailored to unmet patient needs and improving real world compliance.

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Within the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries, there is a big debate on how operational efficiency can be increased. How can your IT solutions contribute to increasing operational efficiency?

I believe that a lot of these needs are driven by changing regulatory environments which indirectly require increased efficiency and which in turn, naturally results in an increased demand for IT solutions. However, we are also trying to sell our services by communicating the strong business intelligence and value they come along with. For instance, we are currently constructing a structured automated component based offering, which will be built into clients global life cycle submission system, ultimately integrating these components and creating a system in which data can be collected in a decentralized manner, be condensed in the HQ and thus allowing for a centralized submission of the data to the authorities. Obviously, this will create enhanced operational efficiency, however, the need is driven by regulatory requirements.

A significant upcoming trend within the life sciences industry is big data mining and the resulting opportunities for all companies across the value chain. To what extent is NNIT positioned and prepared for this trend?

The term ‘Big data’ as such needs to be refined in order to actually create value. I personally am a bit tired of consulting companies coming with the idea of ‘big data’ because typically the analytics part, which defines how value is actually created, is a big issue. Big data needs to be broken down to individual business processes, where then, these chunks of big data can be used to create value for the client.

We have a dedicated department in NNIT focusing on business intelligence, scrutinizing these trends and our corresponding service offering. We as an affiliate contribute to this by forwarding our input from the industry and what we see is that the topic of ‘big data’ is not always approached correctly. Therefore, we are already working on this trend by breaking down its components and translating these into needs of the industry, to which we then tailor solutions to.

One part could be our regulatory affairs segment for instance. It is all about how to apply the concepts that are behind ‘big data‘ to individual aspects of the client’s operations. Although ‘big data’ really seems to be a buzzword for the industry, I prefer to go out to the client and see what their specific needs are to then tailor a specific solution, rather than trying to extrapolate a ‘one fits all big data’ solution.

One of the benefits of having the focus on the life science industry is, that we get a significant amount of input from our clients which we consolidate internally thus understanding trends and upcoming challenges. We then use this knowledge in the scoping sessions with our clients being able to satisfy their needs.

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NNIT’s international strategy is to “leverage our strong industry specific expertise in life sciences internationally” – could you please break down how exactly you are implementing this expertise in Switzerland?

We have significant knowledge incubated in our HQ in Copenhagen, where we have tailored individual departments based on the knowledge we inherited through once being a part of Novo Nordisk. This knowledge centre is linked in a two-way stream to all affiliates; we contribute with the knowledge we gather in the work with our clients and they produce industry best practices and standards which are communicated back to the affiliates. Thus, we ensure that everywhere around the globe we work according to the latest knowledge and findings.

Moreover, in early January 2017, myself, along with peers from around the world, will fly to Copenhagen for a kick off week, in which we discuss best practices, latest trends and get updated

with the latest industry insights. I am happy to see that in Switzerland we are becoming quite strong in terms of contributing to our HQ knowledge incubator with field insights and expertise.

NNIT gives Novo Nordisk, Lundbeck & LEO Pharma as reference clients – all of which are Scandinavian pharmaceutical companies. What is your strategy to diversify your client portfolio and tap into the immense potential Switzerland offers?

We are already working with pharmaceutical giants on the Swiss market on different projects and are actively trying to penetrate the local industry. A lot of this is done by word-of mouth and exemplifying our results. At the very beginning, we gained clients through what I call the 'Danish connection', aiming at companies where we knew the head to be Danish or companies with whom we had done business before in Denmark; by serving them and achieving excellency we were able to create a reputation in Switzerland.

Is the Novo Nordisk heritage a challenge when acquiring new clients?

This aspect represents two side of the coin for us. On the one hand, we always need to communicate to our clients that we are independent and detached from Novo Nordisk and that there is no risk that we will share the data of our clients to them.

At the same time, this history is part of our DNA which gives as a significant competitive advantage as we truly understand the industry, and thus its needs and challenges.

What message would you like to be heard around the world?

In Switzerland, we still need to tell the global story: we are a global company with experts from all around the world being able to package different solutions from globally integrated experts individually for the need of the client, delivering quality in an efficient manner. We are not a generic service company; we truly have a different DNA and I am confident that this can open new avenues for our clients and ourselves alike.

We strive to develop and provide best in class services and solutions by listening to our clients and staying tuned to industry trends and regulatory developments. Big data, cloud migration and disruption are topics relevant to all industries in the world. Our strength is that we understand them in a pharma context and are able to support our clients with IT solutions tailored to e.g. developments within Identification of Medicinal Products, Tracking and tracing of medicinal products, international developments within persona data laws and cloud strategies.

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