Michael Hübner – New Venture Lead, Johnson & Johnson Innovation Switzerland



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Johnson & Johnson Innovation focuses on accelerating all stages of innovation worldwide, forming collaborations between entrepreneurs and the Johnson & Johnson Family of Companies' global healthcare businesses. Michael Hübner, Early Innovation Partnering Lead and member of the Swiss Johnson & Johnson Leadership Team discusses how they support breakthrough early innovation through collaboration and strategic partnerships;

JLABS, a global network of life science incubators*; and JJDC, their own strategic venture capital arm.*

Can you share with our audience the key elements of your experience that led to join Johnson & Johnson Innovation in Switzerland?

Like many of my colleagues at Johnson & Johnson Innovation, I have a scientific background. I studied biochemistry in Tübingen and Munich, before joining to the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, where I graduated with a PhD summa cum laude in cancer research. I then moved to the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) on Long Island in New York as an EMBO fellow and DAAD scholar and continued to work on cancer topics related to the mechanisms of gene regulation in cancer cells.

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory is one of the top ranked research institutes in the world dedicated to the life sciences and it was the site of several discoveries that were awarded the Nobel Prize over

the past decades. When I approached the end of my time at CSHL, I asked myself the same question that many academic researchers do, namely, whether to remain in academia or take the step into industry.

There were two reasons why I decided to make that transition. The first was that if I had remained in academia, the next step would have been a professorship, where I would have needed to specialize and build my career in one particular research topic. Meanwhile, my own personal interests are rather across a broad context of biomedical research and I was more interested in working in a matrix environment of a global organization alongside experts in various fields.

The second reason was that I was always interested in the translational aspects of research; I wanted to help pave the way for research findings that come out of top academic institutions to benefit patients in need.

Therefore, when I received the opportunity to join Roche in their global business development team for oncology, I decided to take the leap. This role was a very steep learning curve for me because not only was it a change from academia to industry, but it was also a change of subject, from epigenetic research in the laboratory to business development in a global pharmaceutical company.

Within my first month at Roche, I had already completed an advanced business development course and was discussing collaborations with CEOs of biotech companies at a partnering conference.

I actually went to more scientific conferences and read more about science when I was in Business Development than when I was a researcher in the lab. Initially, my job was still very science-focused because I was leading the scientific assessment and due diligence of preclinical and clinical-stage opportunities. Over time I grew into a transactional role, leading cross-functional Due Diligence teams for licensing and acquisition transactions, and I led the acquisition of Tusk Therapeutics, an immuno-oncology focused biotech company in the UK in 2018.

In 2019, I received an offer from Johnson & Johnson Innovation to join as Innovation Lead in Switzerland and to become a member of the leadership team at the Johnson & Johnson Family of Companies in Switzerland. My role is very much in the area of sourcing, evaluation and supporting transactions of early-stage innovation across our therapeutic areas in the country.

Can you explain what Johnson & Johnson Innovation is about, how it is structured, and the place you have within the global organization?

There is a lot of fantastic research and innovation happening in different ecosystems, from universities and research centres to startup incubators and small and mid-size biotech companies all over the world.

In order to gain access to this external innovation, eight years ago Johnson & Johnson created a separate organization, Johnson & Johnson Innovation, that is dedicated to finding and supporting early-stage innovation across the globe.

We are organized into four Innovation Centers which are located in some of the major innovation hotspots in the life sciences: Our innovation centres in San Francisco and Boston serve the US West and East coast, respectively; London for the whole EMEA region, and Shanghai for Asia Pacific.

The Innovation Center in London is our gateway into the European innovation landscape, and it coordinates mainly three main activities: The first is collaborations and strategic partnerships with universities and research institutes, startup incubators and healthcare companies. Our focus is on collaboration up to clinical proof of concept in pharmaceuticals and medical devices, as well as in consumer healthcare products. We have a dedicated network of innovation scouts embedded in the key innovation hotspots all across Europe including Switzerland, Germany and France who help identify exciting research and therapeutic programs.

The second activity is supporting entrepreneurs through our JLABS @ BE life science incubator which is part of a global network. JLABS resident companies benefit from having access to large pharma infrastructure and resources; we provide expertise and mentorship, and we can help companies make contact with our network of investors. Our European site, JLABS @ Beerse, is located at Janssen Pharmaceutica, one of our key Janssen R&D hubs in Belgium, where it is strategically embedded in our R&D ecosystem.

Importantly, companies who join JLABS do not have to have a collaboration with Johnson & Johnson, nor do they have to give up equity or any hard rights to their innovation. However, many JLABS resident companies who have benefited from the program choose to continue their relationship with Johnson & Johnson.

I should mention that the selection process to become a JLABS company is very rigorous, which also means that being part of it demonstrates to venture capital firms or other pharma companies that the company has received the right support and mentorship which aims to increase its chance

of being successful.

Since moving to Belgium is not an option for every startup company, we also offer a virtual residency model where companies can remain where they are and still benefit from the entire program. In addition, we offer a wide range of educational events which are free to attend for resident as well as non-resident companies on topics such as drug discovery, IP-related questions, business development and more. We are actively looking for more Swiss companies who want to benefit from JLABS, so come and join us!

The third activity is JJDC, our strategic venture capital arm, the oldest corporate venture capital company in the world. Through it, we provide venture and equity funding to startup companies within our strategic focus areas.

These three pillars of Johnson & Johnson Innovation provide a one-stop shop for entrepreneurs on their journey from “bench to bedside”, i.e. from a game-changing discovery in the laboratory to providing the next generation of healthcare solutions for patients worldwide.

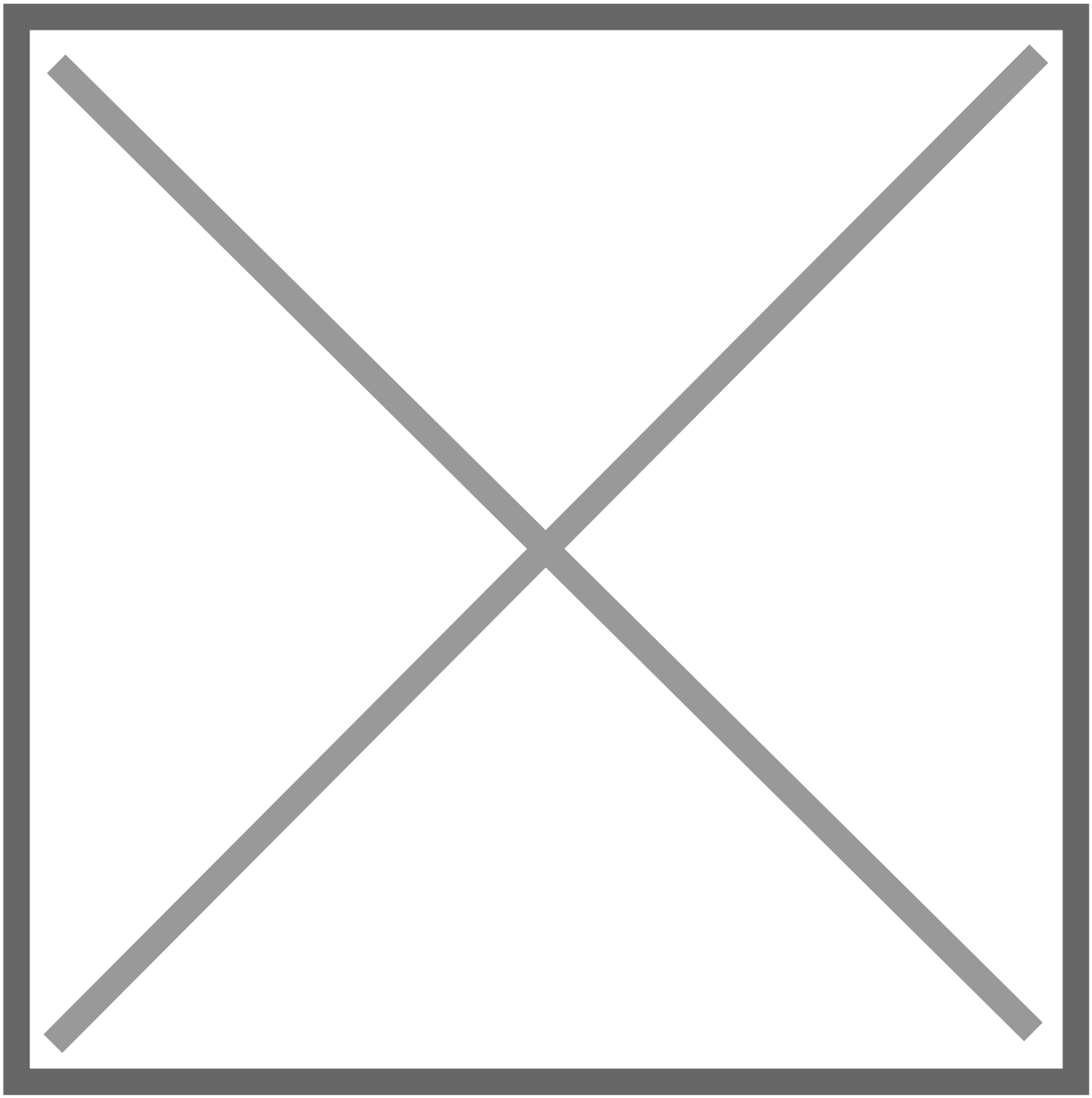
Are you trying to nurture those conversations with companies that are developing projects in areas that Johnson & Johnson is involved with or is the focus broader than that?

We look for companies and projects from a very early stage. We have a number of collaborations with universities in Switzerland, Europe and globally, starting from the academic labs, where professors and staff come up with great ideas and technologies. We might collaborate with them for a certain amount of time, we might support them through financing and expertise, and then see how it develops. Several such early-stage collaborations have already developed into successful collaborations and licensing transactions.

Our primary objective, of course, is looking for collaborations in areas that we understand; companies that somewhat fall in our areas of interest because that is where we can help, where we can really offer support. Nevertheless, our areas of interest are broader than almost any other healthcare company, covering our three business sectors in pharmaceuticals, medical devices and consumer health

We have dedicated teams for every therapeutic area or business interest at the London Innovation Center, including oncology, immunology, infectious diseases and vaccines, neuroscience, cardiovasccular, metabolism and renal disease, pulmonary hypertension and vision care; in

medical devices we are interested in a number of aspects of orthopedics and surgery support; and finally, our consumer care team is looking for a broad selection of self care and skin health. In addition, we have cross-sector initiatives in lung cancer, colorectal cancer and microbiome and Global Public Health, just to name a few. Our team members are subject matter experts who fully understand their field and can properly evaluate opportunities for partnerships and collaborations, always with the company's strategic direction in mind but also with an open mind to search for new opportunities where innovation may be.



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In terms of venture capital operations, as part of a huge corporation, how is Johnson & Johnson able to be as close to companies as an independent venture capital firm would?

Our venture capital arm has a strategic focus which means that our main interest is not the mere financial return on investment but rather helping companies be successful. Therefore, our investment window is perhaps longer than that of Venture Capital firms that are mainly looking for a more near term Return on Investment. We can also provide additional support and expertise.

My advice to startups is to select their venture capital partners carefully and ensure they are open to providing the level of support and advice they require.

Switzerland is certainly one of the key innovation hotspots in the world and has led the World Intellectual Property Index for ten years in a row. But how does that robust ecosystem translate into successful biotech companies?

Switzerland is one of the leading places in the world for innovation and has an excellent academic ecosystem with several Universities and hospitals consistently ranked within the top institutions globally. Additionally, Switzerland is an attractive workplace, at least in part because of the quality of life, infrastructure, stable political system and economic strength, as well as the talent pool, in particular in the life sciences.

Venture capital investments have also been strong here, with over two billion Swiss Francs being invested across industries in 2020.

Now, how does that innovation translate into healthcare companies? First of all, it is relatively easy to start a company here because there are excellent incubation space and funding opportunities available, both from the public and private sectors.

However, there is a certain gap towards bringing a startup company to the next level of success. One could name a couple of reasons that could help close this gap: Academic researchers could talk to pharma companies about their research and initiate collaborations earlier on.

Another factor is perhaps we need to see more successful serial entrepreneurs in Switzerland who have demonstrated that they can take an idea from the research laboratory to reach patients and who can therefore attract Venture Capital at a level that is competitive globally.

One thing is certain, startup companies will almost always need partners on their way to success, from either pharma companies or Venture Capital, and often from both. The reason is that young startup companies do not enjoy the resources to have the chemists, biologist, engineers and so on like a global healthcare company does. They are restrained in resources, which is where Johnson & Johnson Innovation can come in and help.

The world of corporate innovation is rather large and competitive today. What is Johnson & Johnson's unique selling point?

On one hand, Johnson & Johnson is a large international company but perhaps people do not know how large our footprint is here in Switzerland. We have 5,700 direct jobs in Switzerland, including employees and contractors in nine sites and eight cantons, which makes Johnson & Johnson one of the largest foreign employers in Switzerland, not only in healthcare but across industries. 700 of these colleagues are working in Research & Development jobs, which makes Switzerland a key location for Johnson & Johnson in our search for the next generation of medicines and medical devices.

What is special about Johnson & Johnson is that we are very much driven by our Credo, which provides us a framework for, on one hand, look for the best next generation of healthcare solutions for patients, but at the same time take responsibility for our employees, their families, doctors and nurses, and the communities that we work and live in.

To support that framework, we have a number of initiatives in Switzerland and across the globe, focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion. We have regular training and programs to support LGBT+ rights and initiatives, as well as a very international workforce, with over 90 nationalities in Switzerland.

We also have a number of programs to support return to the workforce for people who have had a career break for over two years, and a strong focus on talent development for women in the workplace, in particular leadership positions, not to mention programs to support families through generous paid maternity and paternity leave.

Moreover, Johnson & Johnson has a number of long-standing activities and collaborations with the Swiss Red Cross and the Special Olympics, which we are sponsoring. That is a framework that helps us be good corporate citizens. These initiatives have earned us a TOP Employer certificate in Switzerland, which we are very proud of.

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