

Sourcing innovation, strategically ^[1]

Discovery ^[2]

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Looking for the latest trends in biotech? Phil Gotwals has answers. In his former role focused on searching for and evaluating external science and technology at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR), he laughingly called himself a “personal shopper” for scientists looking for innovative ways to discover new medicines.

Now Head of Business Development and Licensing (BD&L) at NIBR, Gotwals is thinking more strategically. His eyes are still on the trends, but he’s also delving deeply into the science already in play at NIBR to guide thinking about which of those new trends to pursue and how – in an existing internal program or through a business alliance.

“We want to have a long enough line of sight to the opportunities that are coming in to NIBR so that we can start to prioritize within and across our existing discovery and early development programs,” says Gotwals.



Phil Gotwals pursued a Ph.D. in fruit fly genetics before the genome of any living organism

had been sequenced.

An eye for the avant-garde has been in Gotwals' makeup from the start. He pursued a Ph.D. in fruit fly genetics before the genome of any living organism had been sequenced. He did so because genetic experiments can be so definitive. Remove a gene from an organism and learn without question its role in biology. These studies form the foundation for thinking about human disease and medical interventions today.

Here, Gotwals talks about science, the search for innovation, and his strategy for BD&L.

Were you always interested in science?

Going back to my undergraduate days, I was interested in pursuing two things: music and science. To make a long story short, science won. I still sing and play the horn some. I try to do a little music. It's in my soul.

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Phil Gotwals, Head BD&L for research at Novartis

After earning a Ph.D. in genetics, what inspired you to choose a career in industry?

As a postdoctoral fellow in academia, I was working to understand a very specific type of molecule called an integrin that can play a role in multiple diseases. By working with our pharmaceutical company collaborators, I got an introduction to the kind of science that was going on in industry.

I learned that scientists working in industry actually generate potential therapeutics to these molecules and test to see if they help people with disease. Once I understood that, I never looked back.

What brought you to Novartis?



Phil Gotwals, Head of Business Development and Licensing for research. Photo by Fidelis Onwubueke.

I heard about NIBR in 2003 or so. I was completely sold on the mission. I liked the idea of getting to know as quickly as possible whether an experimental medicine is going to benefit patients. I was determined to join the organization when the right opportunity arose.

When I joined NIBR in 2009, there was no immuno-oncology group, but there was a strong desire to enter the space in a competitive way. I helped build the foundations of our immuno-oncology research team, which now not only has delivered approved therapies but also has a pipeline of projects.

Why are strategic alliances important in drug discovery and development?

There's no possible way a single institution, even one the size of NIBR, can encompass all the potential innovative ideas. By opening ourselves up to the world, and then being smart and strategic about how we source innovation, we're going to have a much better chance of fulfilling our promise to get the best medicines to patients efficiently.

You worked in search and evaluation, looking for technologies for Novartis to invest in. Which do you like better, search or evaluation?

I like them both, but primarily I like to search. Aside from NIBR, there are very few places where you're allowed to look globally for innovation and know we're capable of bringing some of these ideas in. It's inspiring.

Do you use your science background in the business

development field?

You really can't do search and evaluation without a scientific background. All the people on that team have Ph.D.s, and most have postdoc and research experience. You also have to have a taste for business.

What is your strategy moving forward as Head of BD&L at NIBR?

A few years ago, we focused our energy on responding to opportunities that came to us. In the past few years, we've become more strategic, with a focus on looking globally for opportunities that align with the strategic priorities for the company and picking the best investments.

The next step in that evolution is to be able to foresee the top opportunities that will potentially come to NIBR in the next six to nine months. That way we can start to prioritize. We can also factor in our existing portfolio and internal research programs.

We're also starting to look further ahead. What new science or technology is going to hit in five to 10 years that we really need to be thinking about now?

One of NIBR President Jay Bradner's priorities is to open the framework for science at NIBR. Is that happening?

Opening the framework will be an ongoing initiative. I don't know that we'll ever say we reached the right equilibrium because it probably will change over time.

NIBR has a strong reputation for both research and clinical science. A lot of external innovators come to us because they get great advice from us. We're happy to have discussions, even with innovators we probably won't do a deal with, because sometimes those conversations lead to new ideas.

We want to engage with the outside world.

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Main image by Fidelis Onwubueke.

Tags:

[Innovation](#) ^[3]

[Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research](#) ^[4]

[Working at Novartis](#) ^[5]

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Links

[1] <https://www.novartis.us/stories/discovery/sourcing-innovation-strategically>

[2] <https://www.novartis.us/stories/discovery>

[3] <https://www.novartis.us/tags/innovation>

[4] <https://www.novartis.us/tags/novartis-institutes-biomedical-research>

[5] <https://www.novartis.us/tags/working-novartis>