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Corporate culture is extremely important

Birgit Krenn, recently appointed Head of the "Manufacturing Science & Technology" (MS&T) business division at VTU, on her training, her tasks and the role of gender stereotypes in working life

Birgit Krenn has been working for VTU since 2007 and was instrumental in establishing the MS&T division. In 2015, the biotech expert assumed the position of Group Manager and began to establish MS&T teams across the countries in the DACH region. Today, almost 40 employees work in this division, which has seen above-average growth since 2020, particularly as a result of the intensive support provided to the key producers of COVID-19 vaccines in the expansion of their production facilities. As Division Manager, Krenn will be responsible for further development of the MS&T portfolio as well as opening up new markets and will drive the further development of specialist teams in all VTU country subsidiaries



Birgit Krenn, Head of Manufacturing Science & Technology

You have taken over management of the "Manufacturing Science & Technology" (MS&T) business division. What is its job?

We focus on consulting and completion of projects in the biopharmaceutical and pharmaceutical field of "Chemistry, Manufacturing, Control" (CMC). In particular, we work on CMCPhase 3 projects relating to process characterisation, process validation and technology transfers, as well as providing support in the development sector. We manage development sub-projects for the manufacturing process or analytics or provide support in data analysis and documentation. Some clients also just want advice and coaching to improve their operational processes.

What are the key criteria for success on the path from process development to commercialisation of a product?

The highly regulated environment and the high risk of failure which accompanies a project to the very end are certainly particular to the pharmaceutical industry. A bad read-out from clinical trials can stop a project on a daily basis, even though everyone is working flat out on it. As in all industries, the key to success is a good product, of course, as well as speed and



the associated good risk management, along with a platform which is a well-established as possible.

You have also supported producers of COVID-19 vaccines with this portfolio of services. What was the particular challenge here?

The speed of the projects has exceeded everything we have seen before. In addition, although we had less time than usual, we also had to define new strategies, for example for the implementation of regulatory requirements, which are not yet as clearly discussed for mRNA vaccines as they are for long-established product types. The raw materials market then also plays a trick or two

Are the tasks in the field of MS&R changing, as far as the pharmaceutical sector is concerned, due to new forms of therapy (for example, more complex vaccines, gene and cell therapy products, etc.)?

That is certainly true. Each product class has its own specific requirements and challenges.

CR: How was the MS&T sector organized before a separate business division was established?

Previously, MS&T was a group of our company in Austria. When the decision was made to establish MS&T in all group countries, a decision was also made to create a separate business division.

CR: How do your tasks as a division manager differ compared to your previous job?

I am responsible for a larger team, a wider geographical area and a broader range of clients. In addition, there is a more intensive strategic exchange with the corporate functions and other business divisions

What was your path through education and how has your career progressed so far to reach your current position?

I studied technical chemistry at Graz University of Technology, specialising in biotechnology. After working in research start-ups and at Fresenius Kabi, I moved to VTU where I joined an established business division. After a few years, I started to build up the MS&T sector.

What motivated you to pursue a scientific and technical education and a career as an engineer?

My talents were relatively even across the board. I enjoyed mathematics as much as art and literature. So de facto I could have studied everything. On the one hand, financial independence, and therefore an industry with solid prospects for the future, were important to me. On the other hand, I have always appreciated the intellectual challenge. And chemistry was my worst subject at school.

CR: Was it important for you to have other women as role models? Or do you think that gender doesn't play such a big role when it comes to acting as a role model?

I do not have any specific role models, because I am convinced that individuals are not responsible for successes. I find much more systemic connections Images: VTU and am therefore interested in the interactions between individual personality, social environment and society, as well as technological or environmental factors for example and try to understand them. In general, role models are crucial for development, of course, as we all



take our cues from others – but as one influencing factor among many, e.g. a social environment that promotes women and their careers. There are both women and men in my personal and professional environment whose opinion and advice I value greatly. In addition, good books always leave their mark on me; recently, for example, Anna Burns' novel "Milkman" and Jenny Odell's analysis "How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy".

Did you sometimes feel that, as a woman in a male domain, you had to work harder or be more perfectly prepared?

Above all, I have the impression of constantly having to deal with stereotypical prejudices about what I can or cannot do or what I want or don't want. That also takes energy and joie de vivre.

Some argue against quotas for women because only expertise should count when filling positions. What do you think?

Expertise also counts when appointments are made according to a quota. There is simply an additional rule that people should not only pick people with expertise and of male gender. The current leadership elites are predominantly made up of a social cohort – the famous "old white man". These leaders have not yet managed to build up and employ female talent to a sufficient extent. This has a negative impact on women, but also on companies, which are desperately looking for qualified management personnel. Obviously, the leaders need additional measures for support. Whether quotas are the best measure for this is probably better judged by experts in social sciences.

How important do you think structures in companies that explicitly make equal treatment an issue are?

What is your experience with the corporate culture at VTU in this respect? The corporate culture is extremely important. Very few leaders want to put women at a disadvantage, and they certainly do not want to harm their companies. It is therefore important to make people aware of the processes and, above all, the subconscious decisions that hold women's careers back in the long run.

There are deliberations about creating separate educational formats for women in technical subjects because men are otherwise too dominant in these educational paths, especially at a young age.

Single-sex education can give women a break from men, who very often claim the attention of the teachers all for themselves. As a woman, I would find it pleasant if I could access some single-sex educational modules in a predominantly mixed degree programme. But it seems even more important to me to increase the mix of students and teachers in technical degree programmes, i.e. in terms of gender, social background, lifestyle and nationality, for example. If I find people in an area who are similar to me and who I can make friends with, then I am more likely to go there. This means that STEM subjects become more interesting for everyone.

CR: Do you think that teams that include both men and women have advantages over those in which only one of the two genders is represented?

Diversity is a scientifically proven success factor. And working in a mixed environment is also more fun.