

Reaping the Full Benefits of Collaborations

As your collaborations increase, good management practices make sure they pay off.

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Collaborating with outside researchers has one benefit no one overlooks—free data. Outside academic investigators (who are almost never paid) give your company access to a range experimental models that limited research budgets can never match internally.

On the face of it, collaborating should be a snap. Collaborators sign Material Transfer Agreements, you ship the reagents, they do the experiments, you get the data. What's complicated about that?

The complications set in as collaborations increase. Even a small company may have five or ten collaborations. Immunex, my former company, had about 900 at the time it was bought by Amgen. At Immunex it was not unusual, for example, to have 20 or more collaborations in order to test one molecule in a wide variety of cancer models.

Simply because they become so many, collaborations inevitably must be managed in order to reap maximum benefits from free data. Collaborators have to be contacted regularly. The quality of their data must be assured. The data must be quickly delivered to those in the company who need it, examined for patent opportunities, and stored for easy retrieval. Straightforward as that sounds, without a system for managing collaborations, it may be more than your scientists can effectively accomplish as they are stretched thin between research responsibilities and mounting requirements for collaboration oversight.

The Other Benefits

Of course, the benefits of free data really depend on how it is used. It is worth recalling ways in which collaborations make companies more successful.

Collaborations Can Speed Development Decisions. The faster you learn about your molecules, the easier it is to decide which ones to take into clinical trials and manufacturing. Patents on your molecules have a limited lifetime, so rapid decisions on clinical utility have a clear economic benefit. Good collaborations make learning faster, so decisions come sooner and time-to-market shrinks.

Multiple Collaborations Help When Time Is Critical. When it is essential to obtain data without delay, it may be advisable to have multiple collaborations involving similar but qualitatively different experimental models. Many companies hesitate to set up such collaborations, for there is a danger of losing collaborators' goodwill when they in effect compete to deliver data. But when the need is critical, multiple collaborations can be established in an ethical manner. The key is honesty about what you are doing and why. Treat your collaborators with respect and they will understand.

Collaborations May Reveal New Indications. The diversity of experimental models available through collaborations enhances the probability of discovering new molecular functions, or conversely, revealing potential development, dosage, or safety problems. Broader understanding of a molecule's biology brings better understanding of development options.

But one of the greatest benefits is that collaborations outside your area of biological expertise may reveal new indications. With clinical trial success so difficult to achieve, having a second or third indication tremendously increases chances of eventual regulatory approval. Witness Enbrel, which failed in Immunex's clinical trials for Crohn's disease. Rheumatoid arthritis, which made Enbrel a billion-dollar drug, was originally only an alternate indication verified with help from collaborators.

Collaborations Can Increase Intellectual Property. Collaborations should always contribute to your research group's patent filings. Effective collaboration management identifies discoveries made by collaborators and notifies patent attorneys before patentability is lost by public disclosure.

Publishing With Collaborators Enhances Your Scientific Reputation. Manuscripts published with collaborators demonstrate your scientific leadership and heighten awareness of your pipeline molecules progressing through development. Venture capitalists and investment bankers highly regard publications as evidence of scientific credibility.

Collaborations Can Attract Scientific Talent. Ambitious young scientists always try to attach themselves to scientific leaders. Publications with collaborators and talks your staff are invited to give at meetings will raise your scientific profile and make recruiting top-notch talent easier. In addition, your collaborators will often recommend your company to their younger colleagues searching for positions.

Collaborations Can Build Relationships That Speed Clinical Progress. Collaborations with thought leaders establish relationships that often lead to clinical studies conducted by these same experts. Progress from pre-clinical to clinical research accelerates through the influence of their reputations, their greater resources, and the quality of their work. Moreover, the need to educate different investigators about your molecule decreases. A strong collaboration program can establish relationships with investigators and institutions worldwide.

Collaborations Attract New Opportunities. As a leader in your field, outside investigators may approach your company about helping them in new projects. It is not only your scientific reputation that attracts them, however. Very likely they checked with some of your collaborators and heard you have a reputation for fairness.

Summary. There are compelling benefits for extending research capabilities through collaborations. But dozens of questions large and small arise as collaborations increase. What is the best way to disseminate the data? What is the best way to store it? Who has the authority to launch collaborations? How should we handle collaborations that are unproductive? What if a collaborator violates our agreement? Effective answers exist and are the basis for good collaboration management.

Putting in place efficient practices to keep the benefits of collaborations from slipping away is affordable for every company, even small ones. It is the best way to make sure the right people see the data at the right time, so that drug development decisions on which success depends can be the very best.