



Insights from
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Leadership in Biotech: What does it take and how women can thrive in this disruptive industry?

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Life sciences is an incredibly broad field, with a wide range of science domains and ranging from diagnosis to treatment. Even within seemingly similar sectors like biotech and pharma, leadership demands vary significantly.

While both industries are anchored in innovation and scientific rigor, the competencies needed for effective leadership are distinctly different. Understanding these nuances is essential for selecting and developing effective leaders.

In biotech, the pace of disruption and constant innovation defines a unique set of leadership demands:

Visionary Agility:

Biotech leaders must navigate a rapidly evolving landscape in the early stages of medicine development, where new scientific discoveries and technologies continuously reshape the industry. It's about seeing what's possible and moving swiftly to make it real.

Scientific depth

Unlike pharma, which often prioritizes established processes and large-scale commercialization, biotech leadership requires a foundational understanding of cutting-edge science and its potential to redefine traditional paradigms.

Entrepreneurial expertise

Biotech leaders often need to manage fundraising, resource allocation, and lead smaller, highly specialized teams. This contrasts sharply with the more structured environments typical of large pharmaceutical companies.

These differences make biotech leadership highly specialised. Competencies that are valued in pharma—such as managing large-scale operations—might not be directly transferable to biotech.

In some cases, traits that excel in one sector may even hinder effectiveness in the other. This is why leadership selection in biotech needs a tailored approach.

The gender gap in biotech leadership

For women aspiring to lead in biotech, these industry-specific demands present both challenges and opportunities. Women currently make up 40-50% of the biotech workforce in regions like the UK, US, and Europe, yet hold only about 20% of leadership roles (e.g. CEO, CFO, CSO). This disparity reflects broader systemic barriers, and also emphasises the need for targeted support to help women gain the specific tools and networks required for biotech leadership.



How women can thrive in biotech leadership

From the perspective of an Executive Search Consultant specialized in life sciences, the gap is seen as an actionable challenge. Women in biotech already bring ambition and talent to the table, so it is crucial to employ strategies that support these qualities:

Proactive career planning

Women should identify gaps in their experience and actively seek opportunities to build the right competencies. A conscious approach to career development is key to moving into leadership roles.

Networking with intent

It is essential for women to connect meaningfully by sharing insights, gaining visibility, and building relationships that support career growth. This is especially true in the biotech sector, where interdisciplinary collaboration is at the core of success.

Industry-specific mentorship

Aligning aspiring leaders with mentors who understand the unique demands of biotech can make a real difference. This guidance helps bridge the gap between ambition and the specific skills needed in this complex industry.

A strategic imperative for diverse leadership

Diverse leadership isn't just about equity; it's a strategic necessity. Biotech is a disruptive, high-stakes industry that thrives on innovation and new perspectives. To meet global healthcare challenges and drive meaningful advancements, we need a full spectrum of voices at the leadership table.

The Executive Search industry plays an important role in implementing diverse leadership. By understanding the specific demands of each industry and supporting aspiring professionals as they build their careers, we can help to nurture a new generation of leaders who are ready to guide biotech into the future.



Kristina Vaivadaite is a Client Partner in the Life Sciences & Healthcare Practice Group at Pedersen & Partners. With two decades of Executive Search expertise, she has successfully led over 500 senior-level search assignments.

As a key member of the global Life Sciences & Healthcare Practice Group, Ms. Vaivadaite collaborates with clients across the sector to deliver strategic executive search solutions that support their global, regional, and local growth objectives. Her extensive experience includes C-level placements across industries such as Life Sciences, Consumer Goods, Industrial, Technology, and Financial Services, spanning Europe, Asia, and the United States.

Ms. Vaivadaite holds a Master's degree in Psychology from Vilnius University and has earned a Professional Board Member certification from the Baltic Institute of Corporate Governance (BICG). In addition to her native Lithuanian, she is fluent in English and Russian.

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