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IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Dr Vernon Harten-Ash, Chief Executive Officer, Harten Group

1) Why is Cambridge such a good base from which to operate your kind of business?

The East of England is one of the leading clusters for pharma/biotech worldwide. It's a dynamic region with global players and entrepreneurial start-ups co-existing side by side. This means that there are highly talented people with good ideas. Sometimes they need help to take their businesses forward and that's where we come in - providing specialist expertise as and when needed. It may be access to a team of consultants to optimise a new business idea or finding a Key Opinion Leader in a rare therapy area.

2) Have the biotech and pharmaceutical sectors matured in the time you have been working here and if so, in what ways?

Yes, both have matured significantly. Ten years ago, it wasn't unusual for a young biotech team to present to investors dressed in jeans. Things have changed noticeably and the need to attract hard-to-secure investment has resulted in more senior players being involved to give reassurance to investors.

Similarly, the infrastructure within and around Cambridge has developed massively, with many science and business parks housing a broad range of successful healthcare and biotech companies which collectively give a 'critical mass' to the area.

The local rail and road routes have also improved in this time especially to London, although more needs to be achieved. The new guided bus track and service also holds promise of the ability to develop further to the north west.

3) Do you think there is further growth potential in the cluster looking globally?

This area is recognised globally as an intellectual engine, an impressive generator of concepts, technologies and talented entrepreneurial people to stimulate these developments. One of the current challenges is to secure the other ingredients of the business mix - finance, business infrastructure and market access - to come to the region rather than risk the talent and the ideas disappearing to other parts of the world more attractive to them.

Without doubt there is further potential for growth. Cambridge is a global brand, attracting inward investment from both VCs and large pharma, for example the recent investment into Heptares (£21 million) and the establishment of Pfizer's regenerative medicine facility here.

We need to keep our eye on the ball throughout this economic downturn and ensure that, as recovery begins, Cambridge can retain the talent and ideas being generated to establish and grow further businesses here. While the market can provide much, local and national government need to be proactive and positive if the region is to continue to grow.



4) What difference to the local cluster's strength have the recent surges in BioMedical capability and healthcare innovation made?

The East of England now boasts a mature infrastructure to support entrepreneurs and fledgling companies. Innovation continues to flourish with new companies being formed not just as University spin-outs but also from the efforts of the growing number of serial entrepreneurs here in the region.

I would say that at present the major hurdle facing all healthcare companies, not just those in the region, is the lack of capital to drive development and innovation forward.

Despite the major advances in capability, mature management teams and indeed some of the most savvy biotech angels in Europe, we are in a position where over 78 per cent of biotechnology companies are struggling to raise funds (BIA press release 2009).

This is clearly having an impact on companies' ability to grow - yet despite this, we continue to see success stories in this region.

5) Why is the region so proficient in 'recycling' biotech-related jobs?

The good news is that there are lots of job opportunities now for people in the region. It is viable to stay here, develop a career and see your family grow up, using local provision for schools, healthcare, culture and sporting facilities. This often appears to be the case for those from overseas considering a move to the UK or indeed Europe generally; Cambridge is seen as a good stepping stone into the country.

The bad news is that strangely this is still not so obvious to key players in the sector who work in other areas of the country. Maidenhead/Slough and West and Central London hold key supplies of talent. Some people are

often against moving to the Cambridge area for a range of reasons. Some feel we still appear isolated, detached from large-scale enterprise and without the commercial critical mass seen in those parts.

6) To what extent are local bio and pharma companies recruiting from international talent pools these days?

The usual intent of local, leading bio and pharma companies is to recruit wherever the talent is best. International searches are often considered early in the process. They usually start informally and often involve international contacts and colleagues.

Such intent may then get translated into formal 'campaigns or recruitment plans', which may become limited internally by money, time and knowledge of, or access to, media platforms internationally. Also visa and working permit regulations can inhibit the process as a result of uncertainty over a successful outcome. The net result of these limitations is that informal and formal recruitment exercises may both miss talent that should be attracted to the region.

7) What are the advantages and drawbacks of taking on staff from other global territories?

There are a number of advantages. Simply by spreading the net wider, more talent will be available to a company and through the recruitment process different possibilities may emerge, on outsourcing, methods of development or manufacture, ways of achieving the same goal in different ways.

The value of having different cultures within a central function or office can also become apparent when trading internationally. Disadvantages include the time it can take to recruit from abroad, unless the person is currently in the UK working in a way

Harten Group was founded by Dr Vernon Harten-Ash to offer a specialist resourcing service to the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, including VC-funded start-ups. Services on offer include interim management, pharmaceutical consulting and permanent recruitment.

Over the last 15 years, the Cambridge-based company has established a 2,000-strong network of highly qualified and experienced consultants who work on assignments with UK-based offices of global companies, as well as businesses located across Europe and the US.

After qualifying, Dr Vernon Harten-Ash practised as a Medical Officer in the Royal Navy before joining the pharmaceutical industry and becoming Medical Director. He studied for an MBA in the US, worked as a consultant and set up the company in 1994.

which can simply be extended to a useful duration of 18 months or two years minimum or the person is already allowed permanent residence.

Meanwhile other candidates, who may not have the best talents but their working status is known, may overtake the international candidate in terms of attractiveness.

Recruiting internationally can also be more expensive and employee costs may be higher when factoring in relocation. Last but not least there's cultural fit, which can be hard to predict.

8) For what specific roles does Harten receive most call to fill - in terms of individuals or teams?

Harten Group specialises in high value projects, where the cost of failure can be very high, which can prove to be the difficult ones. An example may be useful.

A client has 30 days to determine whether they should purchase a set of products from another manufacturer who wishes to divest. The price asked was in the many tens of millions. Twelve key skills sets were identified for the project to be successful; the client at day zero had five.

Seven, including international medical, scientific, regulatory affairs, sales and marketing and project management were provided by us. The conclusion was not to buy and they didn't. If we had got that wrong the cost of failure could have been very high, putting the entire company at risk.

9) What advantages does interim management hold over permanent provision?

Interim recruitment can be better for some assignments. It's faster than permanent recruitment which can take three to five months from start to the person joining.

Qualified and experienced interims can be making an effective contribution very quickly - within 10 working days is the norm. With interims, you can access specific skill sets required by a particular assessment, report or piece of high-value critical thinking or contact making.

An interim, working over a short period of time, perhaps for a limited number of days will make a significant difference, easily measurable in financial terms. Interims are also highly focused, with no office politics or

administrative responsibility and provide an objective view, a fresh approach which may result in a different method or a good opportunity which might have been overlooked.

The cost, or more precisely 'cost per task', when directed or focussed correctly, can be hugely more efficient than the slower, time-consuming permanent route.

10) What has been the most tricky - or challenging - assignment in your experience and which (it may well be different) has given you most satisfaction?

We were called in by a top-five pharma company to assist with the introduction of new medical technology which had not been progressing to plan. It became tricky once we realised that the cause for the stall was human - actually the case in 70 per cent of such consulting assignments - and what was even trickier was that the person concerned was the senior manager who had personally selected us for the project!

How to help him discover that he needed to move on and yet support the company and the project? Several tricky internal meetings followed!

Fifteen months later I met him at a conference accidentally. He said: 'Did you know that I was moved from that job? I am now back in charge of X&Y. I am so much happier and feel I can contribute to the company again. Thank you so much for what you said and did!'

At the end of last year, a client's Regulatory Inspection loomed. The previous year's had failed; the original UK management team had left disaffected and international support from head office had failed to materialise. Product licences were at risk.

Could we provide the person or the team within one to three months? A senior specialist was sent to the company to work onsite within nine days and gradually the true extent of the problems began to emerge.

A project team of three was assembled: to manage the day job, map the way forward, plan for and undertake permanent recruitment for 2009.

The inspection has now taken place. The results were excellent, the inspectors openly impressed and the new recruits on board. The client 'sleeps better now.'