



Christopher P. Austin

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When you climb Everest, get a guide

When Christopher Austin arrived at Merck with a Harvard medical degree in hand, he thought he knew everything. He soon learned there were hundreds of people there working in a new research field as yet unknown to him.

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Years later, when he arrived at the National Institutes of Health, he again discovered that “I didn’t know what I didn’t know” about this vast agency with incredible reach and scientific impact.

Austin, a neuropsychiatric specialist, began working at Merck in 2002 in its new human genetics department. The race was on to identify genes that could be targets for new drug development. But the secrets of the genome would not be revealed quickly enough. –

“We thought the scales would fall from our eyes and we would understand all there was to know about treating diseases as soon as we had this book of life in our hands,” he recalls. But the task was more difficult. “Merck was a wonderful, preeminent

drug development company, but it could not invest in the long-term understanding of the genome I thought was necessary to catalyze that knowledge to improve human health.”

As he was considering career alternatives, Austin attended NIH’s National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) conference. Francis Collins, then head of the institute and now director of NIH, told Austin that the 300 genes he was focusing on at Merck were only a fraction of the entire genome. Collins asked Austin if he would like to come to NIH to “help us figure out what to do with the genome—that literally was his job offer. I still remember that because I thought, ‘that is either the silliest thing I’ve ever heard or it’s the greatest job offer in the history of science.’ I’ve always been attracted to big problems, and this is only going to happen once in human history.”

Austin learned the influence of NIH was tremendous. “I underestimated the impact, the convening ability, the fact that when NIH speaks, people listen,” says Austin. “I wish I had appreciated how big the opportunity was when I first got here. NIH is a pretty magical place, and it took me a while to figure that out.”

“When you make a move,” he advises, “assume you don’t know how the new organization works. Get a buddy. Don’t try climbing Everest without a guide, because you will run into grief.”

Austin was initially hired to infuse industry and academic culture into NIH, deemed essential for understanding the vast amount of data from the Human Genome Project. As that project

reached completion, he became the first director of NIH’s National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). The job required him to devise a better discovery-to-product translation process, unencumbered by the different constraints of academia or the pharmaceutical industry.

“I thought if I could develop this process, it would have an enormous impact on everybody because it would make clinical translation more efficient and effective and logical and innovative—like going from what sometimes feels like astrology or a Ouija board to engineering,” he says.

Austin incorporated team-, deliverable-, therapeutic-, and impact-on-people-based models. “What we’ve been able to

do at NCATS is merge the creativity of academia and the deliverable-based culture of industry. It’s dynamite, and it’s unusual.”

Austin’s experience in both sectors provided the perfect background for the job. “When you make a cross-sector move, what the sector wants is your unique experience that’s different from what they have now,” he says.

Austin’s advice:

- **Spend time in industry**, especially academics who want to understand drug discovery. He similarly advises those from academia or industry to spend some time working in government to learn how regulators think.
- **Become multiskilled**. That’s in opposition to the narrowly-focused way medical and doctoral students are trained to think. “If you view that (advanced degree training) as a learning opportunity for how to think, that’s great,” says Austin. “If you think that’s all you have to know for your career to flourish, you are mistaken.”
- **Mid-career, take a break**. Austin cautions that science is like a subway train: if you’re standing on the platform, it will pass you by. He advises a sabbatical to go somewhere totally different. “Do it because it will keep you fresh.”

While job security is an attractive aspect of government jobs, a surprising proportion of federal workers are on limited timeframe contracts. At NCATS, only about half the staff are General Schedule (GS) employees. All institute directors,

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including Austin, are term employees.

“Did I worry about job security when I came here? No, I didn’t.” Austin says most of the people working at NIH NCATS are

highly trained scientists and clinicians with a focus on impact and bringing value to their country. With that perspective, job security takes care of itself. “You can blow the doors off of the field if you have a whole organization made of people like that.”

Austin tells people to think big about their career aspirations. Austin had to build his own program with no employees or budget. “And here I am, 18 years later, running an almost billion-dollar organization, doing what I came here to do,” he says.

“The places I had been before NIH were wonderful places. Harvard is a wonderful place, and it thought it was the center of the universe. Merck also thought it was the center of the pharmaceutical and science universe. And in a lot of ways, it is. But neither of them is: NIH is. The view that you have from the top and the ability to influence is enormous. And that’s been unbelievably gratifying.”

“It’s the Crystal Palace. It’s where the Wizard of Oz lives.” ∞

Editor’s note: Since this interview was conducted, Christopher Austin has made another move across sectors. He is now CEO-partner at Flagship Pioneering, a life science platforms company in Cambridge, MA.

