



Wendi Yajnik

Global Head of Academic Partnerships and External Innovation at Novartis Institutes for Biomedical Research (NIBR)

Explore to feed curiosity

Sometimes a career gives you everything you want, year in and year out. But then, something changes. You get curious about how things work in other sectors. You start to feel wanderlust, and you thirst for new knowledge. You begin to explore beyond the periphery of your current environment.

That's what happened to Wendi Yajnik. She loved being at Brigham and Women's Hospital, bridging the gap between academic and industry scientists. But after 18 years (and after seeing her twins celebrate their 16th birthday), she realized it was time for a change. She was free to travel and learn

YAJNIK'S ADVICE FOR THOSE LOOKING TO JUMP FROM ACADEMIA TO INDUSTRY: LEARN TRANSACTION SKILLS.

something new while using the skills she had honed in academic research and licensing.

Yajnik began exploring large biotech and pharmaceutical companies in Boston. Word got out that she was looking for a new opportunity, and headhunters began knocking on her door.

Sanofi was looking for someone to revamp collaborations with academia. "I knew the players (at Sanofi) and liked their philosophy and the leadership," says Yajnik. While mulling over a decision to accept a position there, she considered potential

drawbacks. Were they serious about their desire to change the status quo? Would she be able to "sell" her ideas to internal stakeholders? In the end, the natural fit with the position overcame her doubts.

At Sanofi, Yajnik indulged her wanderlust. She had teams in the U.S., Germany, and France. "I loved the global nature of it, of going to find science wherever the best science exists." And she discovered that when Sanofi said they wanted change, "they really meant it."

Yajnik discovered a different viewpoint about the role of technology transfer that she believes predominates in academia. "In academia, the technology licensing office provides a service to faculty to enable their individualized research program, whereas in pharma, we invest in discovery research that's really strategic and based on a robust research portfolio review. This serves to prioritize the company's scientific and business strategy," she explains. This difference was an important realization. She also notes that in academia, the action happens in early discovery/scientific exploration, while researchers in the pharmaceutical industry are focused on product development even in the early stages of research. "The cultures are different, and they have to be different," says Yajnik. "There's very good science that happens in academia, but I think the difference is scientists don't know how far away it is from a product. They're just not trained to look at drug development that way."

After more than three years at Sanofi, Yajnik took a position as global head of academic partnerships and external innovation at Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR). The company's president, Jay Bradner, also came from academia and was a strong proponent of bringing academic innovation

into the NIBR pipeline. He created the position with the vision of hiring someone who wore both hats and Yajnik fit the bill.

It takes time to build credibility in each new position. Her advice to anyone moving into an industry position is to "get to know the players, build credibility, become a resource"—and worry less about the minutia—like how many weeks' vacation you get—later. "They're just not as important in the long stretch."

Compensation in academia and industry "don't compare," says Yajnik. In industry, there are elements beyond the base salary

to consider, like bonuses and long- and short-term incentives. But she advises people to focus on the potential experience more than anything else. "The experience will pay for itself long term," she says. Her first business position, after taking a leave of absence from a tenure-track assistant professor from New York University Medical School for personal reasons, was as an entry-level licensing manager at Brigham and Women's technology licensing office. "That opportunity was everything and (pay) didn't matter," she emphasizes. Job security, she points out, can be an issue anywhere, even in academia. In industry, "once you get experience, the stability might not always be there, but opportunities will be."

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Yajnik's advice for those looking to jump from academia to industry:

- **Learn transaction skills.** She ran transaction teams at Brigham and Women's Hospital as well as at Sanofi and says the transaction skills she gained were essential for advancing her career.
- **Hone deal-making capabilities.** Yajnik recommends getting five years of academic experience getting to the deal first,

and then moving into an alliance management position in industry. "People who come out of academia are pretty good alliance managers because they not only understand the intellectual property, transactions and relational aspect of working with the principal investigator, they get to market the technology, they get to do the deal, and then they have to manage the deal," she explains.

"Each experience gives you something different," adds Yajnik. "That wealth of expertise is appreciated."

Sometimes, Yajnik wishes that she had made a move to industry sooner. "I'm enjoying it," she says. "Not that I didn't enjoy academia, but it's cool to see the technologies being developed. Moving through the research and development process is energizing."

"Leading change in an industry setting gave me opportunities that I would never have had in academia," says Yajnik. "Maybe I should have gotten out earlier to see what was going on, but I wouldn't change a thing at this point. It's been a great journey."

