

EU biotech CEOs and board members reflect on a turbulent 2020

Egon Zehnder rounded off 2020 with a final gathering of biotech CEOs and board members, who shared their reflections on a turbulent year. We started these forums in April 2020 to connect biotech leaders as the world and the industry faced an unprecedented crisis. As we closed the year, there was a degree of fatigue, but hope and optimism for the year ahead, and a desire to build on the unique opportunities that COVID-19 has also created.

Many leaders felt fatigued, highlighting a desire to re-energise and build further resilience

- Most participants observed that their teams were fatigued by 2020, and energy levels had dropped. Having to round off the year on Zoom was not anticipated earlier in 2020. Many employees are struggling with the lack of routine. “The mood is less optimistic, and it is becoming hard to keep up the energy levels—everyone has had enough”.
- They frequently cited the lack of downtime and expansion of the working day with virtual meetings. “[It] feels like you are running a primary care clinic, back to

back. If you are running behind five minutes for the first [meeting], you will be an hour late for the last one”.

- In the early days, as companies tried to establish a common sense of purpose, it was important to demonstrate that we were all in the same boat. One CEO started writing a personal blog to staff, rather than a corporate communications output; they observed that staff related well to their CEO showing a more human side. In meetings, there was more discussion on a personal level, as colleagues entered each other’s personal space.
- One US-based CEO of a UK company had managed to return to the UK during the summer respite period. They described the incredible feeling to be with people again; others noted how much this was missed in terms of fostering team spirit and creativity.
- There was a sense of apprehension from many leaders as to how they and their teams would manage under the continuation of lockdowns, restrictions and business interruptions, and a recognition that proactive support is needed to support people to maintain their energy.

Leaders did see some positives in the crisis, with the exponentially accelerated digital agenda, increased flexibility and openness from leaders, and more effective board relations

- Digital strategies and the internal and external day-to-day use of technology in some cases jumped ahead by as much as five years versus original plans.
 - One CEO noted: “The power of technology has surprised me. I had 300 people from 212 countries all together on Zoom”...“we have a very young team; we’ve done better as they are more used to having virtual discussions; older [team members] required a lot of energy to adapt. Maybe this new mode of meeting is more suited to the younger generation.”
 - Others highlighted the dramatic change in availability of digital interaction (video, email, photography) with physicians, particularly in primary care, where uptake was historically slow; this was seen as likely to be a permanent change.

- The use of technology and virtual approaches in a clinical trial setting was seen as another positive, with the ability to accelerate development programmes, as well as some flexibility shown by regulators.
- Hosting healthcare conferences virtually was one area where remote interaction was considered less successful. JP Morgan hosted its 2021 conference online, and while there were still deals to be done, the experience of being able to bring together a group of people from different companies and different disciplines is one missed by many.
- COVID-19 has highlighted opportunities for improving day-to-day operations: “You think you have good systems and processes but COVID-19 has put the spotlight on them and tested them to the limit...we have cracks, and things fall through those cracks.”
- Boards have increased their interaction with management teams, which has proven to be very helpful. One participant noted: “Board meetings have often convened when necessary, rather than when planned. That has been a very positive benefit”. CEOs typically now feel more comfortable reaching out to their board members for advice, and there was a sense board performance has improved.

Looking towards the future, leaders struggled with the level of uncertainty, but were optimistic about 2021

- As leaders prepare for a post-pandemic world, there is a lot of uncertainty to be factored in and it is difficult to appreciate the exact impact in each market.
 - As a group, leaders need to demonstrate optimism, but it should be grounded in realism.
 - Leaders were optimistic of meaningful improvement in the next 6-9 months, but recognized that, until a solution is found, it is still a significant global problem, even with current vaccination rollouts.
 - The challenges with vaccine supply chains were cited, and have been borne out following the approval of multiple vaccines.
- Many previous working norms have completely changed and leaders questioned how to embed some of the positive new routines.

- Is there a need for so much travel? It is now often seen as a waste of time and should only be used for situations where it is truly beneficial.
- Flexibility will endure, to varying degrees. “We have moved on from the notion that we need to work 9 to 5. There is now more of a mindset that outputs are what’s important.”
- At the same time, not everything works as well remotely; we will need a hybrid approach.
 - In meetings there have been some real advantages to remote working, but also obvious drawbacks: “Time in the meetings is quite wasteful, with a tendency to involve more people than is necessary.” “It is hard to achieve the same as you do in in-person meetings. Are people really listening on Zoom calls?”
 - One company had been in the process of relocating before the pandemic. With lockdown restrictions in place, operations had been completely virtual for four months, which worked surprisingly well.
 - As working from home has been more effective than expected, this may reduce the need for commercial space. One executive observed that their company pushed back increasing the size of premises for another year and had adjusted future plans.
- There was a consensus that progress on vaccines will deliver a big improvement through 2021, despite the challenges, and that it will be important to build on some of the positive changes seen in 2020.

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Covid-19 Micro-Website

We have launched a micro-website where this and other informative pieces are posted. This site will be regularly updated: [click here](#) for further details.

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