

Not your ordinary scientists: CR Competence AB

What motivated you to start CR Competence?

Anna Stenstam: To get a job. Me and my business partner had finished our PhD but couldn't get a job. We knew that the industries we applied for were interested in our knowledge – they needed and wanted the skills we offered, but they would rather hire an engineer than a PhD. We also realised that by using instruments at the universities, we could run advanced studies for industry with methods our clients often didn't even know would help them. At the same time, we believed it would help the universities having more experts around and that our usage could both inspire and make a better return on the large investments. Now of course the motivation is to help others.

What are the problems or challenges that your company offers a solution for?

We offer a fundament for strategic business decisions. That fundament is based on understanding something, for example how an ingredient will work, or how a product should be processed. You need to understand it. The better you understand it the higher quality decisions you will make. We provide that understanding based on theory and experiments.

Who helped you getting started? For example friends and family, incubators, investors or mentors?

To start a company in Sweden is not challenging at all, especially a service company. 15 years ago you needed round about 10.000 EUR to start a company, which we didn't have. A friend loaned us money to get started. Today, you only need a fourth. To start is not the challenge, to grow is.

What was your biggest problem in the start-up process? And what was your biggest mistake, or was there an



Anna Stenstam, CEO of CR Competence AB (photo: CR Competence)

obstacle that you did not expect before?

Nobody understood what we were doing. Universities didn't understand how to invoice us. The university lawyers questioned our ethics, thought we were going to trick their scientists and steal their ideas – they didn't have trust in us at the time. Some professors were of the opinion that no company should be able to make profit on the investments made with research funds. It also took quite some work to find an insurance company who was willing to take the time to understand our business model. It was hard for them to understand that we used very expensive equipment that wasn't ours or even placed in our premises. Sharing economy was new, people had not ▶

Company Facts

CR Competence AB, registered in 2005

Number of employees (2020): 13

Business area:

- Phys-Chem characterisation and stability
- Surface characterisation and modification
- Polymers, surfactants and materials
- Scientific due diligence and Ideation
- Pharma, Med Tech, Food, FMCG, Ingredients and Materials

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heard of Uber or AirBnB. We were pioneers in many respects. Most people who did this, did it through institutes such as RISE (Research Institutes of Sweden) or DTI (Danish Technological Institute). The fact that we wanted to make this a private company was unique. The university was not interested to „spin us out“ since we were a service company and it was important for them that we didn't use their name in any way, ever. A lot of good things have happened in the past 15 years. The largest obstacle not foreseen, was when RISE suddenly had a period where they had an aggressive B2B approach. Every company I contacted had already been visited by them. But, as most obstacles, it only made us better. I would never have started the company under such circumstances though, and that is something important for governments to consider.

What has been your most interesting company case so far?

The interesting thing with us is the cross-business mix. No single case is „the one“. The fact that we work with treating the lead roof of the 900 year old dome in Lund, the same week as we look at sustainable ingredients for hair care, a medical technology for organ transplants and a pharmaceutical drug:



The core team of CR Competence AB (photo: CR Competence)

CAROTS (Commercial Analytical Research Organisations Transnational Strategy) is an international project that aims to establish a new type of private or public-private company in the Baltic Sea Region: Commercial Analytical Research Organisations (CAROs). CAROs, as intermediary bodies between industry and academia, provide enterprises with much quicker yet complete assistance in analytical research in areas like New Materials, NanoTech or Life Sciences. The project is led by DESY, Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron, in dialogue with ten project partners and twelve associated organisations from across the Baltic Sea Region.

For further information visit
www.carots.eu

that is the most interesting. One of the larger cases however was a pharmaceutical project from formulation concept through characterisation, scale-up and stability. We developed the pre-clinical formulation which included development and usage of several methods such as Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, Small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS), X-ray powder diffraction (XRPD) and high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) which was also transferred to the client. The project passed several iterations and is now in development.

What is your biggest challenge at the moment, personally in your role and for the company?

The biggest challenge for the company is to continue to develop both sides of our incredibly important balance: the scientific depth and the business strategic understanding. We are given the trust to work with our clients on their strategically important initiatives. To turn data we can trust into understanding they can use. Understanding that needs to be delivered in an impactful way so it can form the basis for doing better. I acknowledge this trust, but it is also a challenge. The stakeholders and sponsors from the clients are now representing a broad category of people, who need and expect different things.

What would help you most right now to reduce costs, increase your visibility and to co-operate with other intermediaries?

I am not interested in reducing costs. Increasing visibility is important though, for example through a mediator network which is very valuable also in relation to co-operation with other mediators in our projects. The relation between us is full of trust, respect and understanding of how fast things must happen to be relevant in the B2B world. That makes our network a well functioning platform without the need for a one-stop-shop. You just call any one of us and we will direct you to the best one. If our role was further acknowledged by authorities, I wouldn't say no to the possibility to do the odd academic project also without academic affiliation. That would help us stay awesome.

What is your number one advice for a new founder of an intermediary?

Nurture your relationships and be curious. As a new founder build a team - don't do it on your own! ■



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