

CEO Spotlight: Jonathan Hunt

03 Oct 2022 | Contributing Writer **S. Harachand**

https://www.contractpharma.com/issues/2022-10-03/view_features/ceo-spotlight-jonathan-hunt/?widget=listSection

Syngene International chief executive explains how the traditional cost arbitrage model is evolving to a more rewarding intellectual arbitrage.



Syngene's CEO, Jonathan Hunt.

Jonathan Hunt is the Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of **Syngene International Ltd.**, an integrated research, development and manufacturing services company headquartered in Bangalore, India. Armed with more than 5,200 scientists, Syngene serves a wide range of sectors including pharmaceutical, biotechnology, nutrition, animal health, consumer goods and specialty chemicals.

Jonathan joined Syngene in January 2016 and is responsible for leading Syngene's business operations. With over 25 years of experience, Jonathan has extensive knowledge in the global biopharmaceutical industry. Prior to joining Syngene, he worked with AstraZeneca for more than a decade where he held various leadership positions including President & Director of AstraZeneca, Austria and President & COO, AstraZeneca India. Jonathan holds a BA (Business Studies & Economics) degree from the University of Sheffield, UK and has done his MBA from Durham University, UK.

In an interaction with Contract Pharma, the chief executive of Syngene, a company that takes great pride in having a high client retention rate, emphasizes the advantages of operating as a scientific equal with large biopharma firms while highlighting the importance of building trust and having an experienced team with a proven track record.

Contract Pharma: *Can we start talking about what led you to your leadership role as chief executive and managing director of Syngene International?*

Jonathan Hunt: I have been in the pharma industry for over 30 years; it is a business that thrives on innovation and is driven by the desire to improve lives. This is a noble mission and one that is important to me. Syngene has many of the characteristics of a pure-play, innovation-led biopharma company, while also serving other sectors. The company is a leader in an industry and sector that is growing fast, where science and technology are driving advances year-on-year. I can't think of a more exciting place to be right now.

Contract Pharma: *Tell us a little about SynVent, Syngene's integrated drug discovery platform. Do you have other such models that make a difference to your clients?*

Jonathan Hunt: If we look globally, there aren't many CROs with the depth and breadth of capabilities, experience and infrastructure to take an idea seamlessly from the earliest research stage to the clinic. Many can deliver individual components, but that often leaves the partner with the complexity of managing disparate partners and having to reassemble the data into a coherent research plan.

Our proprietary integrated drug discovery platform, SynVent, is designed to provide the most effective and efficient means to conduct target validation, translational interrogation, therapeutic discovery and preclinical development for our clients. Through the SynVent platform, we can execute end-to-end discovery and development programs for clients while delivering added value through the co-location of teams across the discovery and development continuum.

This proximity makes handovers efficient, timely and gives the process in-built resilience. We believe the integrated approach is a smart way to deliver the innovation our partners need. We've seen strong demand for this approach and have already grown to a portfolio of more than 15 integrated drug discovery programs, with more in the pipeline.

Other proprietary platforms include the models that we are developing using artificial intelligence. We are also looking at whether there is a market for a 24-hour "relay" type approach that expedites the delivery of certain types of time-sensitive research.



Syngene's Bangalore campus.

Contract Pharma: *Many of Syngene's clients are long-term. What are the key takeaways from such lasting associations for a CRO/CDMO like Syngene from the emerging markets?*

Jonathan Hunt: I think that there are three dimensions to our longest-standing relationships: a track record in innovation, trust and familiarity, and cost. Let's look at each in turn.

When outsourcing first started, biotech and pharma companies used CROs or CDMOs to execute relatively simple pieces of work as part of their total value chain. However, there has been a distinct shift in the characteristics of those relationships in recent times. Biopharma companies in the West are now approaching the larger Indian CROs or CDMOs with multi-dimensional problems requiring sophisticated, multi-dimensional solutions. Stepping up to the challenge, the CROs or CDMOs are increasingly providing innovative solutions to drug discovery and development challenges.

Secondly, what about trust? We are proud to have a high client retention rate with large biopharma companies. In fact, we work for 18 of the top 25 biopharma companies in the world and most of them are multi-year relationships.

In the case of BMS and Amgen, these partnerships have gone a step further. These companies have established dedicated facilities on Syngene premises which are managed and operated by Syngene. As a strategic partner, we work as an extension of their internal scientific teams to bring them innovative, flexible and efficient solutions at scale. For instance, Syngene manages the largest R&D facility for BMS outside of their own facilities in the U.S. More than 600 Syngene scientists work exclusively on BMS projects as part of its global R&D network.

In our experience, the more we operate as a scientific equal and deliver innovative scientific solutions, the longer the contracts tend to be. And it does not stop with the large pharma companies. Small and medium size biotechs are looking for specific capabilities and experience to take their molecules through the many milestones to get to regulatory approval. We partner with those companies as well.

The third dimension is cost. While India still offers opportunities for cost arbitrage, Syngene today is much more about being a world-class company, pursuing scientific excellence and adding value through innovation. Our clients look at Syngene and see a company of long history, enormous scale and depth of capability, and they partner with us because we often have experience and knowledge that they don't have themselves. That's intellectual arbitrage. We continue to be cost competitive but the cost is no longer the primary source of value creation for clients.

Contract Pharma: *What has Syngene's experience been in the field of digitization as a CRAMS player?*

Jonathan Hunt: Syngene is introducing AI and machine learning to every research team to expedite drug discovery decisions. We can reduce the number of toxicology studies using AI-based data analysis, saving time and cost.

We have digitized our quality management system to reduce the impact of human error and increase the traceability of the audit trail. We know that these investments give confidence to both regulators and clients while making life simpler for our scientists. The use of electronic laboratory notebooks reinforces the timeliness and accuracy of data collection, which also adds to the robustness of the audit trail.

Of course, like most companies, we are also investing in cybersecurity to protect our networks and the data that we generate for clients.

Contract Pharma: *What is it that makes Syngene's biologics services stand apart?*

Jonathan Hunt: As a relatively new entrant into commercial-scale biologics manufacturing, we have the obvious benefits of new infrastructure, the latest technology and an operating environment that was built with the very latest regulatory standards in mind. I think clients also benefit from the deep science that's the foundation of the company. For over 26 years, we have been successfully solving complex R&D challenges, which means that our biologics manufacturing teams are only ever an arm's length away from our highly experienced team with a proven track record and a portfolio of product experience.

The investments Syngene has made in building capacity year on year have strengthened our position as a fully integrated custom biomanufacturer, offering both mammalian and microbial facilities. The microbial facility provides further integration opportunities with our existing discovery and development capabilities and extends service offerings in the space of GMP manufacturing of plasmid DNA and mRNA.

The recent 10-year biologics manufacturing agreement we signed with the world's leading animal health company, Zoetis, reaffirms our ability to manufacture large molecule drug substances on a commercial scale. The agreement is an inflection point for Syngene's biologics business because it's really taking us into commercial-scale manufacturing on the biologics side.



An employee at Syngene's drug development facility.

Contract Pharma: *Going forward, do you see a greater focus on research in the Animal Health segment?*

Jonathan Hunt: If you look at animal health in general, you see an industry with great growth and, scientifically, at least, a real overlap with the knowledge, technology and approaches that we use routinely in finding new medicines. You can see that the world over, more of us are owning pets. They become part of the family and people pay a lot of attention to their health. This is a powerful driver of animal health, particularly

companion animals, and it's a good area for us to be in to support the industry as it grows.

Contract Pharma: *Syngene has around 87% of scientists as its employees. What is Syngene doing in terms of building scientific capacity?*

Jonathan Hunt: Our scientists are at the heart of our ability to deliver world-class, science-based services across small and large molecules. If you're a young scientist working with Syngene, you can travel the world scientifically and never have to leave Bangalore. You can collaborate with some of the best scientists in the world inside of our campus. And I think that's fantastically exciting.

Beyond offering learning and development opportunities at every stage in people's careers, we focus on building capability for academic research.

Contract Pharma: *Lastly, where do you see the potential for growth for Syngene moving forward in the fast-growing global CRO/CDMO marketplace?*

Jonathan Hunt: Pharma company pipelines are growing and more medicines are being approved by regulators each year—the market for CROs is forecast to grow by more than 6% worldwide by 2020-2026. Of the new medicines being approved, more than 60% come from smaller pharma companies that are more likely to partner with a CRO than build their own infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, we believe that we will benefit from the investments made in biologics.

For small molecules, our Mangalore facility is on track to obtain key global regulatory approvals in the next 12 to 18 months, strengthening our position as a one-stop solution provider across discovery, development and manufacturing. Further, we see tremendous potential in Syngene's integrated drug discovery platform, allowing us to extend our relationship with clients to every stage of the value chain.