

The Daily Telegraph

Thursday, February 15, 2007

PUBLIC LIFE

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Biotech leader began with the incredible shrinking company

NORTH NEWS & PICTURES

PROFILE

The influential chairman of a UKTI advisory group describes his early years of downsizing at ICI to **Martin Baker**

As the leader of a cutting-edge biotechnology company, Kevin Cox has about as much time for old jokes as you'd expect – somewhere between a nano- and a pico-second. But his first working experience, after taking a doctorate in chemistry from Balliol College, Oxford, had all the characteristics of the kind of gag that gets recycled at regional CBI and Rotary Club dinners.

Question: How do you get an American to run a small business? Answer: Give him a big one and wait.

Cox, the president of Avecia, a company that makes the active ingredient in many of the new biopharmaceuticals being developed, is now managing explosive growth, and can make light of his first professional experiences as he left university in 1982.

He joined ICI but quickly discovered “that it got smaller and smaller as it evolved into Zeneca and then Avecia, until my working experience was something like you'd get in an SME”.



Wheels within wheels: Kevin Cox's public role necessitates trying to focus the available resources on the best targets

After years of retrenchment he is managing the upside of the cycle. His company has increased its headcount by 11pc over the past year, taking on 50 new staff, and Cox, lean and focused, is clearly happy to be “operating in a high-growth, high-change environment”.

He says: “We have 500 people and turned over £60m this year, compared to £50m the year before. We have grown very rapidly over the last few years. We've had to move from being a small, close-knit group of people where much of the management can be done through corridor conversations, to a much more structured environment.”

Cox clearly relishes the nuts-and-bolts side of running a business, which appeals to a strong pragmatic streak that runs in parallel with his academic training. He chose to go into marketing, because, he says: “During my DPhil in Oxford, I realised a lot of people were better than I was at doing basic research and I decided to apply my skills elsewhere and move into commercial rather than academic work, and most of my career experience has been on the commercial side.”

However, he is somewhat frustrated that he is not fully in charge of outcome. Drug developers, “typically biotechnology companies, come to us with a

molecule and we design a manufacturing process for that molecule,” he says. But however well Avecia does its job, it is not in control of the laboratory testing.

“Never a week goes by without the feeling that you're almost managing a different business,” he says.

“Another management challenge includes developing a relationship with customers throughout the drug development lifecycle – a process that can typically be seven-to-10 years. In the early stages we are mainly research and innovation. At the end it is largely about regulation and compliance.”

So Cox, with a commitment to long-term, relationship-driven management tasks,

and coping with managing issues not entirely within his control, was an ideal candidate for the two public-sector positions he now holds.

At the end of 2005 he took on a new role as chairman of Bionow, a biotechnology industry grouping in the North West: "I have very little executive authority. My role is one of influence, to get people to listen to an industrial perspective. Frankly, the first job is to work out the right people to speak to, the ones who press the right buttons," he says.

The national stage beckoned in November 2006, when he became chairman of UK Trade & Investment's Biotechnology and Pharmaceuticals Sector Advisory Group. His function, once more, is primarily about influence rather than executive control. His duty is "to provide advice from an industry perspective on marketing, exporting and opportunities for inward investment".

He says: "We have to know our strengths within

the UK bio-pharmaceutical community, be able to identify market opportunities, make sure the right resources are applied to those opportunities, and in making the best use of your strengths try to develop a 'portfolio' approach – recognising the importance of new things coming into the development pipeline as more mature ones come to market."

His new chairmanship is unpaid, and involves up to six major meetings a year, a role that is complementary to his private-sector work: "If, for example, I have an overseas trip coming up [for Avecia] I will see if there's an overlap with UKTI objectives."

One of Cox's most important duties this year will be at the BIO conference in America where he is charged with overseeing how the UK showcases its capabilities. He will also chair a keynote conference session.

He obviously enjoys the neat fit between his private and public-sector roles, but how does he measure success?

"Ultimately, it's about how we make a difference. So we look at value added, how every pound spent by the UKTI translates into export pounds or inward investment."

The immediate future will see him "break down and clearly define the tasks ahead.

The UK industry is huge, but we can do this job effectively if we concentrate on the areas where we really have strength.

"The danger is sitting round all the time talking without doing anything. You have to ensure that there's action. There's no place for passengers in this process."

So has he any advice for those who might want to make the journey from private to public without taking any passengers (or prisoners)?

"Make sure you understand the language that's used. We all use our own internal lexicons, acronyms and buzz words. The public sector has its own, and at some meetings I've found two or three consecutive sentences used where I've hardly understood a word. I've had to ask what people meant."

Cox believes that private-sector skills are increasingly in demand and executives should "have confidence in the quality of [their] own abilities and experience. A lot of it will be directly relevant and applicable to the public sector."

Factfile

- **Born:** 1958
- **Education:** City School, Lincoln; Sheffield University, BSc chemistry, graduated 1979; Balliol College Oxford, D Phil, graduated 1982
- **Career:** 1982-93: ICI, various technical/management jobs in UK, Japan and America; 1993-1999 Zeneca: general management; 1999-to-date Avecia: commercial director lifescience molecules vice-president Avecia Biotechnology, president, Avecia Biologics