

Q&A with Thibault Jonckheere, CEO of ImmunXperts SA bringing expertise in Immunology and In Vitro Testing to support the Drug Development Process for Small Biotechs, Large Pharmaceuticals, and Academic Groups



Thibault Jonckheere
Chief Executive Officer

ImmunXperts SA
www.immunxperts.com

Contact:
Thibault Jonckheere
+32 71 96 01 33
info@immunxperts.com

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Mr. Jonckheere, would you tell us about ImmunXperts SA?*

Mr. Jonckheere: ImmunXperts is a company that we like to think of as a partner in the drug development cycle. We partner with all types of organizations, such as small biotechs, large pharmaceuticals, and even academic groups who are developing products. They call upon us because - I believe - we have a unique combination of expertise in immunology and experience in, in vitro testing. We try to bring this knowledge to these companies through a kind of partnering which

can go from developing in vitro assays, up to providing classes or practical training. The partnering is important, because the companies know the products they are developing much better than us – we merely bring in some specific expertise at one point of the development cycle.

CEOCFO: *Would you give us a couple of sample engagements, when a company might turn to you, what they are looking for and how you help them?*

Mr. Jonckheere: At the moment, what is very much in the spotlight is the immunotherapy area. There are people or companies developing products who are very knowledgeable about cancer, its causes and mechanisms-of-action; but they may have less experience in the immunology aspects. Therefore, what they would come to ask us is to develop in vitro tests that can replicate and translate aspects of the human immune system in vitro, so they can test the antibodies, or the molecules they are developing, and get an idea of what their products are capable of. Typically, they are comparing different products internally, or want to benchmark against products currently on the market, or they are looking at specific aspects of the immune system.

For example, the immune checkpoint inhibitors – and all the potential combinations that can be formed by the several hundreds of antibodies in this area. We can test these in vitro and give an idea to the companies developing these products of how potent they are. In vitro tests are fast and can also in certain cases replace and reduce the use of laboratory animals. We can also give them insights into some of the potential risks that they should look at, like immunogenicity.

A second example would be cell therapy. The focus recently has been CAR-T, TCR and all other immuno-onco applications. In this segment, our expertise is in the design and development of potency tests. The goal is to understand the mode of action of the cell therapy product and try to transcribe that in vitro.

CEOCFO: *Would you have a standard method or group of testing, for example in cell therapy, and then you would adapt for the individual project, or do you almost have to start from scratch each time?*

Mr. Jonckheere: We have to almost restart from scratch each time. Of course, thanks to the seasoned team of experts we have a very wide range of experiences we can build upon. We can also count on the vast experience of in vitro testing using state of the art techniques like flow cytometry, ELISPOT, ELISA and multiplex analysis. Each time, the questions of the clients are so specific that indeed we need to develop a custom solution for that. I believe it is also something that diversifies us from other service companies, where they prefer to develop one assay, validate it and then apply it in as many situations as possible. We prefer to start from what the partner organization's questions are and what they are looking for. Then try to answer that question in the best possible way. In that sense we really like to say that we think together with the clients and that we act as a kind of mobile development team.

CEOCFO: *Are clients coming to you because they understand you have that deeper level of expertise or is it more of a surprise to find out what you can do for them?*

Mr. Jonckheere: It is maybe half-and-half, as part of them come to us because we have this specific expertise and that is why today we have clients from all over the world like China, Japan and the USA. On the other side we also have clients who through working with us discover our capabilities and understand by working with us, what we actually mean when we say we want to be a R&D partner. It is not only something that is fancy or marketing. It is really what defines us as an organization, as well as what motivates our team to work here every day inside of our company.

"I believe that we are very different in the way we use and look at in vitro testing and early drug development. If you have very tough questions that you cannot answer internally or with your current partners, then it might be a good time to approach us. And those are the questions we like to get the most." - Thibault Jonckheere

CEOCFO: *How do you reach out to potential partners and clients?*

Mr. Jonckheere: We have several ways of getting in contact. The most obvious is going to specialized conferences on topics like predictive immunogenicity or functional assays, or even more generic conferences about developments in oncology or in cancer. This allows us to learn what the specific requirements of our customers are and also gives the opportunity for us to present our work. Next to that, we are a partner in a series of subsidized projects. People also get to know us through our publications, or posters, and search engines such as google. Last but not least, we like to visit our potential customers and have in depth discussions with their scientific teams to be able to offer the most optimal solutions for their specific requirements.

CEOCFO: *Do you sometimes have an idea what the results will be due to your expertise. Can you look at a project and have a feel before you do the testing?*

Mr. Jonckheere: We probably could in some cases, but a lot of times the companies come to us and blind what they are developing or what they are looking for. Therefore, very often, at least at the beginning of a collaboration we have no idea, even when we have the results, of what the results should have looked like or what the client would like to see. They do it also because it is a good way to test us and see how reliable the tests are. That is at the beginning, but then the more we dive into the project of a client, the more complex the questions get. Then the difficulty to predict stems from the necessary combination of knowledge at the client's side and on our side. That is why we really need to work hand-in-hand with the client's organization. To make sure at the end we do not (only) see the answer we would like to see, but that we get data that actually makes sense for them to select the next steps or to take the – sometimes difficult – decisions needed.

CEOCFO: *What attracted you personally to ImmunXperts to take on the role of CEO?*

Mr. Jonckheere: I considered it as a big chance. The company was started by several people, among who was our CTO, Sofie Pattijn – who is still very much leading the company today. At one point the company was growing and they wanted someone external, so they proposed the job to me a year ago. I am from a non-scientific background, but at that time I was already working in life sciences, so I was looking for a challenge in a small company. I wanted to take on a leadership role and be able to combine my financial expertise and business development skills, with helping move a young startup in life science. Therefore, what attracted me to ImmunXperts was the challenge of having to develop a very small company in an innovative area that was totally new to me. Secondly, the fact that I can feel on a day-to-day basis that I help indirectly the people here in giving the resources they need to do their jobs and as a company we help other organizations develop innovative products that can cure many people of late stage disease. That is what motivates us as a company, but me personally also.

CEO CFO: *What surprised you as ImmunXperts has grown and developed under your leadership?*

Mr. Jonckheere: Our business model is not very common. In our sector and in general people would categorize us as a CRO. However, the business model of a CRO is to develop a test, validate it and then try to repeat it – very often in a clinical (monitoring) setting. Our business model is actually to develop something very specific for each client. That is also what our people here inside of the company like, because they are one foot in the lab, but also on the other side thinking together with the client, interpreting data and presenting them. Therefore, this business model at first seemed to me like something that was not going to last for a very long time. However, we have found a way of making this successful. When I joined 1 year ago, we had less than half of the personnel and a much smaller lab than we have today. This strong growth is a first proof that we can make this work, even though a lot of more hard work and ideas are needed to turn this into a continued success.

CEO CFO: *Are you seeking funding or partnerships as you grow?*

Mr. Jonckheere: We are sufficiently funded at the moment with the present business plan. When it comes to partnerships in the broad way, we are always interested, because that is part of who we are. We really like to partner with other organizations and to work with the best in each area. For example, for in silico, we did not develop our own tool, but we are working together with a company based in Copenhagen. We identified them as being the best, and contacted them as we wanted to work with them. If someone is interested in partnering they should certainly contact us.

CEO CFO: *Put is all together for our readers. Why choose ImmunXperts?*

Mr. Jonckheere: I believe that we are very different in the way we use and look at in vitro testing and early drug development. If you have very tough questions that you cannot answer internally or with your current partners, then it might be a good time to approach us. And those are the questions we like to get the most. As a young innovative company it is always nice to be challenged by other organizations, especially in life sciences where a lot of bright people are working on innovative topics, and try to add our little piece of work into the major challenges they are trying to solve today.

