

Conference Session D2: The Growth of a Strategic Partnership

This was a well-attended session with complimentary and enlightening speakers that exudes the chemistry that glues their strategic relationship together. Session Chair, Phil Elstob introduced the speakers pointing out that this is one example of such a relationship that have worked well together. Highlighting the uniqueness of the relationship and how well the two organisations work together, the scene was set for the speakers.

The first speaker was Rebecca Wood describing the business of Croda explaining that the company is a specialty ingredient supplier to a range of downstream sectors. Rebecca has a chemistry background, joins the company in 2015 as an Open innovation Co-ordinator and was responsible for overseeing relationship development with University of York. The second Speaker, Rachel Curwen, is Head of Research Development Team at the University of York. She is a biologist and is responsible for overseeing relationship with Croda. Rob McElroy, the third speaker, is an academic staff in Green Chemistry at the University of York and has undertaken several projects in collaboration with Croda. The presentation was jointly made by the three speakers, who likened the strategic relationship to a three legged stool propped up by legs of timing, individuals and focus.

The timing was serendipitous as the relationship was crystallised by parallel events within the two organisations: The relationship started with Croda as far back as 2010 with the sponsorship of a PhD student, a few collaborative projects were also funded by Croda between 2010 and 2015. The same year saw the appointment of a new Deputy Vice-Chancellor who is interested in encouraging strategic partnership with industry. This gave Rachel the mandate and the support to capitalise on the existing relationship With Croda. Incidentally it is about the same time that Rebecca was appointed at Croda and she is looking to improve her portfolio of open innovation by forming strategic relationships based on parameters that include, in addition to others, geographical location, culture and capability. University of York with an existing relationship also matches the requirements of CRODA. The first official strategic meeting between the two organisations took place in 2015, looking at how to extend the existing relationship with the Green Chemistry group to other research groups.

The first meeting was between key members from the York research groups that has technologies of interest or those that are able to present the capabilities of their group to senior management (with Innovation Portfolio) and key members of the technical team at Croda. The first meeting was more of an introduction of individuals and capabilities within the two organisation. Future meetings, facilitated by Rachel and Rebecca, were held to focus on specific requirements and capabilities within the two organisations. Over the next few months projects were agreed and the relationship continued to see Croda represented on Research Steering Committees at the University with resulting wider collaboration with other research groups in Chemistry and Biology. Croda employs at least one graduate and sponsors a PhD student per annum.

No official agreement was signed but the relationship continue to grow organically. Asked about the reason for such a successful relationship; the team unanimously agreed that one of the key ingredient is the similarity in culture. In addition, there is willingness from both organisations to offer tangible and focused offerings. Rob as the academic staff stresses the fact that he benefits from the interdisciplinary nature of the relationship allowing different research groups to leverage capabilities. Rachel benefits from learning more about other offerings from the University such as studentship and Continuous Professional Development courses. Rebecca enjoys the flexible approach from both organisations based on selective and instigated projects. Croda continues to sponsor PhD studentship and employ York graduates with typically about three projects running at any point in time.

The partnership was built on pillars of timing, individuals and focus but sustained by similar culture of innovation, flexibility and the support from senior management. While there is no formal agreement, there is inherent governance in the relationship and in each project. The agreement between the two organisations will be formalised at the right time.

Overall, the feedback and the active participation of the audience suggest that this is an area of great interest.