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Out-thinking a pandemic: Mahesh Bhalgat

Never before has scientific research and development taken centre stage in larger public discourse. The general public, political and business leaders, and most importantly, the life sciences fraternity are so tuned into the development of multiple vaccines for COVID-19, it has prompted the world to sit up and take notice of the importance of research work done by scientists across the world.



The work of international healthcare scientific research firms, so crucial to the wellbeing of humankind, has always been away from the purview of the public. But this has now changed radically since the onset of the pandemic.

The potential breakthroughs made by Contract Research Organisations (CRO) and Clinical Development and Manufacturing Organisations (CDMO) also gained significant visibility during this time because of the specialised resources and expertise that they brought on to bring out faster solutions needed by the pharmaceutical companies.

Now, the eyes of the world are firmly locked on the pioneering R&D conducted by these firms. One such company is [Syngene International Limited](#), an Indian contract research, development and manufacturing organisation.

Incorporated in 1993 and specialising in drug discovery, development and manufacturing to commercial supply, Syngene is a part of a global consortium of the healthcare industry to help inform, improve and accelerate various aspects of COVID-19 testing, ranging from research to clinical diagnostic applications.

While Syngene's scientists work to improve the state of the world, COO Mahesh Bhalgat is working hard to grow the company's effectiveness and operations. Given the breakneck pace of global research, that's no easy feat, but Mahesh says he's already seeing results since he took on the role in mid-2019. "There are three different areas where we've seen significant growth," he says.

"We've been able to diversify our talent and implement higher levels of technology and digitalisation within our operations, and thus increase our client base." Many of the changes made during the pandemic have become intrinsically linked to that of the world's CROs.

"Everything that we talk about today in the COVID-19 environment is linked with healthcare or biotech solutions," Mahesh says. "Early on we understood that while COVID-19 is not going to stay forever, we have to learn to live with the new normal."

At Syngene, the new normal is a holistic approach to making staff comfortable and providing a safe working environment. "We are a critical service provider and so we transitioned to shift-based work on site and introduced working from home where possible to make sure physical distancing can be practised," Mahesh says.

"In terms of our work, we've also added additional resources and efforts towards COVID-19 preventive methods, processes and different COVID-19 testing solutions."

When it became clear that the capacity to conduct reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) COVID-19 tests would become limited, Syngene set up a dedicated new facility for conducting RT-PCR testing.

"Almost a year into the pandemic, RT-PCR remains the gold standard of testing," he says. "We realised that the RT-PCR test kits and reagents weren't being manufactured in India and supply chain was becoming an issue, so we repurposed one of our facilities to make high volumes of the probes and primers that are essential to these tests."

Similarly, the race to find a COVID-19 vaccine has led Syngene to open its doors to vaccine developers looking for testing solutions. “We have been able to contribute towards meeting the discovery and development stage requirements of global and local players involved in testing their vaccine candidates,” Mahesh says.

Attempting to steer the course of a CRO during a pandemic is one thing; trying to think one step ahead of that pandemic is an entirely different challenge. Mahesh says this forward thinking came as a result of decades immersed in the global pharmaceutical industry.



“I spent 20 years in the US with firms such as Monsanto and Amgen. The US has a very different working culture in comparison to the developing markets, and the change takes some getting used to. There are differences in the regulatory and political environment in developing markets because of cultural differences, as well as managing working relationships both internal and external to your company.”

After Mahesh moved to India, he started at Biological E Limited, a large vaccine manufacturer, and then moved to manage French multinational Sanofi’s operations in Hyderabad. “I think that really helped me to understand expectations and prioritisation, and most importantly how to work in a cost-sensitive environment,” he says.

“In India we always recognise the component of wringing benefits from the cost structure we’re working with. At Syngene I’ve been able to use that experience to turn that cost component into value. That’s the transition we’re in, to make sure our customers see us as a science-based value player.”

The other essential element of Mahesh's approach as COO is Syngene's integrated service offerings, which he believes are poised to be the best in the drug discovery arena. "We don't just simply execute the work and hand it back to our customers," he says.

(This work) requires not only a very high level of sophisticated scientific understanding but also an appropriate level of risk-taking.

"We've been able to transform our offerings into further options for problem-solving. Secondly, we've been developing a technology and innovation-based mindset in our staff, which has led us to evaluate new technologies and move in those directions."

It's in the cultivation of these partnerships with clients and suppliers alike that Mahesh finds his joy. "We orient our partners on new practices we bring in. Especially with safety, we expect our partners to adopt our methods," he says.

"We also look to give them a clear understanding of our expectations over the coming months and years based on our business plans." These forward-thinking policies have made Syngene a preferred partner among its clients, suppliers and other vendors.

"We want to be a one-stop solution for clients, from discovery to development to commercialisation," Mahesh says. "We want long-term, cohesive partnerships with our vendors and suppliers. This requires not only a very high level of sophisticated scientific understanding but also an appropriate level of risk-taking."

Likely to continue for years to come, the battle against COVID-19 will provide a dynamic backdrop to the evolution of the pharmaceutical and biotech sectors. Mahesh believes the relationship between these sectors and the service industry will continue to grow. "The way in which we work together will continuously evolve," he says.

"It's going to require a strong partnership between academia, the service industry and the pharmaceutical sector to make sure that evolution comes quickly enough."

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