

Made in the U.S.A.

By Chris Tachibana

Two Scandinavian perspectives on being a life sciences entrepreneur in the United States

Gitte Jensen is a trailblazer who has seen the wilds of Canada and Oregon, but not as a fur-trader or a cowboy. Her trade is contract research. In 1988, she had just become Dr. Jensen, with a Ph.D in immunology from Aarhus University and a restless spirit. Wanting to experience life in a land larger than 43,000 square kilometers, she moved to Canada, where she became an Assistant Professor at McGill University. She wanted to break out of the confining academic track, though, so she combined her knowledge of immunology, her interest in natural products, and her Canadian husband's business experience to organize a few symposia, sell the proceedings as books, and begin working as a preventative medicine consultant. From there, Gitte Jensen left academia altogether, and created the contract research company Natural Immune Systems, which recently expanded to eight full-time employees and a 370 square meter facility in Klamath Falls, Oregon, where even with a population of 20,000, she manages to recruit subjects for clinical tests. Their main business is

cell-based in vitro tests and clinical pilot studies on natural products, focusing on anti-oxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

Flexibility, service-mindedness and cold, hard cash

Flexibility is one of the skills Gitte Jensen called on to move from Scandinavia to the United States, and from the academic ivory tower to the CEO's desk. Another business requirement is cold, hard cash, and a willingness to put more than just your time on the line. She sold her house to buy the equipment for her start-up company. She cut ties completely to academia, believing that an independent company could turn projects around faster than a grant-based system. As an immunology graduate student, she never thought she would be making cold calls to companies, chatting with industry reps, and constantly thinking about improving client services, but that is how she happily spends her days now, competing in the U.S. contract research market.

From Novo Nordisk to New York

Another entrepreneur who moved from Denmark to the United States is Gitte Pedersen, but she moved to New York City,



- You have to trick yourself into believing it is doable, states Gitte Pedersen, whom has made the United States her permanent business and home address

and with a business degree. She runs Proximity Venture, a consulting company that specializes in strategic business development and implementing globally oriented business plans. In addition to being a business entrepreneur, she has started the biotech company Genetic Expressions with her younger brother Morten, a geneticist. Their company produces a digital, micro-genechip that can be used with DNA or RNA samples, and with any genome. When Gitte Pedersen decided to move to the United States and begin her consulting business, she had been with Novo Nordisk, in both science and sales, for ten years. The biotech industry was just emerging. She decided that if she was going to advise entrepreneurs, she needed to have the personal experience of being an entrepreneur,

because “you can read a lot of business books, but it’s never the same as real-life experience”. She wanted to live in New York City, so she sent out 300 unsolicited letters to potential clients, getting a 25% response rate, and landing her first client right away. One client led to the next, and after six months, she was doing well. At first, she went back and forth between the United States and Denmark, because she didn’t have a visa that allowed her to stay indefinitely. Now, the United States is her permanent business and home address.

Networking and cultivating the right mindset

Gitte Pedersen says an entrepreneur needs a certain mindset.

- You have to trick yourself into believing it is doable.

She suggests employing what might be the Viking trait of burning your bridges; when she started out, she sold her Copenhagen apartment so she couldn’t just give up and move back. She advises anyone starting a new business in the United States to put money in the bank, as a buffer. Then, make a plan, and most importantly, engage your network. Having worked in the United States for Novo Nordisk, Gitte Pedersen knew how hard it was to make contacts, compared to Denmark, where she could get a meeting with anyone. In the States, she says, people are behind multiple filters and get so many sales calls they might not return yours, so it’s absolutely necessary to build a network. Of course, the stereotype of every-

thing being bigger in the United States is true. There are 350 million potential clients instead of 5 million, and the amount of money involved is proportionally larger, too. Correspondingly, the risk profile is different and it takes longer to get to the top of the pyramid.

Jump into the deep end

What both Gitte Jensen and Gitte Pedersen radiate is a desire for adventure and challenge, and a cheerful willingness to take risks and make sacrifices for the company. Both exhibit an ability to “jump into the deep end”, as Gitte Pedersen calls it, by giving up the safety of a job in academics or industry to become self-employed. Entrepreneurship is not for the faint-hearted. Nor, in this global economy, is it for the homebound, since Gitte Jensen and Gitte Pedersen also moved 6,000 kilometers from friends and family to start their new careers. Gitte Jensen has not lived in Denmark for over 20 years, and does not often go back to visit. She misses family in Denmark, but has her dog Holger, to remind her of home (“He’s a Great Dane, of course!”). She misses baked goods, family and Gammel Dansk (a Danish bitter made since 1964). Gitte Pedersen says that when she visits Denmark, she mails back remoulade - “the good stuff”, rather than the yellow mayonnaise that is sold in New York. On the topic of culture shock, Gitte Pedersen says that, fortunately, she is “culturally agnostic and culturally curious”, which helps her approach global projects



Flexibility is one of the skills Gitte Jensen called on to move from Scandinavia to the United States, and from the academic ivory tower to the CEO’s desk

without predetermined expectations, and also helps her navigate new environments.

Gitte Jensen is also completely comfortable in her adopted land, but thinks culture shock would still hit someone moving to the United States, even today when the global connections ought to bring countries closer. She felt that Scandinavia and the relaxed pace of Canada had more in common, culturally. In the United States, the pace is fast, and she reminds us that, “although we all communicate in English, we’re not necessarily on the same page”. Both women also share an unflappable confidence in the future. Gitte Jensen feels that at this point, she could run her business anywhere, in Scandinavia or in the United States.

Gitte Pedersen encourages budding entrepreneurs by saying:

- If it is impossible, you’ll make a new strategy, and in the worst case scenario, you’ll just get a job. That’s not so bad.