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Finding leaders in life sciences

European Biotech US Expansion: Boston vs. RTP



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Executive Summary

For European biotech companies, entering the U.S. is a key growth milestone, offering access to the world's largest healthcare market, deep investment networks, and experienced leadership for regulatory approval and commercialization. Historically, Greater Boston has been the top choice due to its dense ecosystem of biotech firms, investors, academic institutions, and talent.

However, Research Triangle Park (RTP) in North Carolina is emerging as a strong alternative, with lower costs, expanding manufacturing capabilities, and a solid university pipeline. Choosing between these hubs depends on capital access, talent, costs, and strategy. This paper compares both ecosystems and examines evolving U.S. expansion approaches.

For European start-ups and mid-sized life sciences companies, choosing the right location requires careful consideration of multiple factors, including access to capital, talent availability, operational costs, and long-term commercialization strategy.

Key Takeaways

Boston is still Number One

Boston remains the global center for biotechnology innovation, venture capital, and scientific collaboration.

RTP is the cost-efficient manufacturing hub

Research Triangle Park offers a powerful alternative with lower operating costs and strong pharmaceutical manufacturing infrastructure.

Adaptive US market entry models

U.S. expansion strategies are becoming more flexible, with many companies initially building distributed teams before establishing a permanent hub.

Early cross-Atlantic leadership hiring

Successful expansion depends on recruiting experienced leadership talent early, particularly executives who understand both the European and U.S. biotechnology ecosystems.

Hybrid operating models rising

Hybrid operating models are increasingly common, combining innovative hubs such as Boston with operational or manufacturing bases in regions like RTP.



Why European Companies Expand to the US

European biotechnology companies frequently reach a stage in their development where expansion into the U.S. market becomes strategically necessary. The U.S. offers several structural advantages for emerging biotechnology companies, including a deep venture capital market, strong intellectual property protections, and a regulatory environment that—while rigorous—provides a well-defined pathway to product approval.

Access to the U.S. investor community is often one of the most important drivers of expansion. Many European companies find that establishing a presence in the United States improves their visibility among venture capital firms, strategic pharmaceutical partners, and public markets. At the same time, recruiting experienced executives with FDA experience, commercialization expertise, and industry networks is often significantly easier within established U.S. life sciences clusters.

For decades, Boston has been the primary destination for such expansion. However, the rapid growth of Research Triangle Park means that companies today must evaluate multiple possible locations before determining the most effective strategy.



Understanding the Major U.S. Clusters

Boston/Cambridge

The Greater Boston region remains the most established biotechnology hub in the world. Cambridge’s Kendall Square hosts one of the highest concentrations of biotechnology companies globally and serves as the center of a dense ecosystem of research institutions, venture capital firms, and pharmaceutical companies.

Institutions such as MIT, Harvard University, Massachusetts General Hospital, and the Broad Institute contribute to a continuous pipeline of scientific innovation and entrepreneurial activity. This environment has made Boston particularly attractive for early-stage biotechnology companies focused on discovery research and venture-backed growth. However, the strength of the ecosystem also creates challenges.

Boston has some of the highest laboratory and office space costs in the world, and competition for experienced leadership talent is extremely intense. For early-stage companies with limited capital, the cost of operating in the region can be significant. While Boston continues to dominate early-stage biotechnology innovation, other U.S. regions have developed strong life sciences ecosystems that offer alternative advantages for companies seeking operational efficiency and manufacturing scale.



Understanding the Major U.S. Clusters

Research Triangle Park

Research Triangle Park, located between Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill in North Carolina, has developed into one of the fastest-growing life sciences clusters in the United States. The region benefits from the research capabilities of Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and North Carolina State University.

Unlike Boston, RTP has historically focused on pharmaceutical manufacturing, biomanufacturing, and large-scale life sciences operations. Over the past two decades, however, the region has increasingly attracted biotechnology start-ups and international life sciences companies seeking a more cost-efficient operating environment.

Compared to Boston, RTP offers significantly lower real estate costs, a strong manufacturing workforce, and a growing community of life sciences companies. State-level incentives and economic development initiatives have further encouraged international companies to establish operations in the region.



Comparing Boston & Research Triangle Park

For European companies evaluating a U.S. expansion, both regions offer compelling advantages: Boston Biotech companies seek access to investors, academic collaboration, and entrepreneurial networks may find Boston the most effective environment.

Research Triangle Park offers a different strategic value. Companies focused on manufacturing, operational scaling, or long-term commercialization may benefit from the region’s lower operating costs and strong pharmaceutical manufacturing infrastructure. The decision between these two hubs ultimately depends on the company’s stage of development, capital strategy, and long-term operational goals.

Biotech Hub Comparison: Boston vs RTP

Strategic Factor	Boston / Cambridge	Research Triangle Park
Innovation ecosystem	Global biotech & VC hub	Growing biotech cluster
Universities	MIT; Harvard; Broad Institute	Duke; UNC; NC State
Venture capital	Highest globally	Smaller but growing
Talent pool	Top biotech executives & scientists	Strong technical/manufacturing talent
Operating costs	Very high	Lower
Manufacturing	Secondary to R&D	Major hub
Typical companies	Start-ups, innovation-led	Manufacturing & scaling firms

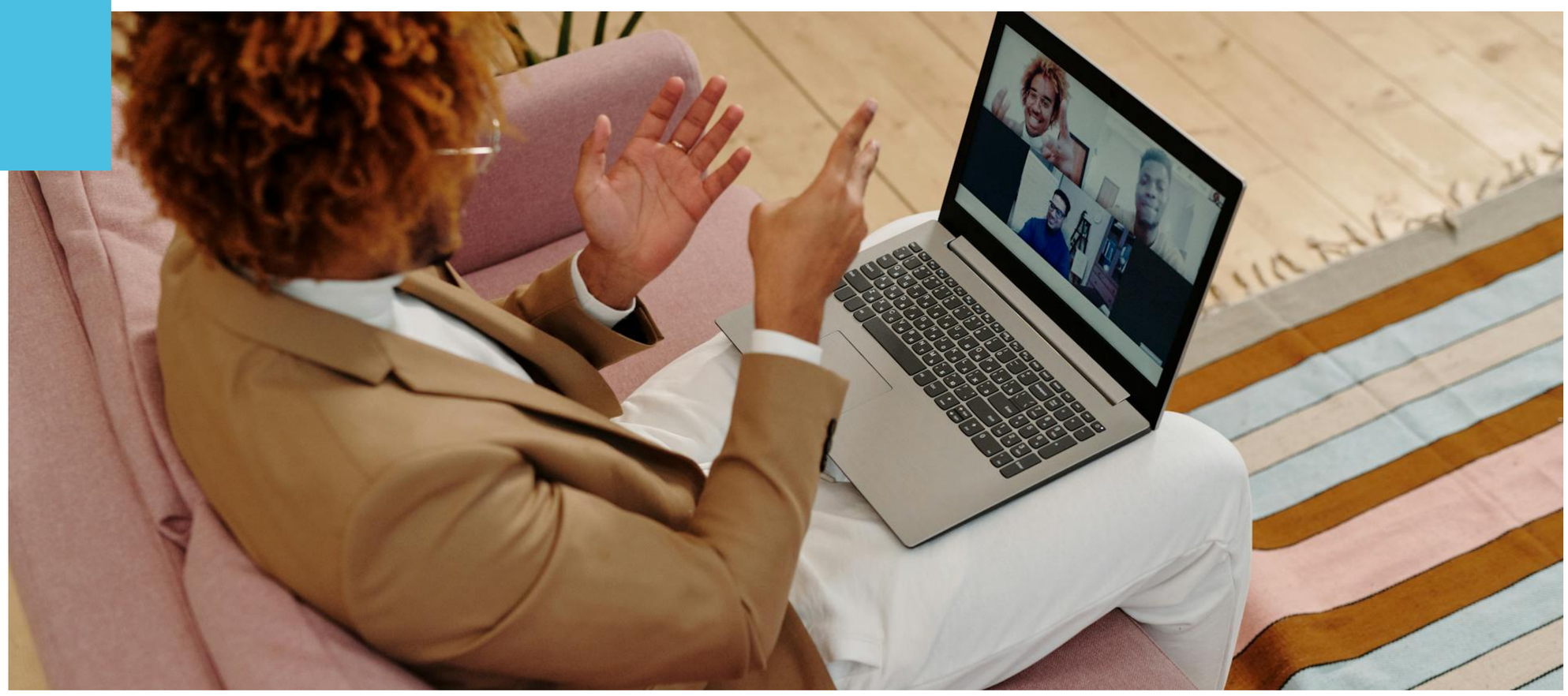


Borderless Talent Strategies

One important shift in recent years is that companies no longer always need to establish a physical presence in a U.S. hub immediately. Increasingly, early-stage biotechnology companies recruit key leadership talent regardless of location and allow executives to work remotely while the organization develops its long-term strategy. Advances in remote collaboration technologies and the normalization of hybrid work models following the COVID-19 pandemic have made distributed leadership teams increasingly common in the biotechnology sector.

For example, a European start-up may initially recruit a U.S.-based regulatory leader, clinical development advisor, or commercial strategist who operates remotely while the company evaluates where to establish its permanent U.S. presence. This approach allows companies to prioritize recruiting the right expertise rather than committing immediately to costly infrastructure investments.

Once the company reaches a critical stage, such as preparing for clinical trials, establishing manufacturing partnerships, or launching commercial operations, it may then consolidate its leadership team in a specific hub such as Boston or Research Triangle Park.

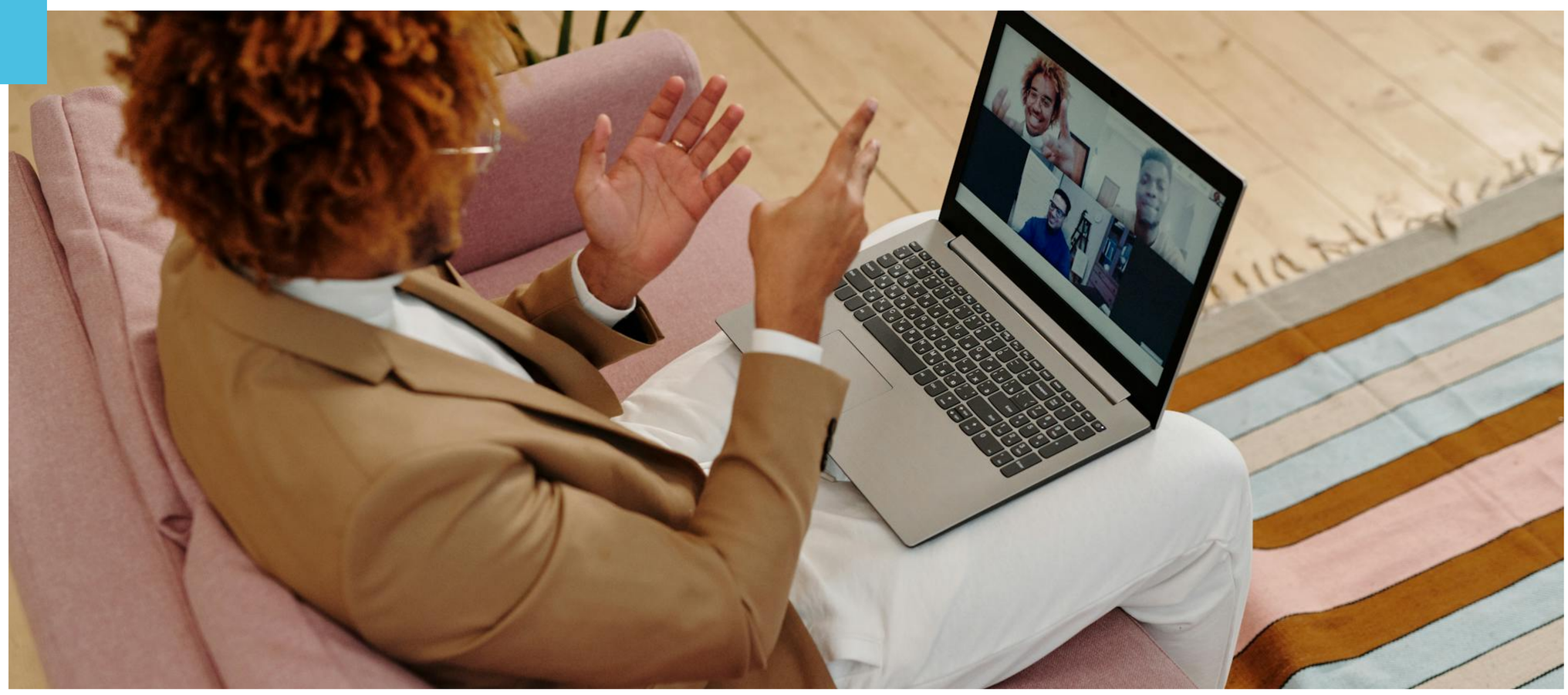


Case Histories

European small- and mid-sized life sciences companies expanding into the United States—particularly into hubs like Boston/Cambridge for innovation and Research Triangle Park (RTP) for industrial scale—demonstrate that success depends less on geography alone and more on clarity of strategic intent and operating model.

A first successful pattern is the dual-continent model, where companies retain core scientific capabilities in Europe while building a targeted U.S. presence for market access, clinical development, or partnerships. Genoskin (HQ Toulouse, France) illustrates this approach effectively by keeping its R&D base in France while establishing a commercial footprint in Boston. This allows the company to engage deeply with the U.S. ecosystem—clinicians, pharma partners, and investors—without duplicating early-stage research infrastructure. More advanced versions of this model can be seen with uniQure (Amsterdam, Holland) and SOPHiA GENETICS (Rolle, Switzerland), which not only built U.S. operational presence but also integrated into American capital markets and healthcare networks. These companies demonstrate that SMEs can successfully bridge continents by clearly separating innovation (Europe) and market access (U.S.), while ensuring strong operational linkage between the two.

A second model focuses on industrialization and scale, with RTP emerging as a preferred destination. Companies such as Stallergenes Greer (Baar, Switzerland) and bioMérieux (Lyon, France) have leveraged RTP to expand manufacturing and operational capabilities, benefiting from a skilled workforce, supportive infrastructure, and lower operating costs compared to Boston. In these cases, the U.S. presence is not primarily about early-stage innovation but about efficient production, supply chain proximity, and long-term operational investment. These examples show that RTP is particularly effective when companies have reached a stage where commercial demand and production capacity become the priority.

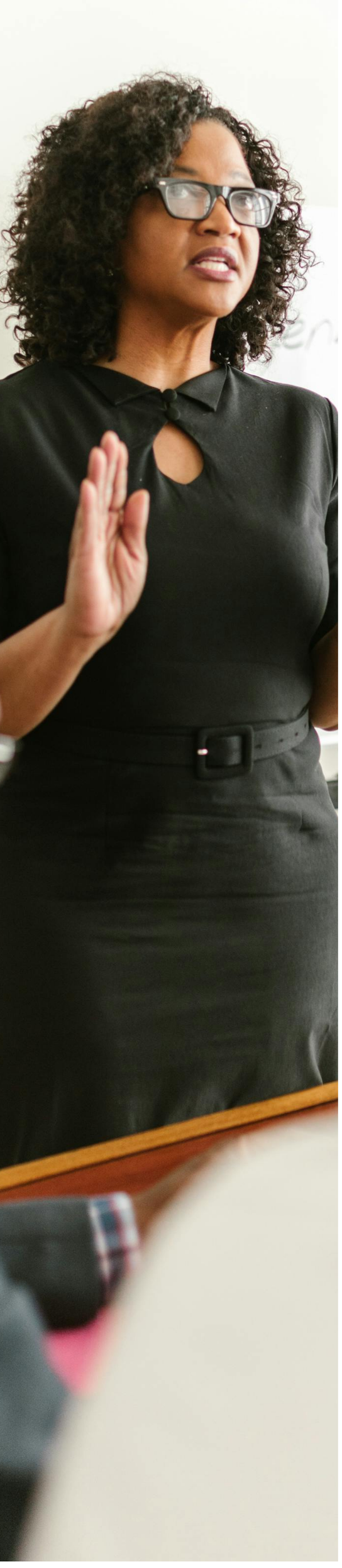


Case Histories

A third approach is the distributed commercial model, which avoids heavy geographic concentration altogether. Waters Medical Systems (wholly owned by iCAIR in Lyon, France) demonstrates how maintaining a central headquarters while deploying sales teams across the U.S. can provide broad market access with limited fixed costs. This model is particularly relevant for SMEs with specialized products, where customer proximity and agility outweigh the need for large physical infrastructure.

However, not all expansions succeed. A common failure pattern among European SMEs is the creation of underpowered “satellite offices”, often in Boston, with limited staff, no decision-making authority, and unclear strategic purpose. Companies such as Evotec illustrate a partial version of this challenge: while active in the U.S., their presence remains heavily partnership-driven rather than anchored by a strong independent footprint. Others, like Cellectis, established U.S. operations but struggled to translate this into competitive leadership due to clinical and market pressures. Across these examples, the issue is rarely scientific capability; rather, often it is a lack of critical mass, local autonomy, and clear role definition for the U.S. presence.

Taken together, these case studies highlight that there is no single blueprint for successful U.S. expansion. Instead, effective strategies share a common discipline: aligning each geography with a specific function. Europe often remains the center of scientific innovation, Boston serves as a gateway to capital, partnerships, and advanced clinical ecosystems, and RTP provides a platform for manufacturing and operational scale. Complementing these hubs, distributed commercial models can extend market reach efficiently.



Expansion Starts with Leadership

The examples explored in this paper illustrate an important reality for European life sciences companies entering the United States: there is no single formula for successful expansion. While Boston continues to offer unparalleled access to scientific innovation, venture capital, and biotechnology entrepreneurship, Research Triangle Park has emerged as a highly competitive alternative with strong manufacturing capabilities and significantly lower operating costs.

At the same time, the way companies structure their U.S. operations is evolving. Some organizations establish a presence within a major biotechnology hub to benefit from dense innovation networks and investor access. Others build operational or manufacturing capabilities in regions that offer cost advantages and specialized technical talent. Increasingly, companies also recruit leadership and commercial teams remotely across the United States before establishing a permanent operational center.

The case studies presented in this paper demonstrate these different models in practice. European biotechnology companies have leveraged major U.S. innovation ecosystems to accelerate partnerships and collaboration. Life sciences organizations have successfully developed operational and manufacturing capabilities within established pharmaceutical hubs. Medical technology companies illustrate how distributed commercial teams can support national growth while maintaining operational flexibility.

Despite these differing strategies, one factor consistently determines the success of U.S. expansion: the ability to recruit the right leadership talent at the right stage of development. European biotechnology companies entering the U.S. market must identify executives who can operate across cultures, engage with investors, navigate complex regulatory environments, and build high-performing teams capable of supporting clinical development, manufacturing, and commercialization. Finding leaders who possess both European and U.S. industry experience is often one of the most difficult challenges companies face during international expansion.

About Chase Partners LLC

Chase Partners LLC is an owner-led executive search firm specializing in leadership recruitment across the life sciences industry, with offices in Boston, Research Triangle Park, Paris, and Lyon. The firm supports science-driven organizations in hiring senior executives who can drive innovation, growth, and commercialization.

Founded by Jennifer Chase—born in the United States and educated in both Paris and Boston—the firm draws on over 30 years of her transatlantic experience. This has enabled Chase Partners to build a deep cross-cultural understanding and an extensive international network of life sciences leaders.

This relationship-driven approach is illustrated by Nick, a London-based candidate placed by Jennifer at Sanofi to help strengthen its Anglo-Saxon leadership culture. Now residing between Paris and Lyon, he later became a client and is today a trusted partner—reflecting the firm's long-term impact both with candidates and clients. By leveraging its cross-border expertise, Chase Partners places leaders who are agile, adaptable, and comfortable navigating complexity and ambiguity in a global environment.

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A boutique, owner-run firm linking executive talent across the US, UK, & Europe.