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Dedicated to working for and together with others

As head of Focused Factory Respimat®, Dr Anja Preissmann works for Boehringer Ingelheim in Human Pharma Supply Germany. She leads the factory that manufactures and packages Respimat® inhalation products since January 2016. In our interview, she talks about being a woman in a technical field at Boehringer Ingelheim, describes experiences that have profoundly influenced her, and offers advice to young people who are just starting out.

Dr Preissmann, what exactly do you do at Boehringer Ingelheim?

I am Head of Focused Factory Respimat®. In that role, I am responsible for the aseptic production and packaging of various Respimat® products. Together with my 380 colleagues, I make sure that our patients all over the world have prompt access to top-quality Respimat®

Written by:



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Could you describe the path that brought you here? Have you always known what you wanted to do, or did it take time to find your path?

I studied engineering with a focus on biotechnology, and initially thought I might go into science journalism. I've loved technology since I was a child. Biotech seemed to be an interesting combination of technology and biology, which was one of my focus subjects at school. I soon knew what path I wanted to take. And I would do it all over again.

I ended up at Boehringer Ingelheim because, even as a student, I had always wanted to work and conduct research in an area that has practical applications. That's why I decided early on to write my thesis at an industrial firm. At that time Thomae, in Biberach, was one of the highest-profile companies in the field of industrial cell culture applications, so I applied for a position there.

During my time at Boehringer Ingelheim, I've had the opportunity to learn about and shape some of the company's most important businesses—biopharma, animal health and human pharmaceuticals—and have gained considerable experience in product development and production.

After working in biopharma in Biberach for five years at the start of my career, I spent the next five years in St. Joseph, Missouri, where I helped open a new factory for the production of animal vaccines. Looking back, I would say that those years were among the most exciting periods of my career, and just a wonderful experience.

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choosing an employer?

Most of all, I wanted to be involved in meaningful work and to keep up with the latest technology. I was specifically looking for a company with an international environment that offered opportunities for professional and personal growth. I wanted the chance to be creative and share my ideas, and I wanted my voice to be heard. I found all of those things at Boehringer Ingelheim.

Thinking back, how did you feel as you began your career? What motivated you? What concerns did you have?

At first, of course, I was somewhat worried about being in a new environment, since I was moving from Berlin to the small town of Biberach. I didn't know how working at a company like Boehringer Ingelheim would compare to being at a university or how well I would adjust. I was motivated most of all by the technologically exciting environment in the biopharma division, which is just incredible, and by the many opportunities I had for research and development. I also liked the international nature of the company. Before long I realized that I had no reason to worry. I could always count on my on-site colleagues for support, and I learned a great deal from them. My supervisors were fantastic mentors.

What was it like to be offered a position of leadership?

My first leadership role was in the United States, when I was asked to head up a small team of process development engineers. I was very proud to be given

abandoned, and people were always helpful and willing to answer my questions. That made many things possible and helped me find my way into the new role.

You've had an interesting career path at Boehringer Ingelheim—was there a particular moment that played an especially important role in your professional life?

There have been so many experiences and defining moments in my career; it is very difficult to name just one. But I was very struck by something my former boss said to me during a difficult phase of a project: "Always remember who you are working for, and why you are putting up with all of the hassles. We are working for our patients and colleagues and for the jobs at our site. This is worth doing our best every single day." These words have continued to guide me.

What do you like about the work you are currently doing? What makes it interesting?

Above all, I like working with people. I love watching people grow and reveal their talents, and seeing that good results come from cooperation.

Is there anything about Boehringer Ingelheim as an employer that you particularly appreciate?

I appreciate the family-like culture at Boehringer Ingelheim, and I like the fact that the company's core values of respect, empathy, passion, and trust are centered around the people. It's not just about short-term success and end-of-quarter numbers, as can be

colleagues and supervisors. We have given each other a great deal of support.

You are a woman in a technical field—is that still unusual? Have you encountered special obstacles?

Yes, unfortunately it is still unusual, as a recent experience reminded me. At a conference on “Leading the Factory of the Future,” I was the only woman in a group of 30 participants from a wide variety of industries. And only 10 percent of the students in my university program were women.

I quickly acclimated to a male-dominated environment and succeeded in overcoming the obstacles I encountered. I had to learn to assert myself and earn the respect of my colleagues. In many cases my knowledge and expertise, as well as the fact that I knew what I wanted, won them over. And, of course, a bit of feminine charm never hurts (*laughs*). I enjoy working in a technology-oriented environment. I like clarity and transparency, and I see no need to pretend I’m something I’m not in order to succeed. I’m a firm believer in the benefits of diversity.

Did you have a mentor? Who were your role models?

In the course of my career, I was lucky to work with a number of people whose example and values continue to guide me. I’ve had a variety of inspiring colleagues that helped me pursue my goals, and allowed me a great deal of freedom to achieve them. I have also been influenced by supervisors who embraced our values of

convictions. When you enjoy something, it shows, and sooner or later others will join in. Don't give up, and remember that being "different" can have advantages. Taking a different approach opens up new perspectives, and that can be very helpful. Networking and contacts are also important.

How do you manage to balance the demands of a career and your personal life? Do you have any advice at a personal level?

My position is very demanding, so I need to set certain limits. I sometimes have to say no so that I can pursue my personal interests and take care of my own needs (for example time for my family, exercise, and gardening). Frankly, this is a daily challenge. Over the years, I've come to the realization that above all I'm responsible for myself, and that means setting my own limits.

What keeps you motivated as you start each day? Why do you do what you do?

As I mentioned before, I find my work in the pharmaceutical industry to be very meaningful. It allows me to see that I am contributing directly to improving the lives of people around the world. I enjoy working with people and appreciate diversity and talent.

What strengths do candidates for a job in your department need to have? What training and soft skills should they bring with them?

your own. There are too many disciplines and too many different factors involved. So if someone is interested in a job with us, they need to be eager to assume responsibility—for making decisions, for their area of specialization, for their colleagues, and for their results.

Young people just starting out face enormous challenges. What advice would you give them?

Today's young people have a great many opportunities. I would advise them to find the career that is right for them, to experiment, and to learn from their colleagues—but also, now and then, to listen to the “old-timers.” For me, it has always been very helpful that I fundamentally enjoy my work. So I am willing to have other personal interests take a back seat at times, or to deal with unpleasant situations. The important thing is to be aware of who I am and what I want to contribute. That allows me to find the place that is right for me.

"The opportunities for working in a variety of areas, for personal development, and making a difference as well as the company's family-type culture is what I appreciate most, says Dr Anja Preissmann. "

Sarah Pfeffer

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