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Dancing with an Elephant is Easy: Try Taking One Home! Characterizing industry/university partnerships

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In a presentation describing its alliances with university-based research partners, the former CEO of Cleveland biotechnology company Copernicus Therapeutics used the title "Dancing with Elephants". Another executive with the same company spoke several months later about growth pains that the firm had undergone. The subtitle of that presentation was "Research is Easy; Development is Hard". To extrapolate the visceral nature of technology transfer beyond the tired analogy of its reputation as a "contact sport", this author was inspired by a combination of both statements.

Elephants are considered to be very intelligent animals. Like people, elephants cry, play, have incredible memories, and even laugh!¹ They can also be stubborn and not very light on their feet (elephants, that is). In characterizing organizations involved with industry/university partnerships, a comparison to elephants can be useful.

Taking this a step farther, let us appoint fellow members of the technology transfer profession as elephant trainers. So, what's a mahout to do? Here are a few tricks of the trade:

Elephants in captivity can be "high maintenance"². Key to training an elephant is to understand the animal's needs. Making any collaborative effort a success requires one's best understanding of the participants. Meetings sponsored by BIO (Biotechnology Industry Organization), AUTM (Association of University Technology Managers), LES (The Licensing Executives Society), and other professional associations with participants from a variety of organizational affiliations (maybe it is helpful to think of them as 'zoos') promote this understanding. Understanding leads to insight; insight leads to knowledge; knowledge can usually be transferred to practice; and isn't it said that practice makes perfect? OK, that's a bit of a stretch. But try it - you'll like it - and probably learn something about elephants, too.

Collaborations must be based on the willingness and enthusiastic participation of the elephants. On the corporate side, internal champions are critical in driving the process forward.

Empirically, this conclusion makes sense, and is confirmed by the Business-Higher Education Forum³. Consistent policies, internal training, and other outreach programs may enable one to influence the level of participation.

Elephants are affected by their environment. Recall the old fable about the blind man and the elephant. Taking advantage of poetic license, how would a blindfolded man describe an elephant if it lived in a 'university zoo'? How would he describe an elephant from the 'corporate zoo'? Let's see what he might say...

University Elephant (Academia)	Industrial Elephant (Biotech Companies)
Proceeds cautiously	Proceeds quickly
Disseminates information	Safeguards information
Resource-driven	Milestone-driven

Excellence based on system	Excellence based on individuals
Boldness is punished	Boldness is rewarded
Product is process (bureaucratic)	Product is results (little/less bureaucracy)
Time is irrelevant (unless process is violated)	Time is critical (beat the clock!)
Money is a bad thing (unless you are giving us some!)	Money is a good thing (unless you want ours!)

The elephant trainer recognizes these differences easily and can use them to his or her advantage.

Is there anything the two elephants have in common? Certainly. They are likely to be able to learn a new trick, or at least be reminded of one they may have forgotten.

That trick is to minimize the inevitability of delays, at least those that can be controlled. Many are familiar with the legendary time frames required in the transfer of technology. Delays in the process of commercialization incur significant costs. For instance, consider the cost of delay for a product projected to earn \$10 million in annual revenues:

1 month	1 week	1 day
>\$833,000	>\$192,000	>\$27,000

'Taking an elephant home' requires a commitment to the long haul. By minimizing delays, perhaps the ride home won't be quite as long.

To say "technology transfer is a contact sport" diminishes the understanding of the dynamics required to execute a meaningful collaboration. It requires a good deal of hard work. Establishing a solid relationship based on mutual understanding makes that work worth the effort.

Universities and companies have fundamentally different structures, natures, and needs. As broker for many transactions between industry and academia, our firm is well positioned to observe these characteristics. While recognizing that each situation is different, our hope is that a greater mutual understanding of organizational attributes will lead to the often touted 'win-win' for which everyone seems to strive.

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1 Elephant Information repository, "About Elephants": http://elephant.elehost.com/About_Elephants/about_elephants.htm

2 Elephant Care International: <http://www.elephantcare.org/mancont.htm>

3 Working together, Creating Knowledge; The University-Industry Research Collaboration Initiative, June 2001, by the Business-Higher Education Forum.

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