Case Study 7.1. Business Scouts at the University of Southern Denmark

CRITICAL AREA OF FOCUS 1: "Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivizing researchers to disclose IP"

BEST PRACTICE FOR: "Innovation Scouts" and "Match-making activities with industry"

AIMED AT: TTOs **UNIVERSITY**: University of Southern Denmark (SDU) (Denmark)

TTO: Technology Transfer Office of the University of Southern Denmark

The context:

The **University of Southern Denmark** was established in 1998 through a merger involving Odense University (founded in 1966), the Southern Denmark School of Business and Engineering and South Jutland University Centre. The main SDU campus is located in Odense and four regional campuses are located in Slagelse, Kolding, Esbjerg and Sønderborg. SDU has more than 27,000 students, 4000 employees, 5 faculties totaling 32 departments, and 11 research centres.

The **Technology Transfer Office (TTO)** at SDU was established in 2006 as an internal unit within the university to manage and drive the commercialization of novel research results. The TTO has a team of 8 people, including a TTO manager, 5 business developers, and 2 business scouts. The business developers and scouts hold master's degrees in science, engineering and business as well as PhD's in science. The team members also have extensive work experiences in product development, seed investments, marketing and project management. The legal and IP management functions are mostly outsourced to an external patent agency.

The problem:

Before 2010, the TTO team had only a manager and several business developers. Although all business developers had scouting as a part of their overall duties, **the technology scouting activities were not conducted systematically**. Having many other technology commercialization activities to work on, business developers were often pushing technology scouting activities to Friday afternoons when many researchers were not available. The situation resulted in a low number of invention disclosures from university researchers.

The solution:

In 2010-2011, in order to increase the inflow of new invention disclosures from researchers the TTO introduced a **new technology scouting system** by hiring 2 dedicated business scouts. They primarily focused on the these three faculties, that were the most active in terms of invention disclosures at the University: Faculty of Health Sciences, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Faculty of Engineering. To stay closer to researchers and to be present in their research environments, business scouts, in general, spend a couple of days per week in the different departments.

In addition to the traditional invention disclosure system (i.e. the submission of invention disclosure forms by researchers), the business scouts undertake **two main types of scouting activities**.

The first one relates in the organization of one-to-one meetings with researchers and research groups at departments. The business scouts start by reviewing publications and basic research grants received by department researchers, in order to identify areas with higher potential for commercialization. Within the course of two years, the business scouts have had meetings with all researchers of a particular department at the level of associate or full professors to discuss their research activities and how they can be utilized for knowledge transfer for the benefit of society. Before each individual meeting, the business scouts spend half a day reading research publications of the group they are visiting. The meetings usually last about 11.5 hours, with additional 2-3 hours for follow-up meetings with researchers in the next days. This type of technology scouting initiative has been proven to be the most effective in generating the inflow of new invention disclosures at SDU.

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The second type of technology scouting involves setting up meetings between SDU researchers and key industry representatives (company managers or industrial researchers) active in that particular scientific and technological area. This external in-depth scouting can take up to a month to be organized. At the beginning, business scouts screen publications of SDU researchers and send the most relevant of them to industry representatives. These meetings, which usually take about half a day, help researchers to receive a feedback from industrial counterparts on their research questions or to point them to more interesting areas from valorization perspective. The business scouts also typically arrange additional two days as follow-up meetings, one day with researchers and another day with industry representatives, in order to assess the existence of potential areas of collaboration of technology transfer.

Moreover, TTO increasingly realized the importance of involving university top managers in driving technology scouting and ensuring their support. For this purpose, twice a year the TTO organizes **meetings** with faculty deans and department heads at SDU to provide an overview of all technology transfer activities performed since the last meeting. The TTO has found out that through these meetings the university management gets more information about what is going on in terms of technology commercialization that from all other sources. By acting as an information collector for faculty deans and department heads, the TTO ensures their active support and involvement.

Finally, the TTO systematically monitor the effort spent in scouting activities and the results they obtain.

It measures the number of invention disclosures, the number of industry contracts run (commissioned research agreement, sponsored research agreement or sponsoring PhD student or other types of legal agreements between private parties and research groups). It also measures the frequency of scouting – "Do we keep the pace of two meetings per week?". They also track how often they meet with researchers from different departments.

Alignment to PROGRESS-TT:

This case is a good illustration of the "Innovation Scouts" and "Match-making activities with industry" , Best Practice in PROGRESS-TT Critical Area of Focus 1 "Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivising researchers to disclose IP".

The introduction of dedicated scouts has substantially increased the number of invention disclosures at SDU. The positive technology scouting experience of the TTO at SDU provides the following valuable insights to other TTOs in Europe.

First, **a successful technology scouting** requires the allocation of sufficient resources to that, such as dedicated technology scouts. Having technology scouting as one of many duties of business developers does not always pay off. Instead, the two technology scouting best practices undertaken by dedicated business scouts at SDU have proven to be effective and can be adopted by others.

Second, to **be effective**, the direct interaction of scouts with research groups has to be carefully prepared in advance, and has to be followed up by additional development activity. Third, it is important to raise the awareness of and involve faculty deans and department heads in technology scouting so to ensure their active support. The TTO at SDU has achieved that by organizing mutually beneficial meetings to report and discuss recent technology transfer and commercialization activities. By acting as an information collector the TTO has received the interest and support of the university top management.

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