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A Day Job And A Gay Job: How OUTbio Is Connecting LGBTQ Biotech Executives

Networking Organization Now Has Branches Across The US, UK And Ireland

by **Chloe Kent**

LGBTQ networking group OUTbio has gone from strength to strength since it was founded in 2015, from a small event attended by a handful of executives in Boston to a registered non-profit with affiliated groups across the US alongside international branches.

“I always start by saying I have a day job and a gay job,” opened OUTbio founder Ramsey Johnson. By day, Johnson works as vice president of clinical operations of Aditum Bio. In his spare time, he runs the non-profit OUTbio, a growing LGBTQ professionals group for the biotech industry.

Since it was set up eight years ago, OUTbio has gone from being an informal organization to a fully-fledged non-profit with 501(c)(3) status in the US, recording attendance of well over 200 people at each of its regularly scheduled events in Boston and with around 1,800 estimated members in its local network. It recently held its first employee resource group summit in May, pulling together ERG leaders from various life science companies across the Boston area.

“I started OUTbio a little over eight years ago, just as a way of networking and meeting people,” said Johnson. “We had our first event April 2015 and we probably got 10 or 11 people that showed up for that, and since then it has just sort of blown up on its own and grown very organically.”

He added: “Just when I think I’ve got every gay person in Boston on our mailing list, every month when I advertise the events I get enquiries asking to be added. It just keeps getting bigger and bigger.”

In its Boston headquarters OUTbio holds an event “just about every month,” hosted by a biopharma company based in the area. Tom Donovan, founder of biotech consultancy Lyrebird and director of OUTbio’s UK chapter, said: “We’ve seen what the cafeteria of every major biotech in Boston looks like.”

These events can include input from host speakers about relevant topics, such as diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as networking activities.

Since gaining non-profit status, OUTbio has been able to accept corporate donations which have allowed it to expand beyond being a networking organization. OUTbio is now in the second year of its scholarship fund, where it is awarding a \$5,000 scholarship to LGBTQ students in STEM.

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For the past two years it has also been offering mentoring programs, matching seasoned LGBTQ executives across the life sciences industry with new starters “who are looking to have successful careers while also living authentically and being out in the workplace.”

“There’s still a little bit of fear sometimes that if they’re truly out, if they’re truly authentic, will they get passed over for promotion?” Johnson said. “Will they not get that project that they really want to work on? Will they not get that job offer that they want? People are really hungry to talk to somebody that has been doing this for a long time that is also out at work. We always get more potential mentees than we have mentors, there’s such a big desire for people to be paired with someone that they can talk to about this stuff.”

An organization like OUTbio, Johnson said, would have been game changing when he came out, over two decades ago. “I was out to friends and family, but in the beginning was not out professionally,” he said. “One person that I worked with that happened to be gay said never to come out at work, because you don’t want it to be the reason you don’t get promoted. If I had known there was an organization like this back then, I wouldn’t have gone through that.”

Branching Out

Outside of Boston, OUTbio has established branches in New York, San Francisco’s Bay Area and San Diego, as well as the UK and Ireland.

Johnson said: “We don’t have the bandwidth here in Boston to run those other organizations as true chapters, which would mean we have some control and oversight over them as organizations. What has worked is those branches incorporate independently, they form their own legal entity, and they sign a licensing agreement with us here in Boston that allows them to use the OUTbio name and logo.”

The Boston branch has shared its journey to non-profit status with the other US branches, allowing some of them to also receive charitable status much more quickly than they would be able to as standalone organizations. “It took us over five years,” said Johnson, “but the New York branch, for example, is already a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and they’ve done all that in less than a year.” An OUTbio executive from the Boston branch stays on as an advisor or board member for the tertiary group, to help guide them through the incorporation process and get them up and running.

OUTbio’s UK branch is also aiming to deliver the same suite as OUTbio Boston over the next few years, Donovan said. Working across both the UK and US units has helped Donovan keep a line of communication between OUTbio units in both countries, he added.

“We can share our experiences of having grown the first organization with the newer, younger branches, to help guide them through best practices, what’s worked, what hasn’t,” Donovan said. This can include aspects like events management support through pitching to biotech companies for partnerships.

The biggest piece of feedback Johnson said he had for those looking to set up new OUTbio branches was to not bite off more than they can chew. “In the beginning,” he said, “they all want to be social networking organizations, they all want scholarship funds, they all want to do mentor programs, and I think they can get overwhelmed. I tell them all the time, ‘Take your first two years to become the best organization you can be at having monthly or quarterly events. There’s no need to run before you can walk.’”

Creating An Inclusive Workplace

Biotech, Johnson said, is no different to any other industry in that “there are still a huge number of people who are not out at work, that have felt like they’ve been discriminated against. There’s still a lot of microaggressions that exist in the workplace.” (Also see "[How To Improve Diversity And Inclusion: Five Companies Share Best Practices](#)" - In Vivo, 13 Apr, 2022.)

For biotech organizations that want to create an LGBTQ inclusive workplace, Johnson noted that little things can make a big difference, whether that’s changing a logo to rainbow colors during pride month or making public donations to D&I organizations like OUTbio.

“It’s not rocket science, there’s no need to reinvent the wheel in terms of showing that you’re an

ally as a company or that you're supportive of the community," he said. "They're all very small, minor things that you can do just to show that you're supportive, that you're an inclusive place to work, that you can be your truest, most authentic self when you come to work every day."

Biotech hubs like Boston tend to be small, close-knit communities, he added, so if an organization is supportive of its queer staff members then word will spread.

Donovan added that executive leadership can also be crucial on this front. "Don't delegate this. Whatever that core group is that leads on diversity, there has to be an executive sponsor who shows up and is a direct conduit to the highest level of management."

In an industry like biotech, made up of numerous small- to medium-sized organizations, networking groups like OUTbio, which connect members of a specific community, can be a lifeline. "You can often feel like you're on an island, working in this little company without strong connections to other companies and without a channel for meeting folks," Donovan said. "If you can provide a resource for a minority community, where people will feel innately more confident about joining a group, then you can make amazing connections and really speak to this siloed nature of the industry."

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By **Chloe Kent**

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As gender-neutral language becomes more widely used throughout the business community, the pharmaceutical industry must confront how it approaches the matter of gendered language in healthcare communications.

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