

Health Pulse Podcast Transcript

Season 5, Episode 10

Guest: Lita Sands, Managing Director, Deloitte

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ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Adopting technology in life sciences is a big task. Learn where the best organizations are targeting their investments and how to make no-regret bets for a healthier future.

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Lita Sands, Managing Director at Life Sciences, Deloitte, welcome. Thank you for being here.

LITA SANDS: Thank you, Alex. It's great to be here with you.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: What made you first interested in life sciences? And why has it kept you engaged throughout your career?

LITA SANDS: I had worked in other industries before, in telecom and financial services. And while I really enjoyed the work, it was hard to be passionate about those things. And my first job was at Pharmacia. And I absolutely fell in love with really trying to crack the code, initially, on why were patients not adherent with their medicine. And since then, it's just been a continual effort to actually move up and down the value chain and go all around the ecosystem to continue to find these-- and identify these questions and figure out how to make things better, because at the end of the day, what you're doing is so important in this industry.

We're really changing everybody's quality of life, helping to change their mortality, and fast-forward now, almost 25 years later, curing things we never thought possible with cancer. So when I take a look back at some of my first positions at Pharmacia and then with Pfizer and Novartis, one of the first things I did was I helped to develop patient journeys, saying, these are such complex problems from the first moment a patient is aware they have something wrong, to then understanding why it's so important to stay on medication the way a doctor prescribes it. And there are so many opportunities for it to fall apart across the entire journey and to be recursive in nature, too. So those things really helped us diagnose where there were issues and lean in with patient support where it made sense.

And then the next area was, how do we make the health care provider journey better? There was a really set way of doing things that the industry had done for decades, which was send out a sales representative with a certain detail A to provide the very same message over and over again. And I'm like, if you're a doctor, that's got to get boring after a while. So at Novartis, actually, we did some of the first health care provider campaigns that were designed around the problems that doctors were trying to solve, as well as their staff, and actually, over the long term, build a better partnership with the sales reps because they were really focused on what was important to that staff.

Then, as my career progressed and I ended up moving to the services side, I was so lucky to have the opportunity to work at Amazon Web Services. They brought me on board to build the life sciences vertical. And it was almost like somebody said to you, hey, here's a blank sheet, what do you want to change around the world, literally, like, you can change the planet. So one of the first things I try to tackle was real world evidence. It was becoming such an area of friction, where there was an opportunity for life

science companies to really provide a much more robust insight as to what was happening in that patient journey, quantified by numbers.

It's one thing for things to happen in clinical trials. It's like the gold standard. But when it goes into clinical practice, it falls apart. So we actually expanded the aperture to say, it's not just a real world evidence problem, it's also a problem finding a recruiting patients for these life-saving medications. A lot of the oncology clinical trials were being shuttered because they couldn't find enough patients. So I partnered with Merck and also partnered with Deloitte. And we came out with the Health Care Life Science Data Exchange to help remove friction around getting patients onto clinical trials, and then to be able to be much more facile and nimble with real world evidence to get approval in an evidence-based medicine world.

So anyway, long story short, it's an industry that's continued to fascinate me. The impact we have has such tremendous meaning. And now I'm focused on, how do we modernize the lab? So I'll have more to talk to you about, maybe, in next season on that.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: I love that. I can't wait. And you heard the mission come through loud and clear. That mission has kept you engaged. You've seen that the industry and the health care and life science convergent from multiple vantage points. And you touched on that in your answer, from the pharma company, from the professional services side. There's always a people, process, and a technology component to any of the meaningful change that happens in the industry. Which part of that equation is furthest along in life sciences today?

LITA SANDS: Yeah, well, there's parts that probably are farther ahead than others. And the part that's the least furthest ahead is the most important. So technology, I think-- and we used to say this at Amazon all the time-- is the easiest part, right? There are so many problems that life science companies have had that technology's been able to solve. We could talk all day long about that. But unless you fundamentally change the roles of people in organizations, how they engage with each other and how they engage with health care organization, you will never get the value out of your technology investment. And quite frankly, that's why I'm at Deloitte today.

I saw that problem at AWS. We were able to-- over the course of the five years, we went from companies telling us, we don't want to move to the cloud because we're afraid it's not compliant, we won't be able to validate it. Then they went to the other side, saying, hey, we want to buy these solutions. We want to build. These capabilities are incredible, signing, very significant agreements to move their on-prem data centers into the cloud. But what happened was, a lot of that was happening in isolation within the IT organization, but it wasn't really translating over to the line of business leaders to help them understand how it would help them achieve their business goals faster and what they needed to do to transform to take advantage of that.

So that's one of the key things I do at Deloitte today, is draw a line of sight. So what is the ROI you're getting on that cloud investment? What is the ROI you're getting from gen AI? But more importantly, encouraging the IT leaders to have a seat at the table with the line of business leaders, so they know up front what the business plans are, what the goals are. And they can start thinking ahead and planning out how they can help them achieve them faster. And I think this area is becoming exacerbated lately because, the good news is, life science organizations and health care organizations are forming tighter partnerships than ever before. And a lot of that is around the sharing of data.

Who are the right patients for this drug is no longer a very simple symptomatic discussion. It's a discussion around, can we predict patients who are going to advance, say, from pneumonia to sepsis? Can we use biomarkers to identify the right patient for this life-saving oncology drug and immunotherapy? The relationship has really changed tremendously. But what's happening on the health care side is, they're losing a lot of the folks who were responsible for care before. There's a real issue around staff retention and recruitment. So I think that means that life science organizations have to lean in a bit more with, maybe, more patient services.

Say, for example, in the past, oncology brands were very much focused on HCP interaction, right? It's high science. And they felt like there was enough of a care team, between them and the payer organization, to take care of patient services. Well, nowadays, that's not so much the case. So we're really telling our customers in the oncology world, beef up those patient services. There's a role for you to play.

So long story short, I'd say, the world of life sciences has changed drastically in terms of the need to have tighter partnerships with health care organizations. And there needs to be-- no matter what you do in any organization, if you're investing in technology, there must be change management along with it so that it's really clear how it impacts the business. And business and IT really need to partner together to make sure that that happens.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: You've made it clear, the challenge. And definitely, investing and adopting technology is a big task. There's point solution options. There's platforms. Right now, it seems like there's an AI arms race. How do you go about helping organizations navigate this process? It sounded like it was quite a bit of both the people side and the technology side.

LITA SANDS: Yeah, yeah, it's overwhelming, right? Every day, there's some new article you want to read, some new advancement. And it's hard sometimes to distinguish the hype from reality. But there's a couple things. I think that there'll be a lot of vertical integration into existing platforms. We see it today, right? Microsoft Office's Copilot-- SAP has this capability. Salesforce has Einstein. So it'll be a lot of things that are really plugged into platforms that will make it really seamless for customers. And that makes a lot of sense to take advantage of those.

However, if we look down the line a little bit, I think that this whole idea of agent-driven LLMs, with LLMs being able to talk to LLMs seamlessly, has certain implications where organizations need to think more broadly about the importance of data freedom. So using these applications is important. But how do you make sure that you have access to the data from that in such a way that's available across the entire enterprise?

So what do I mean by that? Increasingly now, customers are realizing that they had such a siloed approach to data, that even when it comes time to, say, do forecasting of sales, it could be incredibly difficult. So if you have an enterprise asset, doing things like aligning the supply chain to, then, delivery of medicine to patients at the point of care becomes so much easier in being able to control for that demand and supply, same thing with closing the loop. We talked about real world evidence before. Using that in research to make sure that you're developing for areas of unmet need is really important.

So I think this idea of data and AI strategy go hand-in-hand. So no matter what organizations do, I always encourage them to see enterprise data as a primary asset, make sure they can unlock the value from platforms that they're using today, because we just don't know what those applications will be going

forward. And as gen AI advances, how it could really automate huge swaths of the organization to deliver efficiencies that we never thought were possible before--

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: AI is both everywhere and nowhere. But it sounds like that, in your answer, you've really distilled some of the examples of-- maybe you don't know where this is going in the future, but here's how you set yourself up for success from an enterprise standpoint. I love that. You hear about AI at conferences. But you also hear a lot of, it hasn't changed my job, maybe it hasn't changed my job yet in hallway discussions. How will the actual AI revolution take place in the life sciences workplace?

LITA SANDS: It's probably happening already, and people don't realize it. We did a study not too long ago where I think we saw, I would say, 2/3 of our customers are doing something with gen AI. A smaller percentage of really gone all out, and they're changing their companies. But what I've told-- look, I've been through enough technology cycles in my career. What I tell all of my customers is, do something because you need to have that muscle. It's not going away. The cloud, look where the cloud has gone in the past 10 years in life sciences.

And some of the use cases are so impactful. One of the pain points we've had for a long time in the commercial space is just getting your approval of materials through medical, legal, regulatory, incredibly painful, can go on, sometimes, for months. And look, the clock is ticking on that patent. And we're seeing our customers really having a lot of success using gen AI with marketing content creation, being able to repurpose things in their library they had before, and, with gen AI, being able to put those building blocks together in a way that's still compliant. You're cutting out weeks, if not months of work, and also the associated money that would be associated with that in the past, sending it out to your agency and having to do revisions. That's one real area that's such simple, low-hanging fruit. You would like to talk about no regret. That's one of them.

Another area is just on general operations. When you get in product complaints, how can you respond to those quickly with gen AI in terms of processing case management? Safety is the same thing. Well, that's part of product complaints, with adverse events. So that's one area where it can take out a lot of the drudgery work to that and also provide you with signals. You may need to know very quickly if there's a problem.

So as we look across the whole value chain, there are examples of this. And one of the things that's exciting is it means that a lot of us have things we do in our job that we just hate to do. It's not what we went to school for. It doesn't give us joy. What we're really espousing to our customers is, go after those no regret bets. Make your employees' lives better. And always talk about human in the I don't see-- and maybe I'll be eating these words one day, but I don't see any scenario where AI is going to be able to replace jobs right now because there are still a lot of issues we need to work out, like hallucinations. There are ways to ground those models in data to help reduce that. Somebody wrote a paper recently. You can use LLMs to check LLMs, to check their work, which has an associated cost with it. But we're still in the early days of this. So with our customers, we keep human in the loop, especially in validated areas, like product complaints. And we make sure that it's seen as a way to help your employees have a more fulfilling approach to their work, as opposed to any kind of a replacement strategy.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: If there was a live audience, I think you'd see some furious note-taking for the masterclass that you gave of no regret bets and where the best life sciences organizations are making those bets. You've officially made it to the speed round. So we jump into this or that, yes or no, some

heartfelt questions, and some, what is your favorite dessert? First, if you could steal one thing, either culturally or from another country's health care system to make us healthier in the US, what would it be?

LITA SANDS: Well, I was-- I got to spend a lot of time in other countries thanks to the work I did with Novartis. And one thing I saw that was really strong were patient advocacy groups. While I know they're strong in the US, I think the fact that ex-US, a lot of life science companies can't go direct to patients or consumers. So they've been working side-by-side with patient advocacy groups as partners for far longer. I saw such amazing impact of-- especially like patient advocacy groups being able to talk to their advocates and their patients about the use of digital therapeutics, the use of mobile apps to really help with their health.

So they were far more engaged in looking at factors that went around the medicine to help patients really have better health outcomes. And they also talk to them about lifestyle changes and what they were eating and their exercise. So I thought that was a really nice, holistic approach that had far greater scale in some other countries than I've seen here.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: We go right from patient advocates and patient advocacy to, what is your favorite dessert?

LITA SANDS: [LAUGHS]

It has to be cannolis. When I was a teenager, I worked in an Italian bakery. And they would let us take home the broken cannolis at the end of the day. I got so fat. But to this day I just love cannolis.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: You said you've traveled around a lot. Is there still a place that's on your travel bucket list?

LITA SANDS: Well, I was only there briefly, but one place I'd love to go back to for a personal vacation would be Japan. I just loved-- everything about it was just so exquisite in terms of just their approach to the simplest things in life. There was such a sense of slowing down, paying attention and always trying to achieve perfection, which is unachievable. So the idea of wabi sabi, which is, when things are not perfect, they're beautiful too. If you've ever seen, sometimes, if a porcelain cup or a vase is broken and they repair it with a gold seam, you come to appreciate the beauty in that imperfection. So there's just so much of the culture we could talk about. But I had a lovely time in the short visit I had.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: What's your favorite way to relax after a long day?

LITA SANDS: Oh, let's see. Well, I do practice meditation. And sometimes, after a long day, all I want to do is sit in front of the TV and zone out. But luckily, my husband practices it too. And we do have a meditation practice that's just a wonderful way to clear the mind, refresh, and re-energize. Actually, it gives us a lot more energy than if we sat there and just watched the mindless boob tube for a while.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: What's your favorite app on your phone?

LITA SANDS: Oh, boy, Probably my fitness app, because we do-- we run every other day, my husband and I. And unfortunately, we're a little competitive. So as soon as we come home, we're pulling up those stats. OK, what's your sprint? What was the first 2.5 kilometers? So yeah, that's my favorite app.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: What's your favorite season?

LITA SANDS: Well, it used to be summer until we all started baking. [LAUGHS] Now I think I really appreciate spring and fall. We love to hike a lot. I'll say fall, probably. We like to hike a lot, but we hate the bugs. So fall's our favorite time to see the change of leaves and to get rid of those darn bugs and to be able to go out, no matter what time of the day it is, as opposed to 5:00 AM or 7:00 PM, Vampire hours. [LAUGHS]

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Physical book or e-book.

LITA SANDS: Well, I'm going to stump you back on that one, Audible books. I'm in love with Audible books recently. I'm reading Patrick Stewart's memoir that came out recently. And when you listen to these biographies that are spoken by the authors, it's like they're just sitting down and telling you their life story. So I spend probably-- my husband is so tired. Everywhere in the house I go, you can hear the e-book going on my iPhone, so-- the Audible book, rather. So I love Audible books.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Love that. You're off the hot seat in the speed round. One thing that I've loved about this-- the answers that you've given in the line of questioning, even the questions that I've asked about technology, you start with an answer about people. And so whatever it is, it comes back to the people. So one constant in your career has been leadership and developing talent. What philosophy do you live by there?

LITA SANDS: Yeah. It's a philosophy I wish I had when I was earlier in my career. Early in my career, I was faced with such intense goals. And because it was about bringing innovation into life sciences, they would tend to put a finer magnifying glass on what we were doing. So they held us up to much greater standards than the way things were always done. So I was always very much goal-oriented, get it done, and plow through stuff. And I didn't think about people. And I would say, over the past five to seven years, it's really changed a lot, especially as we start to grapple with, what will careers of the future look like. For people just entering the job market today or even mid-career, how you get started and how you build your career is so different than when I came on board. Those entry-level jobs are not what they used to be. And also COVID, of course, has more of us working remotely. So what does that office culture look like? And what I found myself doing is building in a reflex, and it's a genuine reflex, to recognize that we all need to be appreciated and seen. I think a lot of people don't feel seen or heard. So that's one thing I do, is I make sure that, no matter what call we're on, there's somebody new, we're inviting them to the conversation, getting to know them.

I constantly reach out to folks with feedback to let them know what a great job they're doing, how much I've seen them grow in their jobs, specific things that they're doing. So again, they're being seen for what they're doing. It's so easy, with Zoom calls, to feel invisible if you're not going into that office every day. And then the other thing I've been doing is-- as we're in our careers, bringing together strategy and technology is going to be almost like hydrogen and oxygen makes water. Strategy and technology will have to go together. So I've been setting up educational classes with folks who want to learn more about cloud, technology, how to help apply it to our customers' problems, because they, in turn, are going to have to go through this transformation.

We talked earlier about IT and line of business need to be joined at the hip, like they do in technology companies, in order to make the future happen. So I give this advice to everybody. Really focus on your leadership skills. Know that we have people earlier in their career who are hungry for it and are looking for it. And we all have so much to offer to them. And that's really what makes a company. It's the people. It's not the technology. So again, something that's been really near and dear to my heart lately.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Well, first, you had people taking notes. Now you have people running to apply to work for you. So it's great to hear your leadership philosophy and how important investing in people and making them feel seen and heard is. What technology or cultural difference do you see making the biggest difference in life sciences in both the next few years and then the next few decades?

LITA SANDS: Yeah, well, again, I'll bring it back to-- a cultural perspective would be ensuring that your organization has the data, analytic, and technology skills, no matter where you look. I think it was probably about five or six years ago, the CEO of Novartis said, we are data science and manufacturing companies. And he hit it spot on. When you think about how drugs are being developed today, the use of protein language models and the use of high-performance compute to identify the next targets and the speed at which the science is moving is breathtaking. And it requires skills nobody in research ever had before. But they're bringing in that technical capability from other places and really looking more at two in a box.

And then as we look toward the future-- for the longest time, the commercial model was so much like-- what was it? Did Wanamaker say, I-- for like \$100 that I spend, I only know where like 50% of the money's being effective or something like that? It was kind of like spray and pray, right? So let's spend this money. And we're going to move the needle. But we'll never be quite sure what's doing it. Those days are over with. So the ability to be analytical marketers and, almost down to a pinpoint accuracy, know where the ROI is coming from is going to be really important.

And again, that brings us back to our earlier conversation, that the marketer of the future really has to de-silo market access, field force, patient outreach, because what it's going to require of them is really taking a look at how the ecosystem is engaging around the patient and helping health care organizations know how to improve that. So it's both the analytical side. And it's the ability to understand how, in a compliant fashion, they can work with health care organizations, bringing them far closer to the patient.

So yeah, I would say, in summary, just, that data and analytics backbone across the entire organization is what's going to separate organizations that are able to help serve patients better versus those that will struggle to get there.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Always about the people. I love that about your philosophy and the way you see the world and the way you see organizations, such an exciting way to lead.

LITA SANDS: Thank you, Alex.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: Lita, this was wonderful. Thank you so much for joining the Health Pulse Podcast.

LITA SANDS: I really enjoyed this. Thank you for the opportunity.

ALEX MAIERSPERGER: And to our listeners and viewers, we know you have infinite ways to spend your time. Thank you for spending a little bit of it with us. If you'd like to join as a guest or leave us a comment, please reach out to us, The Health Pulse Podcast at SAS.com We're rooting for you always.

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