

Strategic Advisory for Leading Therapeutics Innovation - Introducing a New Model that Provides Agility and Precision and Helps Clients Internalize Strategic Capabilities They Need



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Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Mr. Salti, what is the idea behind Strategic Advisory for Leading Therapeutics Innovation (SALT I)?*

Mr. Salti: When you consider how many consulting firms and agencies already serve life sciences organizations, it's natural to ask: Why do we need another one? Reflecting on my career in the industry and observing where therapeutic pipelines are headed, it's clear that life science companies need to move away from traditional models. Many consulting partners struggle to overcome the inertia of change due to their size, making it challenging for them to provide the right-sized talent required to meet the growing demand for agility and precision.

The idea behind SALT I is to introduce a new model that not only provides agility and precision within our own organization but also helps clients internalize the strategic capabilities they need. We aim to empower clients rather than create dependence, helping them develop and sustain these strategic capabilities independently.

CEOCFO: *What gives you confidence that the industry is ready?*

Mr. Salti: Firsthand experience working with many of the top 20 pharmaceutical companies, as well as emerging biopharmaceutical companies, gives me perspective and insight. Also, the data speaks for itself: if you compare today's therapeutic pipelines to those from 20 years ago, you'll see a remarkable shift. The number of assets in development for oncology alone today equals the total number of assets in development across all therapeutic areas two decades ago.

What we're seeing is a shift towards more precise medicines and targeted therapies. As a result, large commercial investments hinging on a single asset or single-indication product are no longer viable. Furthermore, the market is full of nuances that affect market access, such as requiring new types of evidence and go-to-market approaches. The one-size-fits-all model with broad promotional media and large field teams pushing core claims messaging is outdated.

It is increasingly the case where commercial success requires that we better orchestrate and adapt to contextualize customer engagements. This is often confused with simply personalizing to individual preferences; what this really entails is understanding the clinician networks healthcare professionals belong to, the institutions they work at, and the patient communities they connected to. All these factors significantly influence the impact we have on patient outcomes.

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CEOCFO: *How do you keep up with trends, what is working, what is not working?*

Mr. Salti: That's a good question. It's crucial to stay ahead, but generalized trends aren't something to react to, as I mentioned in our launch announcement video. First, it is important to understand that there are many aspects of commercializing life sciences products to stay connected to, and we use systematic monitoring that trigger alerts, as well different data products that provide insights to everything from single trial events, market behaviors, the payer landscape; the list goes on. So, we regularly assess a variety of sources of information.

That said, we don't just collect vast amounts of data to react to; often we see how having more data can make us less intelligent because it can overwhelm and distract us, making us less effective. Instead, we have a methodical approach to how we glean insights that is continually refined. Many life science organizations struggle because what worked once won't necessarily work again. So, it's essential to stay responsive to changing signals by maintaining a learning mindset.

We do not just gather a bunch of data, because one of the risks is with more data, we can become less intelligent because things can be distracting. We actually iterate and refine the methodology that we have for honing in on key insights in different projects areas. A lot of things that life science organizations are facing as well is that what has worked on time, will not necessarily work again a second time around. Therefore, you need to be very responsive to those signals.

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Sherif Salti

And so, to help our clients stay ahead of the curve, we are advocating a similar emphasis on the importance of establishing capabilities that allow for a similar methodology and approach that continuously improves through learning. For example, we're encouraging them to move away from large-scale investment commitments that lack clear indications of viability. Instead, we guide them to adopt 'lighthouse' projects—smaller, focused initiatives that act as beacons for future efforts toward success. By breaking projects into manageable pieces, clients can test solutions, learn quickly, and iterate. This approach, applying continuous iteration in solution development, can also be applied toward financial management. While this represents a significant shift from traditional approaches, it's a methodology we practice ourselves and have begun actively working with our clients to explore.

CEOCFO: *How do you engage with a client, where it may be a smaller company with the actual scientist behind it and is wedded to what he or she has done, and may not be open to what may be a better way?*

Mr. Salti: So, this may come off as a surprising statement, but we're not here to make decisions on behalf of our clients. This is something we'll observe from traditional service partners—they tend to have one big idea, one way of doing things, and invest a lot of time on the pitch. They often try to impose a single, costly idea on clients; it is quite presumptuous to think that better choices can be thought of in a short span of time, or that big decisions without due diligence are prudent, especially if not as close to the business as the client.

Now, of course we are here to introduce new thinking, and how we do that is by supporting our clients with identifying and evaluating different options. We assess everything through the lens of tradeoffs. Our job is not about selling our clients on an idea and leading them to assume that only one solution will work. Instead, it's about hypothesizing and analyzing the tradeoffs between different approaches.

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CEOCFO: *Would you give us a couple of different points in an engagement that showcase your approach?*

Mr. Salti: Sure, I think painting that picture by showing how we help our clients redefine the next generation of customer engagement will be the clearest way to address that. One example that comes up frequently is for how we apply a different rubric to guide investments in scientific and medical customer experiences. Having been an industry partner in pioneering an increasingly digital, omnichannel, and on-demand approach to medical engagement taught me to evolve to make this a reality.

While introducing new ideas to envision this next generation of customer engagement, bringing clarity to decision-making proved most valuable for clients. To determine prioritization of tactics for their plans, many use a two-dimensional framework that focuses solely on impact and effort. However, this oversimplifies the process and doesn't lead to transformative outcomes, especially when effort and impact are speculative. In scientific and medical exchanges via omnichannel, this challenge is compounded because medical affairs can't measure impact in terms of prescription lift like commercial teams do.

Instead, one of the ways we apply due diligence is by understanding the tradeoffs between different options in the context of evolving pipeline needs. For instance, where medical innovation in oncology is a focus, our approach considers various dimensions such as how oncologists face increasingly complex patient cases involving comorbidities and combination therapies. This complexity requires strategic foresight and proactive engagement; our comprehensive review brings clarity to acknowledging how medical affairs play a leading role as the first voice through scientific exchanges leading up to a product launch. Furthermore, delivering innovative solutions may require establishing new capabilities, so we facilitate co-creating nascent capabilities and provide maturity roadmaps to help clients evolve these capabilities over time.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular areas of medicine you find more interesting and open to your approach or is it across the board?*

Mr. Salti: Oncology stands out as particularly significant for me personally and presents an array of challenging dynamics within our industry. It's an area where the industry continues to face considerable challenges and demands an intense focus and attention to detail to make impactful advancements. Similarly, rare diseases capture my interest for the same reasons. While all areas of medicine are important, I find myself drawn to areas with the greatest need, such as oncology and rare diseases, where the challenges are significant. My career has afforded me the opportunity to deeply engage with these areas, applying my skills and knowledge where they are needed most.

CEOCFO: *As you bring more people into your organization, how do you know when someone is a right fit for you? When they really understand the SALTI concept?*

Mr. Salti: There are two parts to your question. One is how we decide whether or not to hire someone to join our team, which is crucial when embarking on important missions. The other is how we attract and select talent.

The first part is tricky because it's challenging to evaluate whether we've considered the right perspective on the diversity of skill sets, backgrounds, and experiences that every individual brings. In my digital and IT background, I approached every problem as a technology solution. But in this multifaceted industry, I've learned to make meaningful contributions by listening to those with different perspectives. This has taught me to focus on core values and commitment.

One key trait I look for is whether a person prioritizes doing the right thing over being right. Early on, I realized that we won't always get everything right, but if we're committed to learning, improving, and sharing knowledge, that's what matters most. This growth mindset is crucial to understanding the SALTI concept.

The second factor is ensuring new members will have a good working relationship with the existing team. It's less about me deciding who to hire and more about how each person considers the impact of adding a new team member on our mission. We seek proactive individuals who can challenge my thinking and lead within their expertise.

We've received many inquiries across the industry, not just from potential clients but also from talented professionals who want to make a meaningful impact. Our reputation for redefining customer engagement and driving transformative outcomes attracts those who share our vision.

CEOCFO: *SALTI just launched. Why is now the right time?*

Mr. Salti: In the first five years of focusing solely on the pharmaceutical industry, I observed changes that seemed slow to materialize. However, since COVID, the pace of change has dramatically accelerated. I never imagined that pharma and the broader scientific community would adopt changes so rapidly. This acceleration isn't just due to COVID; legislative shifts like the Inflation Reduction Act have compelled pharma organizations to be more diligent with their investments to free up resources for different business development opportunities.

Additionally, the need for innovative solutions in the industry is growing, and I believe we are on the cusp of one of the biggest revolutions we will see in a generation. My hope is that by 2030, we will start to see some monumental changes that are beyond any of our current expectations. The launch of SALTI is timed with these developments, positioning us to lead and facilitate these transformative changes in the industry.