

From a bold idea to a thriving biotech: a conversation with the CEO of Argenx

By Karen De Ceunynck



Tim Van Hauwermeiren
Co-founder and CEO of Argenx

Behind one of Europe's most successful biotech companies stands a story of perseverance and relentless belief in impact. As co-founder and CEO of Argenx, Tim Van Hauwermeiren has navigated the company from a bold idea with no data to global success. We asked him some questions about his career path, the realities of building a biotech company, and the lessons he believes are essential for scientists looking to move beyond academia.

Q: To start, could you tell us a bit about the person behind the CEO of Argenx? How do you relax outside of work?

A: First, there is very limited time outside the role. When you try to run a company like Argenx, and you want to do it well, it's all-consuming. That said, one thing I learned, and advice I received from other CEOs, is that it's extremely important to stay fit. With the limited time you have, of course you invest in your family and friends, but it is also crucial to remain fit. In my case, I'm an avid cyclist. I really enjoy cycling, either alone or in a team, on a race road bike. Staying physically fit is important, but so is staying mentally fit. You need to be able to re-energize, refresh, and maintain clarity amid all the daily noise.

Q: Can you briefly share your career path before Argenx? Was there a pivotal decision that shaped your trajectory more than you realized at the time?

A: I'm not a big believer in planning career paths. If you look at my career, it actually zigzags quite a bit, which has given me a broad foundation to lean on. Reflecting on my career, there is however a clear pattern. I consistently made decisions based on people, specifically whom I could learn from.

I studied Bioengineering at Ghent University and had a close relationship with Professor Willy Verstraete. He was an entrepreneur, innovator, and incredibly energizing person. Subsequently, I undertook several internships with the intention

of transitioning into industry. I chose Procter & Gamble (P&G) as my first employer, primarily because I wanted to be close to Jean Wevers, an entrepreneur there who was an innovator and builder of new businesses.

Upon leaving P&G, I was determined to establish my own company and return to the biotechnology sector. This ambition led me to join Ablynx, where I worked alongside its founding CEO, Mark Vaeck, who was also a true entrepreneur.

Q: You co-founded Argenx in 2008 with Hans de Haard and Torsten Dreyer, whom you worked with at Ablynx. When did the idea first take shape, and what convinced you the science and business were strong enough?

A: The idea for the company emerged at a very early stage. In 2007, while still employed at Ablynx, I completed an Executive MBA driven by a clear ambition to establish my own company. The program allowed me to address gaps in my knowledge, particularly in the areas of accounting and finance. At that time, I had been working closely with Hans and Torsten for more than five years at Ablynx and was actively looking for a business idea. Hans had been developing an idea for some time, although it had not yet generated much interest.

That is where the magic happened. At a certain point, Hans and I decided to join forces, invite Torsten, and jump into business together.

Bringing three people together who knew each other extremely well proved to be crucial. One of the main reasons early-stage ventures fail is founder misalignment. Having already worked with Hans and Torsten during very challenging times at Ablynx, I knew how they performed under pressure. Their skills were complementary to mine, and that gave me a high degree of confidence. The idea itself was very early. In fact, we raised seed financing in 2008 without a single data point. Looking back, that was probably a bit bold.

Q: What were the biggest challenges in the early days? Were there moments when you thought the company might not make it?

A: Absolutely, there were many such moments

of uncertainty. And that is an important message to share. Hindsight is nice, but when you're in the middle of it, it takes enormous persistence and perseverance. Whether you like it or not, as a CEO of an early-stage company you are in a financing rat race. You may carry the title of CEO, but all you are doing is looking for money. In the beginning, it was extremely tough. We relied on borrowed equipment and persistent appeals for support. It was pure survival mode. The company was constantly racing to secure sufficient funding.

Although our initial public offering (IPO) on Euronext in 2014 provided temporary relief, it ironically became even more difficult to raise capital after the IPO. In 2016, the company was on the verge of ceasing operations. I remember being on my last business trip to New York.

After a full week of meeting investors with zero traction, I was ready to go home and call it a day. However, one investor still wanted to meet and invited me for dinner on a Friday evening. Despite my reluctance, as I really wanted to go home, I accepted the invitation. By the end of dinner, he asked whether it would be possible to invest in the company. That investment ultimately saved Argenx. Had I chosen to take an earlier flight home and thrown in the towel, Argenx would not exist today. He invested and took a 10% stake in the company at a share price of €10.79. His name is Tom Brakel and he still holds all his shares and became a long-term investor. Without meeting him that day, Argenx probably wouldn't exist.

This underscores how incredibly thin the line between success and failure is. And it is the reason humility is one of our core culture pillars. We remember where we came from. We know the value of every dollar/euro. That history keeps us grounded and humble.

Q: Many PhDs and postdocs will attend the BioBusiness Winter School. What should they understand about industry that isn't taught in academia? Which skills and mindset shifts are essential for them to thrive in industry?

A: An academic career path is extremely narrow, but it's also not an easy path, especially given today's funding environment and uncertainty.

Maintaining long-term strategy and financing in a lab is very difficult. In contrast, there are countless career paths and possibilities outside academia. And if you want to make a real impact, industry is where it happens. Many people joined Argenx from universities or hospitals because they wanted to be closer to the impact is created. One critical mindset shift is realizing that industry is a team sport. Today, more than ever in this complex biotech ecosystem, success depends on collaboration and teamwork. That is not always something an academic environment prepares you for. So focus on developing your social and interpersonal skills, and on how to contribute most effectively within a complementary team.

Q: Do you have any final advice or thoughts for people looking for a career in industry or interested in starting their own company?

A: I often speak with young people who struggle to imagine what their career path could look like. My advice is to triangulate by the people you admire, want to be close to, and want to learn from. When I applied to work with Mark Vaeck, I told him he could give me any job he wanted. I even said I would clean the toilets if that is what it took, as long as I could be close to him and observe how he built a company, how he thought, and how he worked. So again, as mentioned in the beginning of the interview, my advice would be to move close to people you want to learn from and the rest will follow.

Tim Van Hauwermeiren will be the closing speaker of BioBusiness Winter School 2026 on 18 February 2026 in Ghent. The BioBusiness Winter School is a three day course for academics (MSc's, PhD's, postdocs) transitioning from academia to industry, first-time biotech founders and young professionals in their first industry jobs. The programme offers sessions focused on gaining key knowledge of main business topics such as Business Models, Partnerships and Venture Capital.

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