

Belle of the Bioinformatics Ball

Linda Kirsch has made a career of following the simulation and modeling path from electronics to chemistry to biology

By Meredith W. Salisbury

Linda Kirsch has been around long enough to know the secret to success. “It boils down to one thing: you have to work really hard,” she says. The founder and president of her own consulting company, Scientific Sales Solutions, and a vice president of executive recruitment firm Double-Helix, Kirsch has certainly lived up to her motto.

A young, single parent with serious health problems after high school, Kirsch was nearly 30 by the time she finished college, having begun when her son was in kindergarten and working full-time designing control circuits throughout. Her illnesses “introduced me to medicine and science, and not necessarily in a positive way,” she recalls. “It motivated me enormously to get educated and to be able to try and change the system from the inside.” She also worked as a technician in state virology labs, which piqued her interest in the instrumentation involved in biology and chemistry.

A native upstate New Yorker, she attended Boston’s Northeastern University and emerged with an electrical engineering degree — “the most powerful degree in 1979 for a female coming out of school” — and minors in computer science and biomedical engineering. She got her sleep for the week on Friday nights, saying that a combination of fear and youth drove her through those years. “[I chose] simultaneous degrees because I was terrified that I would get out of school and I wouldn’t have a career,” she says. “I was absolutely poor. ... I had to have practical experience, I had to have a résumé, I had to make money.”

STARTUP STAMINA

Kirsch’s exacting regimen paid off. Boeing hired her after graduation, and she moved shortly afterward to Hewlett-Packard, where she worked in civil engineering, computer-

aided design, and simulation electronics design. By the time she joined Polygen (later MSI and now Accelrys), she realized that she was evolving with the field as simulation jumped from electronics to chemistry to biology. The tools needed to describe and design computer circuits were virtually the same as the tools chemists were looking for to describe molecules.

She preferred working with scientists to engineers because of their longer-term goals, and began to deal specifically with startup companies trying to commercialize a new technology. “Those have been the themes of my career: emerging companies and simulation sciences,” she says.

Kirsch has a knack for the startup environment, according to Christian Marcazzo, Lion Bioscience’s director of product marketing who worked with her a few years ago. “She’s got the mindset to deal with the fact that the marketplace is always changing,” he says. “She’s fun — things are always crazy [with her], you never know what to expect.”

Following what she calls “the wave” of modeling tools, Kirsch wound up at Molecular Applications Group and Lion, among others. She has been so immersed in bioinformatics for so long that, says colleague and former InforMax director of bioinformatics marketing Frank White, “she’s one of those people you kind of forget isn’t a PhD scientist because she knows so much.” Her role at most companies has been in business development: training sales staff, negotiating partnerships and deals, and bringing in new accounts. One of Kirsch’s particular specialties is connecting bioinformatics questions across industries. Considering why allowing data beyond firewalls is anathema, she pointed out at a roundtable last year that even the sensitive banking industry had embraced this, so acceptance seemed imminent in this field.

Putting her science and business savvy to work, she kicked off her own consulting firm in 1995. Finally moving to Cali-

ifornia after years of commuting from the East Coast, she set up base in San Carlos, where she can watch bobcats, coyotes, and red-tailed hawks out her window while tending to clients including InforMax and Structural Bioinformatics. “I’ve made the life I want,” she says in reflection. With her history of uncertain health and financial worries, she adds, “Being able to have the life you choose is just amazing.”

Between 20 years in the field and being a self-described “people person,” Kirsch, 51, can’t help having connections. Everywhere. Colleagues note that she can’t walk into the exhibit hall of a conference without being pulled into just about every booth for a chat. According to Michael Liebman, director of computational biology at the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center, “When you’re looking for the six links, you can usually do it through Linda in four.”

It makes Kirsch a natural for consulting and recruiting. “She knows who’s talking to who,” White says.

Kirsch primarily serves companies in figuring out their best growth strategy. “I like to find early-stage companies that are building their early teams,” she says. Filling out the organization is a critical phase that she’s very familiar with. “Too early, they burn too much money. Too late, they’ve missed their window of opportunity.” Then she helps with various decisions: “Is it time to have a VP of business development? Time for a CSO?”

THE OTHER FAST TRACK

When Kirsch showed up at GSAC last year with a broken foot and blamed it on a run-in with Moroccan rugs, nobody batted an eyelash. Most of her friends are familiar with her extensive collection of these tribal works of art. She loves traveling and had been going all over the world when it occurred to her that she was always sending home textiles — but she could never find what she wanted. At last, she discovered in Morocco rugs that are “made by very young or inexperienced people, [they have] lots of mistakes and very irregular, wavy patterns with exquisitely vivid colors,” she says.

Delighted by her discovery, she returns when she can to Morocco, where she stays for several weeks visiting various tribes and villages. Her son, a photographer, sometimes goes along. “I feel like I have a bodyguard,” she laughs. “Sometimes to go buy these rugs, you’re getting in a car with some absolute strangers who speak almost no English to [go] sit in a mountain town for two days to drink tea and smile. And you’re realizing, man, this might not be a good idea.”

When Kirsch broke her foot last fall, it held up more than her rug collecting. She was training at the time for a triathlon,



looking for a new challenge after participating in two marathons with a leukemia society. Always an avid athlete, she was approached twice years ago with offers for sponsorships in professional golf. Now, she’s eager to get rid of her crutches and get back to training. Next time, she says, maybe she’ll go for an iron-man competition.

Though Kirsch is well known for her unusual hobbies and experiences, one in particular gets most people’s attention. Molly Ryan, president of Double-Helix, says, “Did she tell you about Ike and Tina Turner?”

In fact, she didn’t. Even in reminiscing about her experiences, Kirsch tends to forget about her 1972 stint working with the pop singers in their LA recording studio. Paradoxically, it was her introduction to engineering: they were building a database of all the music the duo recorded — Kirsch had never heard of a database before. Though she facetiously refers to the job as her claim to fame, “I had a wild time and quickly realized it was not the fast track I was looking for.”