

## Global Pharma, Swiss Precision: Switzerland's Edge in Attracting Top Executives in Life Sciences

How a World-Class Pharma Location Like Switzerland Can Stay Competitive in the Global Talent Race



Bild: schillingpartners 2025

Switzerland is widely recognised as one of the world's most important pharmaceutical hubs. With leading companies like Roche and Novartis headquartered here, and a dense ecosystem of biotech firms, clinical research organisations, and regulatory specialists, the sector generates around 40% of national exports. More than 47,000 people are employed in pharma, with a multiple of that number working in associated industries.

This success is no coincidence. Switzerland offers an attractive combination of economic stability, liberal labour laws, competitive taxation, a strong educational system, and a high quality of life. In addition, the country benefits from well-established life sciences clusters in regions like Basel, Zurich-Zug-Lucerne, and Western Switzerland's Health

Valley, which count among Europe's most innovative. These conditions make Switzerland an appealing location for companies and a strong magnet for global talent. But there are clear drawbacks:

While Switzerland's fundamentals are strong, it cannot take its position for granted. The time between market authorisation and reimbursement for new medicines now exceeds 300 days, making the country less attractive for product launches. The absence of a coordinated national life sciences strategy, combined with fragmented digital health systems, further adds to the pressure. If left unaddressed, these factors could erode the competitive edge that Switzerland has built over decades.

In the global race for executive leadership, Switzerland must continue to evolve. Access to highly qualified, internationally experienced professionals remains a decisive factor. Yet these candidates are in high demand worldwide, including in Boston, Singapore, the UK, the Nordics, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Countries such as the UK, Denmark, and Singapore, as well as regional initiatives in Germany, have launched targeted strategies to become next-generation pharma hubs. They are investing heavily in regulatory agility, digital health infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems. Therefore candidates weigh their career choices carefully.

## Today's Executive Top Talents

The most sought-after executives have managed across borders, know how to navigate different regulatory environments, and understand how to lead teams in multicultural settings. In a recent search for a CEO for a Swiss biotech firm with global reach, we saw this firsthand: the strongest candidates had experience spanning the US, Asia, and Europe, often in highly complex, fast-changing environments.

Leadership effectiveness in hybrid work environments is another key consideration. While flexibility has become standard, many leadership roles still require a strong physical presence. A recent search for a Head of Clinical Development in the Swiss pharma midmarket revealed that candidates value hybrid work – but also understand the even higher importance of on-site leadership for team cohesion, visibility, and execution of strategy. For Switzerland, this hybrid reality offers a chance to differentiate: combining modern work models with proximity to cutting-edge research and development environments.

## Beyond the CV: the Need for Inter-face Competence

As pharma becomes more interdisciplinary, leadership must span functional boundaries. Executives today are more than experts in R&D or commercial operations; they are expected to bridge the gap between science, regulation, and business. In a recent CFO search for a nephrology-focused healthtech startup,

candidates who are able to translate scientific progress into credible investor narratives and sound financial models stood out. They were not just the numbers guys.

Switzerland's talent market is rich, but such profiles usually require international sourcing and a nuanced understanding of adjacent sectors.

## Meaning, Impact and the Swiss Value Proposition

For many top candidates, especially those with multiple international options, compensation alone no longer drives decision-making. They are looking for an opportunity to shape something meaningful: a business, a pipeline, a market, and to do so within a purposeful context. Leadership roles must offer real influence and a clear strategic mandate. Employers getting this across convincingly attract stronger candidates, especially in a market where purpose-driven leadership is becoming the norm.

Increasingly, participation in the company's success is part of this equation. In start-ups and scale-ups, equity stakes of 1% or more for C-level roles have become typical. Also mid-sized or privately held pharma companies are starting to rethink how they tie leadership performance to long-term value creation.

Looking ahead, we expect more flexible and impact-driven participation models to gain momentum, including virtual equity, long-term incentive plans tied to ESG milestones, and bespoke value-sharing schemes designed for cross-functional leadership teams. While the interest in cash compensation is diminishing, the alignment between personal impact and long-term value creation gains in importance. Executives want to understand how their contribution will be recognised if the business delivers on its strategic goals, both financially, as well as in terms of influence, visibility, and legacy.

Switzerland can build on its strength in stable governance and investor confidence to pioneer such models, particularly in cases where innovation, strategic transformation or international expansion depend heavily on executive commitment.

## Diversity and Internationalisation as Competitive Drivers

One often overlooked advantage of the Swiss pharma and life sciences sector is its openness to international talent and diverse leadership profiles. Our recent analysis of 13 leading life sciences companies in Switzerland (as featured in the schillingreport 2025) shows:

- 30% of executive board members are women, a figure that, while not yet at parity, is above average for many technical industries and provides a strong base for further diversity.
- Nearly 80% of executive board members are foreigners, only a fifth are Swiss, highlighting the strong international character of leadership in the sector.
- 54% of foreign executives have spent most of their careers in Switzerland, i.e. before taking on their current role, indicating that companies value regional embeddedness alongside global reach.
- 25% of executives are foreigners, directly recruited from abroad, underlining Switzerland's continued attractiveness as a location for internationally mobile top talent.

A notable share of leadership transitions also occurs from within multi-national corporations, signaling that internal mobility and long-term talent development are important success factors.

Leadership diversity, however, remains work in progress. Companies that embrace broader perspectives across gender, culture, and professional background tap into a wider pool of leadership talent and foster more resilient decision-making. The most successful executive searches often regard diversity not as a nice-to-have objective but as a central performance factor.

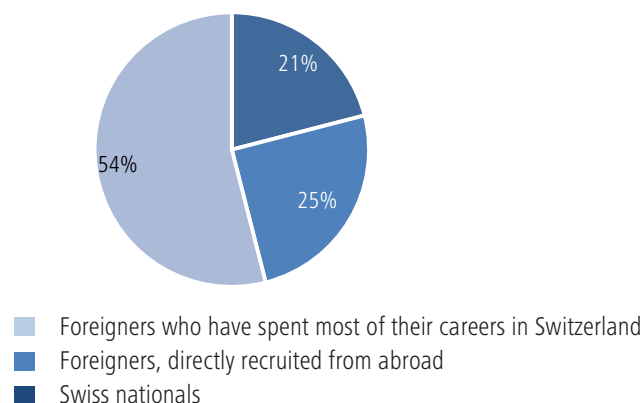
## Conclusion

Switzerland's standing as a world-class pharmaceutical hub, supported by its economic stability, excellent education system, and high quality of life, provides a strong foundation for attracting global executive talent. However, to remain competitive in the intensifying international race for leadership, some social aspects need further consideration.

Today's top executives are not only evaluating compensation, but also looking for roles that offer purpose, strategic influence, and modern flexibility, including hybrid work models. To attract and retain them, companies need to articulate a clear vision and offer innovative participation structures, such as equity-based incentives or ESG-linked performance plans, that align leadership impact with long-term value creation.

Moreover, embracing diversity and internationalization has become a critical performance factor. With 79% of top executives being foreign nationals and 30% of executive leaders being women (a figure above average for many technical industries), Switzerland already demonstrates an openness to global talent. By strategically focusing on these evolving talent demands like offering purposeful roles, adaptable work, innovative compensation, and a truly diverse environment, Switzerland can ensure it remains a premier destination for the world's most experienced and influential pharmaceutical leaders.

## Geographic Source of Pharma Executive Board Members in Switzerland (n=117)



Source: schillingreport 2025



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