

Future-proofing after the pandemic: Building supply chain resilience through partnership

Industry expert John Radke reveals how a reliable and transparent supply chain partner can be critical to weathering turbulent times

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a spotlight on the importance of reliable global supply chains across the science industry. Unprecedented raw material shortages and delays caused by regional manufacturing shutdowns, logistics disruptions and surges in demand have served as a formidable test for both life science manufacturers and laboratory end-users. Now, as the world takes its first cautious steps towards a post-pandemic future, becoming better prepared for managing crises is imperative, with the need to mitigate supply chain disruptions a key priority.

To this end, fostering partnerships with suppliers can be highly beneficial, enabling both laboratories and manufacturers to effectively navigate unpredictable fluctuations in supply and demand. Speaking to the value of such collaborations, John Radke, Head of Life Science Chemistry Production Materials group, shares in this article some of the key considerations to factor into choosing a supply chain partner and explains how our support can help organizations build a strong resilience to ongoing and future shocks.



John Radke, Head of Life Science Chemistry Production Materials group

Meeting diverse needs

Whether sourcing raw materials to manufacture products for downstream applications, or managing the materials inventory of a laboratory, finding a trusted, reliable supplier can pose multiple challenges. The first is ensuring the supplier has the exact product that you're looking for. This may sound simple, but for those seeking application-specific products or facing regulatory requirements, navigating broad product listings can be extremely time-consuming. Procurement errors can also have significant impacts, both financially and through workflow disruptions. Suppliers with well-defined products, applicable specifications, and easily accessible supporting documentation can therefore greatly streamline these efforts. Radke explains: "At Merck, one of the things we pride ourselves in is not only being customer-centric but also being quality-aware," he says. "This is where our M-Clarity™ Program comes in."

The M-Clarity™ Program uses defined quality attributes to place products within quality levels and is designed to improve product and service transparency throughout our broad life science portfolio. "It allows users to navigate to products that range anywhere from being appropriate for use in research to being appropriate for use as an excipient or active pharmaceutical ingredient, making it easy to choose the product that best meets their needs," says Radke. The six MQ levels, ranging from MQ100 to MQ600, also define the documentation and services offered in each class, including the level of change control notification support. "Customers are able to get notification of changes to supplier, label or quality specifications, and at the higher levels, even changes to the manufacturing process," he adds.

Resilience during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that in addition to quality assurance and transparency, strong supply chain management should be a vital consideration when choosing a supplier. Radke recalls this period as “both stressful and energizing” while highlighting how a global manufacturing and distribution network was critical to maintaining stock supplies and meeting the demand. “Because we’re a global company, we have at least 65 manufacturing, procurement, and distribution facilities within the whole organization, and we were able to really leverage these during the COVID-19 crisis,” he says. “These facilities enable us to relocate the inventory to the appropriate geo-region if we see an increase in demand, and also conduct tech transfers of our products. For example, if we are manufacturing in North America, we can potentially leverage a facility in APAC or Western Europe as a backup supply.”

"We have the capability to take a customer from bench to bulk or concept to commercialization"

From supplier to partner

The ability to minimize supply chain risk by offering alternative products and mobilizing a network of secondary and tertiary sourcing makes suppliers such as Merck ideal candidates for those seeking strategic partners. “We have the capability to take a customer from bench to bulk or concept to commercialization,” asserts Radke. “We work with our customers to define what they need short and long term in order to provide a customized service not only from the quality standpoint but also from a scale-up and cost perspective.” As Merck is itself a manufacturer of life sciences reagents, kits, and devices, manufacturing customers can also benefit from a wealth of expertise, lower raw material costs, and potential secondary sourcing during capacity constraints. “We have a full in-house technical group that can be drawn upon to support customers with product information and applications,” says Radke. “Using a combination of planned orders and forecasting models, we’re even helping companies go through the process of planning to generate procurement schedules and find the best total cost of ownership.” Ongoing communication is critical to these collaborations. “If there is a serious supply chain problem, we pride ourselves on getting the right information back to customers so they can make alternative plans,” says Radke. “We’re willing to be honest and transparent with our customers about what we can and can’t do – and this is imperative in trying to find the best solution,” he concludes.

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