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From startup to super company with 115 percent growth



Niklas Norgren, Eva Söderström

Picture: Carolina Hawranek

Recently, Uman Diagnostics received national attention after making it onto the list of "Sweden's Super Companies 2018". Niklas Norgren explains how an idea in the lab at Umeå University grew into a company and a success story.

Niklas Norgren is not only CEO of Uman Diagnostics, but also the man behind the essence of their business. It was 2004 at Professor Torgny Stigbrand's lab at Umeå University, that he conceived the idea of faster diagnosis of brain diseases. Back then, he was researching a type of proteins called neurofilaments, and realized that by measuring one of them - neurofilament light (NF-light) - one could rapidly detect pathologic processes in the brain.

Niklas Norgren wanted to test the idea, and brought his academic knowledge to a specialized life science business incubator. Umeå Biotech Incubator (UBI) provided his project with early phase funding, and soon Uminova Invest and the Norrland Foundation partnered up as long-term financiers, getting the project rolling.

Umeå Biotech Incubator – där forskning blir till innovationer

Umeå Biotech Incubator (UBI) är en av Sveriges excellenta inkubatorer inom life science. Vi hjälper forskare att nyttiggöra sina data för att hjälpa patienter och medborgare till bättre hälsa. Vi stöttar och utbildar entreprenörer inom läkemedel, diagnostik och medicinteknik och agerar brygga mellan akademi, klinik och näringsliv. UBI är ett dotterbolag till Uminova Innovation som samägs av Umeå Universitet, Västerbottens läns landsting, Umeå kommun, Region Västerbotten och Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (SLU). Verksamheten finansieras av ägarna undantaget SLU och med medel från VINNOVA, EU's strukturfonder, Tillväxtverket och Familjen Erling Perssons stiftelse.

Hired a new employee every year since 2014

In the early years, Niklas Norgren worked intensively with product development. In 2009, the company received its first own revenues when the sales of a research kit for analysis of NF-light hit the market. This enabled product development and research on NF-light to create a kit adapted for clinical use.

A year later, in 2010, Niklas Norgren hired his first colleague in Uman Diagnostics.

- We have grown organically since then and Uman Diagnostics has actually hired a new employee every year since 2014, he says.

Early, accurate diagnosis of brain diseases

In 2014, the NF-light product was certified for clinical use. The kit has since been used as an analytical tool in hospitals, especially in neurology, in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and now most recently in Britain.

- UmanDiagnostics is truly the world leader in neurofilament analysis, bigger companies interested in working with this look at us first, says Niklas Norgren.

During 2017 and 2018, the team at Uman Diagnostics pulled off a great effort to get accredited with an ISO 13485 certification. This standardization certificate confirms that the company has an approved quality management system and guarantees the highest standards in manufacturing, business design, manufacturing, tests and sales of medical devices. In short, it is a milestone for any medtech company to show that their product meets the demands of consumers and relevant authorities.

Certified top quality ready for worldwide expansion

Final inspections were completed at the end of this summer, and UmanDiagnostics now has an international seal of approval making the company more attractive to collaborators.

Today, UmanDiagnostics has seven employees and several international collaborations.

Press contact

Niklas Norgren
Founder and CEO, Uman Diagnostics AB
niklas.norgren@umandiagnostics.se
www.umandiagnostics.com/

Elias Eriksson
PR- & Communications
Elias.eriksson@ubi.se
076 – 08 07 938
www.ubi.se

- Traditionally, it's hard to get the big dragons onboard. But with our internationally recognized certification, we expect this to be much easier, says Niklas Norgren.

UmanDiagnostics already has a close business partnership with American company Quanterix. Together, they offer a commercially available test for neuronal diseases in blood instead of spinal fluid - a much less invasive mode of testing for the patient.

Almost 115 percent growth in one year

In October 2018, UmanDiagnostics was dubbed one of Sweden's "Super Companies" - a list published annually by Veckans Affärer and Bisnode. UmanDiagnostics is the only life science company with top ratings regarding annual growth.

- In one year from now we have hopefully expanded our cooperation with the major players in our field, and recruited another two or three people, says Niklas Norgren.

Being a fast-growing startup, Uman Diagnostics recently moved to a new office and labs. However, the one-year old premises are soon becoming too small – again – symbolising their rapid expansion. In the future, the aim is to strengthen Uman Diagnostic's role as a player in the field of personalized medicine.

- We will expand our portfolio of tests and develop additional products for further rapid and effective diagnosis of neurodegenerative diseases and traumatic brain injuries. This is indeed a growing field, and Uman Diagnostics are determined to lead the way, says Niklas Norgren.

Text: Elias Eriksson

Press contact

Niklas Norgren
Founder and CEO, Uman Diagnostics AB
niklas.norgren@umandiagnostics.se
www.umandiagnostics.com/

Elias Eriksson
PR- & Communications
Elias.eriksson@ubi.se
076 – 08 07 938
www.ubi.se