

Edinburgh Technopole The Almac Group

Alastair Hay, Account Manager Peptides, tells us about Almac and why being based at Edinburgh Technopole is good for the team and even better for the business.

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Please explain what the Almac Group is and what it does.

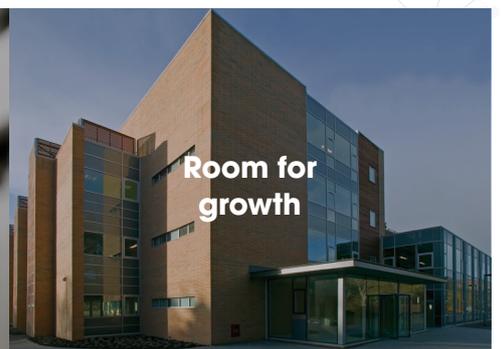
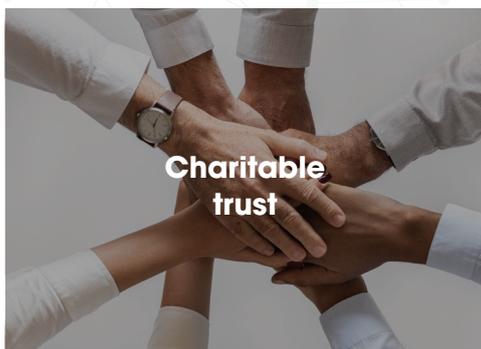
The Almac Group provides a range of development and manufacturing services to the global pharmaceutical and biotechnology markets, including supply and distribution of materials for clinical trials. It’s a complex organisation, with its headquarters in Northern Ireland and over 5,000 employees in 17 facilities in the US, Europe and Asia. Its ownership is also unusual; the original owner, Sir Allen McClay, – the root of the name – created the McClay Foundation, a charitable trust behind Almac, so there are no shareholders or investors, and all the profits are reinvested into the company.

What are the origins of the Edinburgh site?

The Scottish connection came through the 2004 acquisition of a small University of Edinburgh spin-out company called Albachem, which had expertise in the manufacture of small proteins for pharmaceutical research. This was a market Almac wanted to get into and, since the acquisition, it has concentrated on growing that capability.

What are the key technologies and services at the Edinburgh site now?

Firstly, we manufacture large numbers of custom products for universities, biotech and large pharmaceutical companies – mostly high throughput, short-term projects. Another important role is ‘tech transfer’ from the small-scale processes developed in our lab to the large-scale manufacturing methods required by our global manufacturing facilities. And then, thirdly, our newest focus is in personalised cancer vaccines. We are creating products directly for patients, which is very different for us; we had to set up a specific laboratory area to manufacture the peptides and meet very stringent regulatory requirements. We’ve recently gained GMP accreditation and think our lab is the first of its kind globally to produce personalised vaccines for clinical trials.



Personalised medicine is an exciting and fast-moving area - how does Almac remain competitive?

It's largely mindset, and assigning the right people to the right job. These compounds are needed really quickly because they are treating individual patients, and we can supply them within three weeks, compared to the usual manufacturing pipeline of 14 weeks. We soon identified that the most important factor in meeting the tight turnaround times was to assign people who already knew how to make peptides quickly, and make sure they knew how to manufacture within the strict GMP regulations and quality systems required for clinical use. We brought together people who were already in the company and were also able to recruit locally. The core methodologies for peptide manufacturing can still be traced back to the company's academic roots in Edinburgh. In fact, the first employee of the original company is still with us.

Does your location mean you are close to many of your clients?

Yes. We work with a lot of academic institutions on the research side, including Heriot-Watt, Strathclyde, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen universities. We have also been approached by some local biotech companies branching out into the clinical arena; many biotech enterprises in the Scottish science parks are being praised for their innovation and we're delighted to have them as customers.

Why did Almac move to Edinburgh Technopole?

We had simply outgrown the previous East Lothian site, in terms of both size and the quality of the facilities. We chose Technopole because its nearby location meant that our current team wouldn't have to travel too far and we were more likely to keep them; there was space available so we could move in a reasonable timescale, and it was a good size for us to expand the company but leave room for future growth.

What about the practicalities of setting up a new laboratory-based site?

We needed to modify the existing space to construct the lab and an office configuration that suited us; while many of the services were in place, we had a lot of bespoke requirements. There were a few challenges to overcome but the key issues were quickly resolved. We have a very good relationship with the Technopole site team, passing information on and helping each other.

And do your employees prefer Edinburgh Technopole to the previous location?

Yes, it's more convenient for most people travel-wise and they are enjoying the new facility and the benefits on site, such as the canteen service. Above all, it's great to be in a biotech hub recognised for hosting high tech companies.



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To learn more about the Almac Group, visit www.almacgroup.com.

To find out more about the facilities and opportunities at Edinburgh Technopole, visit www.edinburghtechnopole.co.uk

