

THE 5-MINUTE INTERVIEW: Christophe Schilling, President of Genomatica

Christophe H. Schilling,
President Genomatica Sustainable Chemicals (San Diego, CA)

Schilling, 35, along with Bernhard Palsson,, is the co-founder of Genomatica and co-designer of the company's information technology system named SimPheny, which can be used to map the optimal metabolic pathways for the manufacture of commercial chemicals from bio-raw materials. At the age of 26 Schilling, a bioengineer, secured funding from the National Science Foundation to develop SimPheny. Genomatica now has a workforce of about 40 people and rising. It has attracted increasing industry interest during the past few months after disclosing that it has developed bio-processing routes for the production of butanediol and the solvent methyl ethyl ketone (MEK). DSM and Unilever are among its customers.

Schilling: Responding to the challenge of climate change and sustainability.



It's easy being head of a start up bio materials company...because in a way it's all I know. It is incredibly exciting. How the technology is developing gives you all the energy you need. It depends who you are. I am more of an entrepreneur-and I am very comfortable in this environment.

The worst thing about working for Genomatica is...the time that it takes to build it all and make it all happen. It takes years. I am not an impatient person, but generally entrepreneurs want to see things happen and fast. I think sometimes that can be a challenge. For instance with the butanediol [BDO] project, it's incredibly exciting: we have all this technology, we are engineering these bugs, we're making BDO, but we have to build a demonstration plant. By the time I can point to a product that has some BDO in that was made by our process it's probably still four years if not five years away. That's a bit of a frustrating thing at times.

The best part about working for Genomatica is...being able to see everybody's excitement about everything we are trying to build and seeing that with each positive accomplishment we are moving one step closer to making our vision a reality. Seeing the belief and commitment that people and the energy that they put forward toward the common purpose that we have is incredibly rewarding. For me personally it is also because so much of my business life has been dedicated to making this happen.

The one thing that I will have to do to ensure Genomatica is a success...is ensure that we stay focused as an organization and continue to be as efficient as possible with our time, energy and resources.

I am best at...being able to understand and match up the technology and its capabilities with market opportunities that are there and then really rolling up our sleeves and getting into the details of what it will take, how we can do it, and how realistic it is and then being the one that makes the decisions to do one project or another. I am probably best at building a company from a zero to a \$50 million/year company – but I know my limits and this is why [CEO] Chris Gann is here. I am not the guy that's going to take it from a \$50 million to a billion dollar company, although I can play a key role.

I am not so good at...Not doing things. When I see a problem I want to fix it and I tend to have the skill set to fix it, but that's not the way to run a business. It's a learning process-it's something I am much better at. It's really about being able to let go of desires for perfectionism. Delegating is a bit more of a challenge, but it's addressable.

If I wasn't sitting here now as president of Genomatica I would probably be...trying to figure out other ways I could address issues of sustainability. Whether it's related to energy or climate change issues it's something I believe very strongly about. This is one of the greatest challenges of my generation and I want to come up with ways to address that. This is a general passion that extends beyond my business interest. Also I would probably be spending a lot of time going to watch [British] premiership football games and thinking of what could have been if I almost chose a very different path.

If I wasn't head of Genomatica...I don't know if I would be able to do anything else. I really don't. I think I just have that entrepreneurial spirit in my blood. I think I could [do something else] if I had already built a really successful story here. In which case I think I could see myself not doing the entrepreneurial thing again but really more spending my time addressing other issues. I could help impact on key issues in the world such as energy change and climate.

In nutshell my philosophy is...if you are not passionate about something don't do it. Secondly, once you find things you are passionate about, excited about, roll up your sleeves, [and do the] hard work. There's no job too small that's beneath me or job that's too high above me to do. That kind of mentality helps to instill a certain type of culture and philosophy in a small company that is essential. A team work philosophy is very important to us.

If I was a politician my most important policy would be...dealing with global warming and energy dependence.

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