

# Stories of women



INTERVIEWS AS PART OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF  
WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SCIENCE

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Women in healthcare represent **65%** of the workforce.

However, there is only **one female CEO**  
among the top pharmaceuticals companies.

At Aixial, we enable women and men, in all countries  
we are present, to **develop their careers equally**.

We **interviewed** women working for Aixial:  
four scientific women and one woman who is  
making a career in the pharmaceutical industry.

They **shared with us their stories**.

## THANKS TO:

Alina (Czech Republic)

Julie (France)

Alexandra (France)

Lisbeth (Denmark)

Mercedes (Belgium)



*Author: Angélique LAQUET*

# Alina

THE DESIRE  
TO SHARE WITH  
PEOPLE

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Born in Romania, Alina graduated in 2018 from the Faculty of Pharmacy of the Iuliu Hatieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca in Romania.

She joined Aixial in June 2020 as an Advanced Safety Officer. *“Joining Aixial felt to be the right step towards my further professional development.”*

During her studies she took part in internships in different pharmaceutical fields across Europe, such as in Poland and Croatia. After graduating, she moved to Prague to work in Pharmacovigilance, field in which she has been working in for the past two years. *“Pharmacovigilance allowed me to combine what I learned during university with my passion for Research.”*

## AWARDED WITH SEVERAL PRIZES

During university, she was involved in several projects focusing on the development of electrochemical sensors based on different recognition elements (molecular imprinted polymers, antibodies) for the direct detection of dopamine and serotonin as markers for neurological disorders.

Alina is the author of six scientific publications (on detection of dopamine, and on the application of electrochemical biosensors, among others) that she presented during congresses in Czech Republic and abroad. She won distinctions for her works.

As many people from her generation, Alina had the chance to do a student exchange programme (Erasmus) in Florence, Italy, where she further worked in developing a novel platform for the detection of food allergens, among others. *“This program was an amazing opportunity to be a part of a multicultural team, with whom I shared the same interest in nanobiotechnologies. I learned new approaches for developing new sensors and novel techniques used in the electrochemical field.”*

## NO QUESTIONING OF HER LEGITIMACY AS A WOMAN

She never lacked self-confidence or questioned her legitimacy at work; regardless of the environment she was in (university, research groups, work). *"I was always encouraged to speak-up my mind and present my thoughts and opinions. The fact that I was part of groups where all ideas were debated, and arguments were clearly stated helped me develop both scientific skills and soft ones."*

When we asked her why she thinks there are more women than men in the pharmaceutical industry, which is not the case of many scientific domains, she said *"I also asked myself why, at the university, the majority of my colleagues were women"* and added *"Maybe because, although being a scientific field, the work of the majority of pharmacists involves extensive communication with patients. And in order to manage to obtain all information needed, and convince the patient to follow a certain treatment, you need to be not only a good active listener, but also an empathetic person. And women tend to be more empathetic"*.

*"WOMEN TEND TO  
BE MORE  
EMPATHETIC"*

Eager to share her knowledge and to contribute to people's development, Alina wants to continue learning and delivering trainings in the future: *"It gives me a great personal satisfaction when I manage to help people learn something new"*. She also plans to further develop her competencies in medical writing , by authoring reports for molecules that are either marketed or in different development stages.

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# Julie

## A WELL-BUILT CAREER PATH

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Julie graduated from a high school diploma in sciences.

Through a *classe préparatoire intégrée*, she pursued her studies at Ecole de Biologie Industrielle in Cergy-Pontoise and specialized in R&D.

She didn't know precisely what position she would take after the graduation until she heard about clinical research thanks to a speaker - former student of EBI - came to present his CRO.

Julie just ended her final-year internship of 8 months in a famous luxury cosmetics company where she was working on the healthy skin. But Julie was more attracted by the pharmaceutical industry, so she joined a first company in which she had the opportunity to complete an internal training to become a Clinical Research Associate. She stayed one year before leaving the company: *"As a young employee, I was mentally harassed by the bosses. I always had to work more and faster."*

She also confessed that most of her colleagues were women, whereas the directors were the men.

After that, Julie joined a French digital services company as a Clinical Research Associate, where she then could become a manager of a 20-person team around a project on Alzheimer disease that we knew well. She also had the occasion to take a training with a Data Manager, which is today very useful for her to understand data processing in clinical studies. But again, after several months off work due to a high-risk pregnancy, her employer decided to dismiss her. An injustice that she has been striving to fight against as a woman and young mother.

### **SHE IS PART OF INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS**

She finally joined Aixial, first working on internal projects, then outsourced from 2013: In a multinational food-products corporation, in a big Swiss pharmaceutical company as a local project manager, in a big French pharmaceutical company as a Clinical Trial Operation Manager managing a team of local project leaders in different countries. Julie adds: *"It is crucial to have a good level of English if you want to work in the clinical research environment"*.

## HER MOTIVATION: WORKING FOR CHILDREN

What motivates the most Julie today is the fact that she's working on a study on rare genetic infantile diseases. Being a mother, her current position allows her more to balance with her personal life than the job of Clinical Research Associate, exciting but *"always in the field"*.

When we ask Julie what is she proud about, she says *"My career path is quite logical and clear. Step by step, I gained responsibility and I feel more legitimate and comfortable in the position I'm holding"*.

Her strength? She never questioned her capability to succeed and to manage teams: *"The best managers I had were women. Women are more empathetic and maternal than men toward their teams. They understand what makes them happy."* Moreover, she's convinced that women are attracted by the pharmaceuticals because *"there is a humanitarian aspect, we care for people. Female is future!"*.

Her long-term perspectives? With the sanitary crisis, laboratories will have to change the way they work, and they hire less and less. But something is clear, the young woman is passionate: *"I love what I do. I know and appreciate the people working at Aixial so for the moment I feel good. I hope the world will be able to quickly bounce back"*.

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# Alexandra

## A PASSION FOR SCIENCES AND MUSIC

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Born in Cergy-Pontoise area (Ile-de-France), Alexandra has always been living there. During high school, she opted for the scientific section, but she wanted to make short studies without knowing precisely what career she wanted to follow.

After graduation, Alexandra stayed 3 months on the job market before being contacted by company Aprova (former Aixial) to become a consultant.

### A RICH AND VARIOUS BACKGROUND

After highschool, Alexandra applied for several universities and finally joined the DUT Génie Biologique at Cergy University, with the option biological and biochemical analysis. *"It was close to my home and offered many hands-on courses, so it was quite evident to me. I had a great experience, there was a very good atmosphere."*

But Alexandra was only 20 and did not feel ready to enter the job market. She pursued her studies by joining in 3rd year the Ecole de Biologie Industrielle, still in Cergy. Her path was as challenging as interesting: Alexandra could discover some fields that she would have never interested in such as agribusiness and cosmetics, and she could develop her open-mindedness and adaptability through the various group projects. A human and intellectual enrichment.

Alexandra did her first professional experience at a big French pharmaceutical laboratory. She could discover all the manufacturing steps of a drug. But in 2013, there were few jobs offers on the market. Alexandra decided to pursue her studies, in apprenticeship at the IAE de Paris, where she graduated from a Master's in Business Administration.

In January 2015, Alexandra started a mission in a Clinical Quality Assurance department, centered on the validation of IT systems. *"I didn't know anything about IT validation, but they hired me thanks to my project management and contractor's management background."* But Alexandra was missing working on drugs, and the lack of flexibility affected the young woman, who spent much time playing music, that she has been practicing at the Conservatory since her youngest age.

## WORKING IN THE PHARMA INDUSTRY WITH AN ENGINEER DIPLOMA

Alexandra has been in a mission for another big pharmaceutical group for 2017 as a Quality Document Manager. She deals with redacting and updating Quality documents for the good execution of clinical studies.

Her motivations? Being able to beneficiate from a good balance between personal and professional life, and a good working atmosphere: *"I was happy to continue my mission after the maternity leave because it is flexible working, among other reasons. I can be professionally thrived while reconciling my mother's life"*. Moreover, Alexandra likes the project management, and the fact that she has many contacts with collaborators from all departments.

According to her, if there are more women than men working in the pharmaceutical industry, that's because among the scientific fields, girls are more attracted by life sciences, a *"scientific-literary domain"* (because we have to write a lot).

The young woman is proud about always having succeeded in keeping following her goal: Working for the pharmaceutical industry with her engineer diploma. And, to have always ensured to find a job at each step of her studies despite the economic crisis: *"I did many years of study compared to what I planned initially and I'm really happy to have made this choice. I acquired many complementary skills."*

She is also very proud of having continued to practice music at a high level in parallel of her career.

Alexandra adds: *"I could have lacked confidence sometimes because I am a woman. I already heard and suffered from disparaging remarks. But I think that some stereotypes are conveyed within the companies by a minority of people, and that the morals are evolving."*

*"I CAN BE  
PROFESSIONALLY  
THRIVED WHILE  
RECONCILING MY  
MOTHER'S LIFE"*

Now, Alexandra lives from day to day regarding the current situation. She would like to continue working in the pharmaceutical industry, but why not in the cosmetics or another sector. *"I can adapt to different domains thanks to my background."* The young mum would also keep devoting time to her family and to her passion: Music.

# Lisbeth

A PHD AND AN  
EXPERTISE IN  
STATISTICS



Lisbeth has a MSc (Master of Science) and a PhD in Statistics of the University of Copenhagen.

Before joining Larix (Aixial Nordic branch), she has worked in many companies from different business sectors: Research, insurance, medical device, and pharmaceuticals. Her latest experience was in Childhood Cancer Research at Rigshospitalet in Copenhagen.

## CURIOSITY IS THE KEY

Lisbeth is very motivated by the fact that she can participate in projects influencing people's health and especially helping children so that they have the chance to survive.

According to her, what is interesting as a statistician is that you can work in many various environments and join very different companies. *"It is important to understand the people you are working with, and to be curious because the level of statistical knowledge of colleagues varies and statisticians may not initially know the therapeutic area and the environment in which they are expected to assist, so they must adapt."*

In daily life, Lisbeth can help and collaborate with other professionals and make the link with different services within or outside the company.

At Larix, what Lisbeth finds interesting is that there is a wide range of clients working on many different projects. *"It is very dynamic and offers lots of possibilities"*.

Lisbeth is particularly proud of having conducted a PhD project: It was her own project that she led by herself contrary to the usual role of statisticians in companies.

*"IT IS IMPORTANT TO  
UNDERSTAND THE  
PEOPLE YOU ARE  
WORKING WITH"*



## STATISTICS: A HIGHLY DEMANDED DOMAIN

The woman never questioned her legitimacy at work and never suffered from discrimination. Why? Because statistics is a domain in demand so she could easily choose her work environment. *“As a specialist, the knowledge is more important than everything else”.*

How Lisbeth see her professional future? She confesses: *“When I started working in the pharmaceutical industry I was wondering if it would suit me. Now I’m sure that I want to continue in this field because there are so many interesting projects ongoing and future”.*

*" [AT LARIX AND AIXIAL]  
THERE ARE SO MANY  
PROJECTS ONGOING AND  
FUTURE"*

The logo for Larix, featuring the word "larix" in a blue, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "l" is significantly larger than the other letters and has a horizontal bar extending to the right, underlining the entire word.

LARIX is a full service Clinical Research Organisation (CRO), offering assistance in all aspects of clinical trials, to pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device companies.

They provide services within Clinical Operations, Medical Writing, Pharmacovigilance and Biometry.

In 2019, ALTEN made the acquisition of LARIX.

LARIX is today part of AIXIAL group, due to their common business sector.

# Mercedes

VERSATILE AND  
ADAPTABLE

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Mercedes has an MBA in Management Engineering of Charles-III University of Madrid. Attracted by international studies, she did an Erasmus in Belgium. She finally installed there and obtained an internship at European Parliament in the Communication department.

Mercedes joined Aixial in 2018 as a Project Manager. Today she's in a mission for a big pharmaceutical company as a Project Innovation Leader. She wanted to work on the field, in a laboratory.

Mercedes wears many different hats: She is also leading Crowdsourcing initiatives using internal and external ideas, capabilities, resources and networks to improve innovation performance and accelerate the onboarding and implementation of potentially disruptive ideas to aid faster development.

Finally, she contributes to the development of a hyper-collaboration model aiming at promoting interaction, co-creation and synergies between external and internal stakeholders by adopting outside-in philosophy at all levels.

## A QUICK LEARNING AND AUTONOMY ON HER JOB

Mercedes is proud about having acquired a lot of knowledge and skills on her job in a short period of time. Two years after taking up her position, Mercedes is completely autonomous in a job she knew almost nothing about at the beginning. Now, crowdsourcing has much less secrets for her.

Why she chose to join Aixial? Because the group works with big pharmaceutical companies, and they offer to work by project, which Mercedes finds particularly motivating. She also likes having an end-to-end view on the ideation processes allowing to see the evolution of new ideas from detection to implementation. Mercedes is also motivated by the ongoing interaction between external partners and the various cross-functional teams within the company to broaden horizons.

## A WILLINGNESS TO CONTINUE WORKING IN THE PHARMA INDUSTRY

Although she has observed gender inequalities in the past, the young woman believes that pharmaceutical companies have very egalitarian HR policies, which is one of the reasons why there are many women in the workforce: *"Development is promoted, regardless of whether you are a man or a woman. I don't feel any difference in treatment in my company."* She adds that women are connectors; they foster co-creation and cooperation at work. This is especially important in companies that put forward innovation and collaboration.

In the future, Mercedes would like to continue exploring the pharmaceutical world, which is full of projects. She is convinced that there are many ways to acquire skills to evolve in her profession and allow professional mobility. *"You can work in many different departments and you learn very quickly because you quickly put theory into practice"*. A promising future.

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## CONCLUSION

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A **big thanks** again to Alina, Julie, Alexandra, Lisbeth and Mercedes for **taking the time** to exchange and **share their story** with us.

It was **rewarding** to carry out this project.

We hope that it will **inspire young girls** to take up a career in science and do great things like these women did.