

Always Learn: Philip Ashton-Rickardt on Building a Biotech Career Without a Blueprint

Philip Ashton-Rickardt, Managing Director and Chief Scientific Officer at BE Therapeutics in Boston, shares how working-class roots and a commitment to lifelong learning shaped his path from academia to biotech leadership.

Boston, Massachusetts Jul 23, 2026 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - How did your early background prepare you for entrepreneurship?

"I came from a working-class family and so had to chart my own progress through college to an academic career. This prepared me well for being a company starter," Ashton-Rickardt says. Growing up in the UK with no clear roadmap to higher education, he learned independence and resilience early. Those traits carried him through earning a PhD in Molecular Immunology from the University of Edinburgh, postdoctoral training at MIT, and tenured professorships at the University of Chicago and Imperial College London.

In 2017, he left academia to found Smith Therapeutics in Boston, developing CAR-Treg therapies for neurodegenerative diseases like ALS and MS. The company was later acquired by AZTherapies in 2019.

What drives you to keep building new therapies?

"Trying to create something new and important," he explains. After leading immunology at AZTherapies and serving as Chief Scientific Officer at Sigilon Therapeutics through its acquisition by Eli Lilly in 2023, Ashton-Rickardt co-founded Halyard Therapeutics in 2024. Since June 2025, he has led BE Therapeutics as Managing Director and CSO, developing proto-cortex implants to treat stroke and traumatic brain injury.

The technology combines iPSC-derived brain cells with proprietary extracellular matrix biogels to physically replace damaged brain tissue. Validation in animal models is underway with a development path to treat chronic stroke patients within three years.

What is your most important professional habit?

"Always learn," Ashton-Rickardt says. Whether navigating academic committees, NIH study sections, or biotech R&D pipelines, he approaches each role as a chance to deepen expertise. He served on panels for the Medical Research Council, NIH Immunobiology Study Section, and the Israel Science Foundation, among others. He received the Presidential Early Career Award for Scientists and Engineers from President William Clinton in 1999 and earned tenure from the University of Chicago in 2001.

How do you maintain integrity when the stakes are high?

"I have my own standards," he notes. In both academic and commercial settings, he has led teams through complex science and organizational challenges by staying true to clear principles. His work spans CAR-Treg platforms, shielded living cell products, myeloid cell reprogramming, iPSC-derived therapies, and antibody discovery.

How do you handle setbacks?

"Think back to when things were worse. Take one step at a time. I have a great family," Ashton-Rickardt says. His career has included major transitions, from leaving tenured positions to founding companies in highly competitive markets. Each time, he anchored himself in perspective and incremental progress.

What advice do you give to scientists considering entrepreneurship?

"Being authentic and try to be yourself," he advises. The leap from academia to biotech requires translating complex biology into operationally practical and clinically useful therapies. Success depends not on mimicking others but on bringing your own expertise, values, and vision to the work.

If you do nothing else

- Chart your own progress. Do not wait for a clear roadmap.
- Always learn. Treat every role as a chance to deepen your expertise.
- Take one step at a time, especially during setbacks.
- Hold yourself to your own standards, not just external expectations.
- Stay authentic. Your unique background is an asset, not a liability.
- Build resilience by remembering when things were worse.
- Surround yourself with a supportive family or network.

Share this Q&A with someone navigating a career transition from academia to industry or anyone building something new without a blueprint.

About Philip Ashton-Rickardt

[Philip Ashton-Rickardt](#) is Managing Director and Chief Scientific Officer at BE Therapeutics and President, CSO, and Founder of Halyard Therapeutics. He holds a PhD in Molecular Immunology from the University of Edinburgh and completed postdoctoral training at MIT. He held tenured faculty positions at the University of Chicago and served as Chair of Immunology at Imperial College London. He founded Smith Therapeutics in 2017, served as SVP for Immunology at AZTherapies, and was CSO at Sigilon Therapeutics through its acquisition by Eli Lilly. He is based in Boston.

Media Contact

Philip Ashton-Rickardt

*****@philipashton-rickardt.com

<https://www.philipashton-rickardt.com>

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