By Susan Caba

Derek K. Rapp, CEO of the biotech firm Divergence Inc., has been involved in the business of science since 1988.

“I really like the interface of science and society,” he said recently. “I find that interface really interesting and increasingly important as the life sciences continue to grow.”

In fact, working along that interface is one of his chief motivations—he sees life sciences not only as a successful business, but also important in carrying out social values such as preserving the environment and improving health around the world.

Rapp joined Monsanto in 1988 and, over the course of 12 years there, served as Director of Mergers & Acquisitions; of Investor Relations; of Commercial Partnership & Alliances for the Ceregen business unit, and as Director of Strategic Planning within the agricultural unit.

He joined Divergence in 2001, where he has responsibility for strategic planning, financing, business operations and the formation of strategic partnerships and alliances. The company was formed in 1998 to apply new technology in functional genomics and bio-informatics to the discovery of safe, effective and eco-sound strategies for the control of agricultural parasites.

He founded the non-profit organization St. Louis Cares of the United Way of Greater St. Louis and is a board member of the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association and the Greater St. Louis Community Foundation. He has also co-chaired the region’s Plant & Life Science’s Network this past year for the RCGA.

What’s the most efficient or productive time of day for you?

There are two time periods, starting around 9 a.m. until noon, then again at about 9 p.m. until however late I stay up at night. Those are the two highest energy times for me. In the morning, it’s easy to engage with people and be very productive. Then, during the evenings, I can answer e-mail, prepare for the next day—it’s a very relaxed, but productive time.

What is the most creative aspect of your work?

The first aspect is working to determine and assess the different activities and opportunities we have as a company, and to balance the long-term and near-term benefits of those opportunities to make strategic decisions. Some research is inherently very long-term in nature and we have clever scientists with great vision here. They are
Another key piece of my being creative boils down to my ability to be flexible in my personal roles, everything from strategic planning to human resources to public relations—that juggling is challenging and really stimulating and a lot of fun and it requires creativity to be able to jump from activity to activity.

What is the least creative or least satisfying?

Probably the reality that some discussions or meetings end up taking place that are superfluous, either because they are a repeat of a conversation that already took place or they concern a situation that is not yet far enough along—and people are already worrying about a particular aspect or problem instead of allowing the situation to ferment.

What motivates or inspires you?

So many things motivate me. I’m highly motivated by the idea of creating a fantastic return to our investors. They have taken risks by investing in Divergence and I want them to be handsomely rewarded for taking those risks. I’m highly motivated by the fantastic team at Divergence and, knowing that one of my most important roles is to provide the resources and the strategic ability for them to proceed and succeed.

I’m motivated by the mission of our company and of life sciences overall. The environment could benefit by our success, more people could be fed—a major consideration for us in our selection of scientists is their understanding of the need to focus on products that reach the marketplace.

One more source of motivation is that the success of Divergence could benefit the St. Louis region. Our region has a lot of fantastic life science companies and institutions. If we succeed, more scientists will be encouraged to try and advance their ideas commercially.

How do you use devices and electronics—Blackberries, cell phones, iPods—to manage work flow? Are they, on balance, more often a tool or a hindrance?

I do use them, but I would say not as nearly effectively as many do. I use a Blackberry, but only a small fraction of its capability. I am on the phone a lot and I do like the fact that I can know what e-mail I’m receiving. I’m still inefficient at returning e-mails on the Blackberry, though—when you are as far-sighted as I am, it’s not easy composing on those little buttons.

The laptop is the most important piece of technology to come along in my career, as far as I’m concerned. I bring it with me to meetings and now, with wireless, I can hook up almost anywhere. It’s been very important allowing me to spend more time with my family in the evening. I can go home, have dinner with my family and later re-engage with work, rather than going back to the office—or staying late at the office and missing dinner because it seems impractical to think about coming back later in the evening.

What is the most distracting element of your workday/workweek? How do you manage it?

The most distracting element for me in terms of getting my work at Divergence done is volunteer work. I hate saying that, because I love the volunteering I do, and I’m honored to have the opportunities to be involved in the community. But my volunteer activities do end up presenting challenges for me. I have to be very careful not to let them interfere with my work day. I think that’s pretty typical. What do we do about it? I try to have my volunteer meetings either early or late in the day so as not to chop up the work day too much. I try to do my reading in evenings or on the weekends.

But the volunteer work also keeps me fresh. That work can be as intellectually demanding as my work at Divergence. It gets back to the interface of science and business and society.

In what charities are you most active?
I’m active with Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International [involved with approving research grants and providing liaison with different companies involved in the development and commercialization of products to treat Type One Diabetes]. Locally, I chair the Friends Committee for the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, and I’m the next chairman of the board of the Greater St. Louis Community Foundation and I’m involved with other boards.

**How does your administrative or personal assistant increase your productivity?**

Certainly I rely heavily on several people working with me, one in particular with whom I work most closely. She is someone who understands our company, its priorities and my personal priorities extremely well. Because of that, she’s well-positioned to know when something is an issue. I’m happy for her to speak on my behalf in all kinds of settings. The real key to that kind of relationship is the understanding that comes from a lot of time spent talking—making that person a fantastic sounding board, because they have that understanding.

**If there is one thing you would like to do differently in the average workday, what is it? Why don’t you do it?**

I would like to get my exercise every day at 2 in the afternoon. That’s the time my energy might well be ebbing. It’s not practical. So I have a piece of dark chocolate and walk around the office a little bit and do my exercise in the evening.

**What are some of your rules for success?**

Trust your team. Give them the resources they need and the understanding of what success means and trust that they will achieve that success.

Be honest and work hard.

Be analytical but still listen to that voice of intuition in your head or your gut. If there seems to be a discrepancy between the analysis and the intuition, spend some time trying to figure out if there are reasons for that disparity and see if you can end up having them converge.