

Interview: Rob Henderson, President, Biotalent Canada



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President of Biotalent Canada discusses the advantages of being wholly aligned with the government, why the BioTalent is a necessary link between talent and company, and what this means for the bio-economy of Canada.

What was your initial mission two years ago upon arriving at Biotalent Canada, having previously worked for organizations like BoardSuite, the CNW Group, Canadian Dental Assistants Association and the Canadian Journalist Association?

Biotalent Canada was in a great state of flux when I arrived; after being here for four days the government notified the company that its funding would be cut. Before that was even known, I was brought on board to fundamentally change the way Biotalent Canada did business. Biotalent Canada was very much an agency of the government, which can sometimes restrict the way you can represent the industry. The company was not really plugged into the industry, and was seen somewhat as an academia organization. Biotalent Canada is wholly dependent on the government, which is fine but sometimes the government's and private industries' priorities conflict. I tried to mitigate that.

In the last two years, Biotalent Canada completely changed the way it does business, mainly by focusing on partnerships. The organization has attracted over 25 corporate partners, amongst them the vast majority of the associations that represent the biotech industry in Canada. The organization is very proud of that, and as a result is very plugged in now. Biotalent Canada represents these partners, and is in conversation with Rx&D to ensure that the company's priorities

reflect the industry's needs. My background is about half private sector and half non-profit. As a non-profit organization that represents an industry driven largely by the private sector, sales, and business development, I thought it was a good match, and allowed me to have an insight into both worlds.

Quebec and Ontario are the powerhouses of the biotech industry in Canada. How can other, smaller provinces contribute?

Biotalent Canada represents a very broad view of the bio-economy; in addition to pharmaceuticals and life sciences, Canada is also vibrant in agro-food, biofuels, nanotechnology, medical devices, and related industries. Not only are these companies arranged in clusters, but many of the bio-economy verticals are as well. It is true that Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver all have large life sciences clusters; but other provinces like Manitoba and Alberta are leading the Canadian economy in biofuels and agro-food. There are wonderful clusters in PEI and the Maritimes that are also growing. The interesting thing across the country is that all of their needs are very different. There are some that have contracted because of the way the industry has contracted. Toronto and Montreal have been hit hard in some ways, and businesses there have had to change the way they do business. Simultaneously, that has been an advantage for clusters like Saskatoon and the Maritimes to attract talent, with which Biotalent Canada can help. Canada is not just about one cluster; it is about labor mobility, attracting and retaining skills that you need to build a business, even during a recession. Biotalent Canada's job with life science associations is to be responsive to all of their individual needs, and to make them aware of the broad national programs and opportunities that they have to attract and retain the kind of talent that they need.

Looking at Canada's vast geography and diverse demographics, how do you go about finding the right person for the right job in the right place?

It all starts with research. Biotalent Canada looks into its inventory. The company recently conducted a wide-scoping labor market intelligence survey, which will provide a very good snapshot both regionally and nationally of the kind of skills that Canada has, and what is needed from the industry. From an HR perspective, that research indicates that the industry is certainly growing in terms of the expectations of CEOs to grow their businesses. Many of them are very worried about having the right skill sets to be able to choose from different geographical regions to grow their business, so much so that they think skills shortages in certain areas may be a big retardant to growing their business.

From the HR perspective, what do you perceive to be Canada's competitive edge, when looking at biotech hubs around the world?

Biotalent Canada and the industry are aligned with the government; the last budget was focused on skills. They understand that Canada has to be aligned with, assessed and be prepared to have the right skills in order to drive the economy. Biotalent Canada welcomed that news and is at the forefront of that kind of research and providing the industry with that kind of information. That alignment from the government all the way to industry and Biotalent Canada as well is the country's first advantage. Its second is immigration. Canada's immigration focus has been wonderful, and Biotalent Canada has worked hard to attract internationally educated professionals, but also to provide some professions with alternative career paths into the bio-economy. Immigrants who are physicians, nurses, pharmacists or veterinarians may be going through a multi-year path towards licensing, and I do not want these people to lose their scientific skills. The bio-economy, especially with some of the current skill shortages, presents a wonderful opportunity for such individuals to not only make themselves a living while applying their skills to their chosen profession, but also to ensure that their scientific skills remain honed and contribute substantively to driving the Canadian economy. This alignment of skills and immigration policies is a great competitive advantage for Canada that the bio-economy can use to its advantage.

In addition to the 25 corporate partners, how does Biotalent Canada work with the government as a partner?

Those 25 partnerships exist to prove to the government and other organizations that Biotalent Canada represents the bio-economy. It all stems from research. Through studies like labor market intelligence and nationwide surveys, Biotalent Canada demonstrates the needs of the bio-economy and its areas of potential investment to the government. The government does believe the bio-economy is a driver and a tremendous symbol of Canada's technological expertise and it is probably the most educated vertical in the world. You do not get many more educated people in a vertical like Canada. The company presents pain points backed up by bona fide research to the government, which essentially goes through Biotalent Canada and its partners, and executes specific programs to address those skills gaps. For example, the organization has an onboarding program called Career Focus. This is a \$1.5 million grant in process that the government provides to Biotalent Canada to get new graduates into biotech, since this is a pain point for many employers and the government knew that we could implement it correctly for the bio-economy. There is sometimes a skills gap due to the academic nature of university organizations, but companies really need that practical application. That can sometimes be painful for SMEs to

onboard these individuals. It has been a hugely successful program for many years and almost 100 percent of recent graduates who are hired are hired full time when the program is over.

How has the restructuring of the NRC affected biotechnology, from your perspective?

I think it is reflective; even Biotalent Canada's business model has changed over the last two years to reflect the industry more. If the industry is going to contract and change, so do the representative organizations for them as well. In order for Canada to remain competitive, science in and of itself must be learned and nurtured in order for innovation to occur. In other words, science for science's sake must be a priority. On the other side, one must understand that scientists, when coming into these SMEs, must become businesspeople. As a result of the stronger focus on partnerships, given that big pharmaceutical companies and organizations are seeking out small R&D arms to conduct research, these individuals now must become less scientist and more marketer, CFO or HR manager. The issue is that now, more so than ever, large pharmaceutical executives and VCs look at the team, or HR, when choosing small organizations for investment or partnership. It is always about people. With the NRC, I think that all these alignments are great, but we cannot forget that most businesses rely on human instinct. People do business with people they like. They also have to be prepared. Part of the job is about business rather than science. We have to convert all these scientists into small businesspeople and ensure that they are prepared for the changes that the industry is forcing on them. Biotalent Canada is working with the government to address this now essential skill. As some of the company's labor market intelligence survey will show, it is pertinent not only to CEOs, but new graduates too. Soft skills like interpersonal communication are critical, and many people in innovation do not have these skills, even at the CEO level.

Biotalent Canada analyzes market trends and needs to help provide HR solutions. What are the key trends of 2013 in Canada?

Immigration is one of the most important markets that the biotech industry can use to fill the skills gaps in Canada. The Canadian bio-economy cannot only compete internationally; it can win as a driver of the Canadian economy if it taps into that population correctly, and if the government supports it. I think that alignment between knowing the skills gaps, discovering the wonderful market of people here that can fill the gaps, and then building that bridge between the two is not only short term but long-term. It will determine whether the Canadian bio-economy stays competitive internationally and drives the Canadian economy.

In terms of international strategy, Biotalent Canada wants to be a hub for HR in the bio-economy in Canada. Do you have a strategy for reaching out to and attracting people abroad?

Biotalent Canada is actively working with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and organizations like the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, and their Canadian Immigrants' Immigration Program, to present its solutions. These are a myriad of career and skills profiles, job boards and resume builders to educate immigrants before coming to Canada to understand what the country needs, what skills gaps exist, and how their own talent or job history may be able to address that. There has been too much focus on addressing jobs after immigrants arrive. In order for Canada to stay focused and internationally competitive, Biotalent Canada to reach out to these people before they get here. In the next five years, Biotalent Canada's focus will be as much outward as it is inward.

Biotalent Canada recently announced a partnership with BIOTECCanada, which will open many doors in terms of job access. What do you see as the concrete outcome of this partnership?

Firstly, Rx&D came on board last October and they have showed tremendous vision for this industry. They were one of the first adopters. I am very pleased to have BIOTECCanada aboard, and it is a very logical step. One of the reasons Biotalent Canada changed its strategy is because HR takes a lot of research, time and resources, and it is very critical. There are huge differences between the provinces in terms of needs. BIOTECCanada realized this, but it has also contracted over the last five years. Resources are a little bit scarcer and BIOTECCanada has had to do more with less. Biotalent Canada can work as an organization through which they can operate and address skills gaps and support the HR needs of their members without starving one portfolio in order to feed another. Biotalent Canada is thrilled to have their influence and input into its work, as opposed to an organization that could have been overrepresented. They are showing their members that they are adding service and value without taking resources away from those portfolios like government relations, advocacy and policy that are so crucial to their operations.

Why should people choose Biotalent Canada over any other similar organization?

Industry is all about people and being plugged in. Biotalent Canada is essentially the people-driver of the entire bio-economy. Through its corporate partnerships, Biotalent Canada represents every biotech subsector. It is essentially a one-stop shop for these organizations to look at the teams, skills, and the people that run the industry.

What is your strategic vision for Biotalent Canada for the next five years?

I see the company operating internationally a great deal more, as well as being an even more important arm of different areas of the government – not just immigration and skills development, but health, science and innovation, and working as the HR research and statistical arm of all the national and provincial associations to truly align everything. I want Biotalent Canada to be a model for the government to approach an industry. I think that there will be more of this moving forward. I think we will be much more plugged into my vision for Biotalent Canada, which is a stronger focus on academics. Having some influence on curricula and more marketing within high schools to be able to position biotech as an industry of choice is very critical for a long-term solution to some of the current skills gaps and talent issues.

Sometimes we are so focused on money and science that we forget that the bio-economy is about the people and that that is going to be the true driver of the industry in the coming years and that we cannot lose sight of that.

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