

Interview: Leo Le Duc - Director, Amsterdam Science Park, The Netherlands



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Leo Le Duc, Director of Amsterdam Science Park, explains the potential of Amsterdam Science Park as a world-class eco-system for start-ups, mature companies, research centers and students, as well as how the largest beta-science cluster in Northern Europe will help to globally establish Amsterdam as a “City of Knowledge.”

You joined Amsterdam Science Park after many years of governmental service at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of the Netherlands. What attracted you to the Park, and why take on this new challenge?

This attraction mainly came from the Park itself! Imagine a lovely place gathering thousands of students from one of the best universities in Europe, innovation-driven entrepreneurs and world-class researchers. Thanks to my experience at the Ministry, I already knew a lot of the research players working here, and I had worked in close collaboration with a lot of science parks all around the Netherlands, which probably made the move to Amsterdam Science Park smoother.

Furthermore, Amsterdam Science Park truly embodies a unique vibe in comparison with other innovation hubs in the country, especially due its connection with the city of Amsterdam, famous in the entire world for its innovation and creative spirit.

What have been your main strategic priorities moving the park forward?

My first priority has been and continues to be to ensure that each person working, living or studying here becomes a proud ambassador of our Park. We welcome more than ten thousand people a day, and we try to make them fully realize the extraordinary features available in the Park. In a way, we want all the people enjoying the Park in their daily routine to become our voice and to spread the word that this Park is the best place to conduct cutting-edge research, launch an innovative startup or study in one of the best universities in Europe. Rather than spending millions in advertising, we believe that encouraging our members to promote the Park among their peers will be more effective, especially because our people are already extremely passionate about the specific experience that the Park bolsters. You can see a twinkle in their eyes when they talk about this environment, and it is not only about the great facilities or the location, but also about the connection between people from different backgrounds and positions that we foster here.

Most of the entrepreneurs I have met on the campus already promote the Park's attractiveness whilst meeting with their customers or at conferences. They are proud to be part of Amsterdam Science Park and happy to raise awareness about the environment's quality. We already see some tangible and really positive results from this collective effort to raise awareness thanks to work of mouth, and we will use this ongoing effort as a basis to further develop the Park.

Amsterdam Science Park now hosts over 120 companies. In terms of location, assets and facilities, what sets ASP apart from other innovation hubs in the Netherlands and around Europe?

With 120 companies, eight world-class knowledge institutions hosting nine Spinoza Laureates and four Nobel Laureates, eight University of Amsterdam research institutes, 800 entrepreneurs and employees, 1,550 scientists, 6000 students and 2,500 residents, this park ranks among the most important in the Netherlands. We are also extremely close to the campus of the Free University of Amsterdam and the academic hospitals of both the Free University of Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam. Furthermore, we stand as the largest beta-science cluster in Northern Europe.

Beta-science has always been part of Amsterdam Science Park history. Nikhef, the National Institute for Subatomic Physics, received the second Internet address ever in 1992, just after CERN created the technology! We now host one the world most important big data centers globally, while this expertise is contributing to various other research fields given the impact of the Internet on every aspect of life and science. The Park also hosts the Supercomputer of the Netherlands, which is among the world most powerful computing facilities in the world, and probably the most powerful available in Europe.

Thanks to these facilities and to the extremely skilled experts working at the Park, we are able to not only store huge amounts of data but to more importantly analyze them, fostering the discovery of brand new scientific insights. Interplay between beta-science and other disciplines is our main development path, and we can see some interesting crossovers between life sciences and e-Science, which are the two most represented disciplines in the Park. Medical equipment in the academic hospitals of Amsterdam Universities for instance produces a huge amount of data every day, and researchers from the life sciences side work closely with big data scientists in analysis.

How much potential is there for the park to grow further in terms of companies in the coming years?

Even if the Park is already quite densely built, we obviously still have an important development potential. Companies can of course build their own premises, but it seems that multi-tenants buildings will be the solution we will favor in the upcoming years. I indeed see a shift in small and even medium size companies' mentalities, as they are nowadays more and more reluctant to spend dozens of millions to build only one premise. They now prefer to rent offices in multi-tenant buildings and to allocate as much budget as possible on research and innovation.

This shift is not only budget-related, as according to our members gathering together innovative start-ups, spin-offs from research centers and mature companies in the same building is the best way to foster cooperation and benefit from your neighbor's assets or expertise. Furthermore, start-ups are usually evolving extremely quickly, and our members are looking for flexible facilities that will follow their development curb. Finally, multi-tenants buildings would allow a larger number of companies to financially access our Science Park, as the "entrance" price will obviously be less important than if they had to build their own premise.

The park is "victim of its success" and we receive a lot of solicitation from interested companies. We nevertheless are specifically – and quite exclusively- targeting research companies which are linked to beta-science field or already cooperating with the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) or the Research Institutes of the University of Amsterdam.

Is it a current objective to attract a pharma MNC here for its regional headquarters, like Astellas has done in Leiden Bio Science Park?

No, we are undoubtedly targeting smaller companies – even if we obviously do not exclude any possibilities of this kind. Nevertheless, we are currently in contact with pharma MNCs not to properly attract them on the campus, but to foster cooperation between their Dutch regional office or research facility and Amsterdam Science Park's members.

Amsterdam Science Park provides the Amsterdam area and the local entrepreneurs, researchers, and students with an innovation cluster of international calibre. Is international development a path you are currently following regarding future investors?

We are mainly focusing on Dutch opportunities; either related to Dutch pensions schemes or to individual investors or private equity funds, which would like to invest on a very stable and promising asset like Amsterdam Science Park. We are also aiming at creating a large public and national investment fund for Science Parks, with the help of the government.

Knowledge valorization is at the core of ASP strategy and objectives. The park already includes several organizations dedicated to connect science and business, as the ACE Venturelab Amsterdam, the Amsterdam Innovation Exchange (IXA), or the EGI (European Grid Initiative). What are your main projects to drive this cooperation to new heights?

We first want to double the financial capacity of ACE Venturelab Amsterdam, our in-house incubator, in the next two years, thanks to the help of the City of Amsterdam and of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. We are also supporting a brand new incubator project, which will not be physically settled on the Science Park but on the city campus of the University of Amsterdam. This incubator will not be entirely related to beta-sciences and will strive to support any start-up of the Amsterdam area regardless of its industry or discipline of expertise, demonstrating a true multi-disciplinary approach.

Nonetheless, knowledge valorization is not only a question of money! Entrepreneurs are also extremely happy to meet with potential new employees, and they usually emphasize how importantly this kind of informal meeting can ramp up hiring of new talents.

Knowledge valorization at Amsterdam Science Park is not only about state-of-the art research facilities or cutting-edge offices, we clearly strive to create an enjoyable environment with bars, restaurants and sport facilities that will ensure that people love this place and spend more time on the Science Park.

Could you cite for our international readers one success story that highlights the strength and potential of Amsterdam Science Park?

Without any hesitation: the Advanced Research Center for Nanolithography (ARCNL), which notably gathers ASML, the world's leading provider of lithography systems for the semiconductor industry, and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), supported by grants from the city

of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam area, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. This success story really illustrates how a very innovative company facing fierce competition decides to partner with fundamental research centers to remain at the forefront of its industry.

This kind of case study is really a win-win partnership, as ASML benefits of cutting-edge research facilities and world-class researchers' expertise from the academic side, while researchers extremely valorize the applied knowledge owned by the company, which will help the fundamental researchers to better undertake future fundamental research. Considering the extremely positive feedback, I have received from both private and public sides, I think that this pioneering partnership will inspire other companies and other Science Parks in the Netherlands.

You are at the head of the Amsterdam Science Park but also a member of the Amsterdam Network Council. What image of Amsterdam would you like to showcase to our international readers?

The city has always been particularly renowned for its tourism, but the City Council recently decided to emphasize both at local and international levels that Amsterdam is also a city of knowledge. Amsterdam is a bigger city than Utrecht or Leiden, and innovation hubs are spread out in the city and among other city's features, and as an agglomeration Amsterdam has an impressive knowledge offering. I think that the key elements sustaining this idea of "knowledge hub", are the Amsterdam Science Park, research centers and innovation labs that are already available in the city, but we still need to work on the perceptions and awareness of both citizens and the business community.

How will you define success for Amsterdam Science Park in the next five years?

We want to present Amsterdam Science Park and the city of Amsterdam as a "city of knowledge" on the global map. We also want to continue to improve the eco-system experience, striving to develop each side of the campus simultaneously and accordingly: offices and research facilities of course, but also residential and leisure opportunities to create even more synergy between our members.

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