

Interview: Philippe Archinard – President, Lyonbiopole, France



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02.06.2016

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Lyonbiopole was established in 2005 as a cluster designed to support the local business community focused on infectious diseases and microbiology. Philippe Archinard, the Biopole's president, traces the evolution of the cluster over the last decade while underscoring the critical importance of transparency and collaboration between government, industry and academia.

What is your assessment of where Lyon and the Lyonbiopole stand in comparison to the rest of France?

Each cluster in France started with unique origins, stakeholders, and objectives. However, Lyonbiopole is markedly different to other clusters because of its foundation, which originates with large industries and the city. Other clusters in France started for instance with a greater focus on academia and SMEs. Lyon Biopole was essentially initiated by the Mayor of Lyon, Gerard Collomb, and Dr. Christophe Mérieux in 2005. Furthermore, the Biopole is very much focused on infectious diseases and microbiology.

Lyon has a unique capacity to interact and discuss for the benefit of the community; regardless of politics. Despite any political differences that may exist, the Mérieux family and the Mayor of Lyon always act as regional representatives working together for the benefit of economic development

and prosperity. However, this is not always evident. Lyon's life science industry has not been affected by any political opinion; we have a positive impetus and capacity for ambitious plans. This has allowed the cluster to evolve from an originally narrow scope to one that embraces all life sciences, with an agenda that includes fostering public-private partnerships to help finance companies or help them find partners to enter international markets.

We have also been investing greatly in infrastructure. Innovation does not happen in a vacuum; you need a place where people can meet, be it small or large organizations. We have been very ambitious in setting up a 2,000 square meter Center of Infectology, as well as Accinov, a building dedicated to analytical services and biomanufacturing. The idea is to enable small enterprises with limited resources to retain a higher part of the value of their products so they can avoid using contract manufacturers, which is particularly relevant for biologics. SMEs here can expect GMP facilities, quality interaction with French regulators and technicians/specialists that can help them finalize their processes.

All of these initiatives have been major endeavors, and from a financial and critical mass far beyond what a small association would have normally tackled. Because of this city's unique ability to interact between government and academia and industry, with common agendas, there has been a solid growth and hopefully return on that investment. Thus far we have seen an incredible evolution, having started from scratch just a decade ago.

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Is Lyon's life science ecosystem driven largely from private family companies, or does the local government provide enough incentives to stimulate growth as well?

Most tax credits and financial incentives available in Lyon are accessible nationwide. The cost of business is certainly a bit lower here than in Paris, but the main difference is that all stakeholders here work in cooperation. In Paris, there have been too many players and may be too many kingdoms working without a shared and common agenda. Here we have been able to achieve more with fewer resources because of this unique capacity and collaboration. The economy comes before political interest. It is true that the Mérieux family has been the source of most of the industrial success experienced over the last two or three generations. But these large companies like Sanofi or bioMérieux act first as a citizen of the region. We at Lyonbiopole must ensure that we help build an infrastructure and ecosystem that nurtures innovation for the sake of developing SMEs and academic excellence. Retaining these large groups, their headquarters, their research departments here is not obvious, is not a given. They will not stay in Lyon forever just because they

are here today; they need something else. The management of these companies has understood that over time, a vibrant, innovative ecosystem at their door will benefit them and will justify keeping here a very significant footprint.

Does the public-private partnership model offer benefits for the future of Lyon?

Relating to SMEs, France only arrived to this game about ten years ago. Culturally speaking, PPPs are found more frequently in other countries in the realm of SMEs. In the past, SMEs never approached academia because they felt that they could not match or provide for academia's interests. During the last decade, the ability to plug SMEs into this network of relationships has truly taken off. This was helped by the assistance of state subsidies, particularly ones devoted to R&D. Those funds were indeed the catalyst ten years ago to help kickstart this cluster, from which the true beneficiaries were SMEs and academia.. Back in 2005, 100 percent of the activity of the cluster was dedicated to finding good projects for funding. Now it only represents 20 percent of Lyonbiopole's activity. The rest is concentrated on economic development of SMEs, animation of the ecosystem, international partnerships, etc. We have moved from the science and project focus to corporate services; the Biopole is now focused more downstream in the value chain and towards the market itself. As such this public-private partnership is less of a critical part, but it was cathartic to the initiation of the process nonetheless.

In the US, there is a good balance between pure academic research, technological research and applied research. In France, technological research has been and is still extremely underdeveloped. Lots of money is spent on basic research here, and innovation is stalled because of this lack of work in the middle to create true innovation from invention. It is too theoretical and distant for the industry to take over directly from academia very often. You need this middle part to create building blocks to make partial solutions that large industry can use to put something together more commercial. Lyonbiopole has tried to fill that gap while leading the creation of Bioaster, the only technological Research Institute dedicated to life sciences in the French government initiative in 2010. In Bioaster every euro spent in the industry is matched by the state, up to €180 million annually until 2019. The idea is to bring together people from large industry, small industry and academia under one roof, ensuring a constant flow of people coming and going for the duration of their individual project. This should create a lot of added value to work with people from academia. For academic people for instance the capacity to learn and research in a more regulated and better quality environment could help them back in their own academia. Everyone talks about open innovation but ultimately nobody does it. You can only do it when people from different environments and contexts get together to find solutions. Projects need to be challenging enough

for this to happen. Before it was completely different and larger corporations were not ready to share. Now they understand that they can spend billions in R&D and they will not make it alone. That was a prerequisite. The context is there but you have to work on it and to fulfill some prerequisite like focusing on precompetitive technologies and on huge challenges that no industry or academic group alone can tackle. It forces people to be very ambitious in their endeavors. It has taken a longer time than expected but I see now that the industry adhesion and project flow is increasing.

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Given the centralized nature of France, what are the necessary steps for the future for Lyon and the Biopole's role to be more competitive in the future?

Being far away from Paris is also an opportunity, not only an issue. You may waste less time – you can constantly meet people much more efficiently and do less politics. Perhaps we are not the best in France at promoting ourselves; the only way to circumvent this is through example. The more we can showcase the reality versus the image, the more we can document real partnerships, as evidenced by the strong and increasing tie between Lyon and Boston, the more we will be seen as we truly are. We will see this connection helps forge a strong cluster of bioscience, and this is how we can show that France is worth more than its caricature. The reality is indeed better than the appearance. We can't be everywhere at the top and will never get the critical mass of the US on all fronts but we can match it in some fields and the cost of doing research is significantly cheaper here.

Now that the ecosystem is in place, we want to create ties with the finance community and with major countries like the US; therefore by necessity you have to think internationally. Being small was a problem in the past, but perhaps today it is an opportunity. We should ask ourselves, where do we have the best position to excel in open innovation and international development? Is it in the biggest developed country, or perhaps in a smaller place where by design it intrinsically leads to these concepts? Here we know that at least Lyon or France cannot suffice. Switzerland or Israel are good examples because they know they cannot do it alone so they think globally. There are pros and cons in every place. If you articulate your strengths well, you can position yourself well anywhere. This is what we are trying to do on a daily basis.

Where do you see Lyon Biopole in five years?

In five years, our success should be measured by the global perception of Lyon as a bigger player, by our ability to have kept the decision centers of large companies and by the fact the SMEs based

here will have grown in size with a higher part of their financing coming from abroad. We hope to have key successes in the field of life sciences, through some products or services that are born here and sold worldwide. The only issue is visibility. The danger when you are small and far away, is that complacency becomes more commonplace. We should not be afraid of the international challenges. We must carefully position ourselves based on our strengths; we cannot be strong in every discipline so instead we should focus on our historical strengths in infectious diseases, microbiology and cancer.

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