Interview: Nasri Nahas – CEO, Biopôle, Switzerland



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Nasri Nahas, CEO of Biopôle in Switzerland, discusses his motivations for joining the biotech, and his mission to re-position the organization as a life sciences ecosystem bringing together academia, business, and research.

What motivated you to join Biopôle in October 2015?

I began my career as a molecular biologist in France before working as a business developer and manager for several prominent biotech companies. As General Manager, responsible for strategic business activities as well as leading the operational, HR and financial functions of an organization, I have learned the tough way how “alone” one can be in such a position and how valuable it can be to have a network of like minds.

Therefore, when I heard of this opportunity at Biopôle, I immediately felt the unique opportunity for me to build what I always dreamed to have as a CEO of a biotech company: belonging to a dynamic life sciences ecosystem and a vibrant community. A key aspect of the challenge is building something beyond real-estate, which we at Biopôle consider as a means and not an end. Our mission to create a vibrant community is what the Canton of Vaud values most about this unique life sciences park it is promoting.

How would you qualify the mandate you have been assigned?

In the past, Biopôle was considered a luxury space for companies to establish their headquarters. We want to reposition Biopôle as a life sciences ecosystem bringing together academia, business, and research; our aim is that there is no separation between research institutes, universities, SMEs, start-ups and multinational corporations. We need this diversity to build a vibrant community. We provide value to SMEs and startups by accompanying them during critical development and early growth stages. We help them identify challenges and solve complex problems. Our clients consider us as community managers and service providers and not space providers. We are offering companies a comprehensive and dynamic ecosystem in which they can find qualified partners and engage with the major stakeholders in their respective industries. Our trained staff and network of strategic partners provide high-quality services in the field of life sciences. Our clients are therefore electing to be part of this exclusive community, and not simply looking for space.

Can you please introduce the nature of Biopôle's business to our audience?

Biopôle is a private company that functions like any business. The Canton of Vaud owns 97% of the company and expects Biopôle to break even every year. We have committed 134 000 square meters to developing a specialized community in life sciences. As owner of the land, we commission private investors to construct buildings for office and laboratory space. Investors thus purchase a kind of "right of use" over an 80-year period, whereby they commit to construct the building and rent it to future tenants active in the life sciences. There is therefore no direct financial relationship between Biopôle and our members. We Biopôle then devote our efforts to 1) the promotion of the site, 2) the service provision for the community and 3) the community management so that everybody feels at home here and part of a vibrant ecosystem.

Tell us more about what exactly has been accomplished since you took the helm of Biopôle a year ago?

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Our first task was to define and differentiate the offering of Biopôle to current and prospective members. We then produced a suite of new branding and communications materials, including an intranet for the community. These clearly communicate our offering and have been put to good use online and offline. In short, the new Biopôle is now highly visible and we have received excellent feedback from all stakeholders. We have already implemented certain aspects of our vision. Our convention center has hosted several social and technological events for the scientific community, accommodating over 50 clients for each event. In the early stages of business development, SMEs and startups concentrate on the core aspects of their activities, namely product and strategy. They

are unable to allocate significant time and resources to support functions. As a consequence, Biopôle has signed more than 11 agreements with innovative and disruptive firms in the field of life sciences to assist our tenants in functions like communications, finance, marketing and accounting at a very competitive rate. Biopôle members can subscribe to a single service from a wide selection of solutions and enjoy a 30% discount rate if they choose to upgrade at a later stage. These discount bundles have fostered a trusted relationship and emboldened the community spirit found at Biopôle.

What is Biopôle's relationship to multinational corporations?

Large enterprises have played a significant role in the success of Biopôle. Multinational corporations thrive in an innovative and disruptive ecosystem spurred by startups and SMEs. Nestlé Health Science, one of our distinguished members, joined Biopôle to gain access to emerging technological players and profit from the creative and entrepreneurial spirit that we have spawned. Leading businesses want to contribute to this collaborative and inclusive community on an equal footing.

Our far-reaching network enables businesses to access a comprehensive set of services, companies, research facilities and academic institutes in their particular fields at a walking distance! We can link a research facility to a leading neurologist or schedule a startup's pitch presentation before a multinational corporation. Our partner companies also feel they can mitigate risk barriers by belonging to our unique community at the cutting edge of the industry.

How would you define your success today?

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Biopôle's success is deeply rooted in the canton's investments in innovation and life sciences. The canton's strategic vision introduced at the turn of the century has spurred immunology's historical presence at Biopôle alongside oncology. The canton's large-scale market research had concluded that oncology, immunology personalized medicine and nutritional health would dominate the life sciences industry of the future and that Biopôle, while open to all therapeutic areas, had to galvanize its efforts in these four areas at the earliest opportunity. Our clients have expressed great enthusiasm for this type of life sciences community we are putting together since a year now, and in this respect I invite your audience to consult testimonials featured on our website. Our next challenge is to build, in our four areas of focus, a fully-scaled comprehensive ecosystem from therapeutic care and small molecules to medical devices, diagnosis, and home therapy. In a nutshell, the success of Biopôle corresponds to the success of its members who positively thrive

and deliver innovations thanks to our vibrant community.

How does Switzerland compare with the world regarding entrepreneurial spirit and infrastructure?

Switzerland, being surrounded by mountains, has developed the mercantile and liberal business approach of an island. To survive as a player the Swiss market, one needs to be open to globalization and international markets. Since the Swiss have not been blessed with raw materials and natural resources, or blessed by not having those, they have always had to compete on innovation and technology. Since the Swiss domestic market is limited, Swiss companies are required to make their services indispensable abroad. The Swiss education system encourages vocational, professional and technical training. All the above made Switzerland develop a thriving innovation and openness-based business culture coupled with a commitment to social justice and equality.

Switzerland therefore complements its favorable and dynamic business environment with a unique culture of training and research, particularly in the field of life sciences. The technology, engineering talent and research available in Switzerland are unmatched. Biopôle has created a vast matrix comprising Swiss alumni networks and Swiss training facilities which bolsters our entrepreneurial spirit. Instead of segregating academia, training and innovation, the Swiss model catalyzes synergies between all stakeholders, particularly universities and research & development, to the benefit of companies and entrepreneurs. Switzerland has opened channels for expertise exchange and gateways for researchers to take their findings to the market. The Swiss system also favors private investments and creates advantageous conditions to access capital. We at the Canton of Vaud raised USD 173 million last year only for start-ups in the life sciences, representing a 47% increase from the preceding year. Switzerland fares well regarding innovation, productivity and business environment.

If a caveat needs to be cited, I would however say that Switzerland does not encourage enough a risk culture, that can for example be found in Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly in the United States. Risk aversion takes precedence over a culture of failure, that should in my opinion be more widely encouraged and cherished, we need to fail often to succeed sooner, like in any other agile development. In the same realm, the feedback loop between academia and the industry is perhaps too one-sided. Academics take their products to the market but seldom do successful entrepreneurs share their insight and expertise within the university community that typically frowns upon industry experience.

What will Biopôle have accomplished in let’s say, five years time?

In the coming five years, Biopôle will have become “the place to be” in life sciences in Europe for our therapeutic areas of focus. Our vibrant community and name would have become an established brand and reference in the industry. Start-ups would identify in it the right de-risked environment to turn their business plans into reality, SMEs would find here the proper growth environment, while multinationals would thrive in an innovative and disruptive ecosystem at the edge of both academic research and industrial development.

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