Melqui Calzado – General Secretary, Catalonia Bio and Health Tech, Spain



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Melqui Calzado, general secretary of Catalonia Bio and Health Tech, highlights the association's strategy to establish the region as an international reference centre for innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as giving an overview of the steps required to see a new wave of Catalan pharmaceutical companies.

Catalonia Bio and Health Tech recently merged in 2017. What was the reason behind this decision?

The former Catalonia Bio was formed back in 2006 as a non-profit organization aiming to interact with the government and investors to lobby for our members. Over the years, this we evolved to function as a cluster, taking in members such as hospitals, institutes, and universities, and promoting collaboration between each other.

In 2016, we set up a health tech cluster focused on medical devices and e-health, though we saw that Catalonia is not as large as other regions, and it did not make sense to have two associations. Therefore, in 2017 our members voted to merge the two, and as of January 1st 2018, we have been Catalonia Bio and Health Tech, encapsulating biotech, pharma, medical devices, and e-health.

We see this approach as crucial to the changing ecosystem of healthcare. Conditions, such as diabetes, for example, are being treated with medicines, medical devices and electronic monitoring. This is a trend we equally see in other medical areas across the globe.

How would you describe the current state of bio and health tech in Catalonia?

We started the process of sewing the territory later than many other areas of Europe, though we are now seeing the sector sprout and show really promising results. Many large international investment companies are coming to Catalonia, investing rounds of EUR 20 to 30 million into local players, a concept that ten years ago was unimaginable as we still did not have a mature, established sector.

Is time the only factor behind the rise of the local industry?

Culture is also a big thing. Catalonia has always been associated with a strong entrepreneurial mindset, though previously we did not focus enough outside the region. Now, this mentality is shifting, and Catalans see the world as their market.

Has the political situation between Catalonia and Spain impacted the industry in any way?

I don’t think so. The political tension in Spain has not had a negative impact on the industry.

Catalonia offers many positives for investors. Why has the region not yet taken the next step and become a bio hub?

As aforementioned, we need time for the market to mature to the level of other regions in the world. Additionally, the Catalan pharmaceutical ecosystem has many small startups and also a good number of larger companies, though we lack the mid-size players. This is due to the fact many start-ups are sold after achieving success, and this is not a bad thing. Nevertheless, we would prefer to see a number of companies establish themselves and start selling their own products. Without this mindset, we will not see the growth of companies into the new Grifols, Ferrer and Almirall.

How can you help to bridge this gap between larger companies and small biotech start-ups?

In the early stages of companies, CEOs generally have less international experience and a good proportion are expert scientists with a good idea or patented technology. To take the next step in growth, a different type of CEO is required; this is where Catalonia has trouble attracting the correct people, possibly due to factors such as a lower salary. Investors are looking towards Catalonia due to it being cheaper than other parts of the world, though with these lower running costs its then makes it hard to pay the elite CEOs.

Another factor is we still do not have enough serial entrepreneurs you see in other parts of the world. When a CEO has success or failure, they learn, and can then use this information for their next endeavour, while in the meantime passing their knowledge onto the new generation.

What strategies does the association have in place to promote the development of innovation?

We are focused in three areas. Firstly, innovation, as the biotechnology sector can only move forward with innovative products, and we facilitate this by promoting collaboration between companies and between companies and centres, such as institutes and hospitals.

Secondly, entrepreneurs, not in regard to startups only, but mindset. A scientist can be working for a big pharmaceutical company and still have an entrepreneurial mind. We work to help them in areas such as developing a business model and meeting legal requirements. Therefore, when they talk to potential investors, they are prepared.

Thirdly, networking. We have 160 odd members and we are constantly looking to generate opportunities for them to collaborate and learn from each other.

What would be your final message toward the international community to why investors and scientists should look towards Catalonia?

I don’t want people to come to Barcelona, or Catalonia, just because of the weather. What does this mean? During my studies I met many internationals from all over the world who came to Barcelona

for things such as weather and lifestyle. Yes, these are key to any region’s success, though we want scientists and investors to look towards Catalonia for the mature research and facilities as well as the abundance of world-class researchers. And we are now starting to see the view change towards this.

What is your vision for Catalonia Bio and Health Tech in five years’ time?

We have recently appointed a new board that will manage the next four years of the association. We will be focused on establishing Catalonia as an international reference centre, by pushing the region’s visibility. Additionally, we will aim to grow the association to around 200 members and implement more programs aimed towards innovation and collaborative projects.

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