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Invest in Skåne is the official regional business promotion agency for Southern Sweden and provides one-stop investment and export consultancy. Ulrika Ringdahl, managing director, reveals the unique opportunities available in the region's life sciences industry, explains how the Skåne region managed to overcome the departure of AstraZeneca, and discusses the efforts being made in Medicon Valley to become an international hub for the microbiome sector.

When most people think about Sweden, the first place that usually comes to mind is Stockholm. Why should they look to Skåne instead when it comes to life sciences?

In order to understand what makes the region special today, we must look at our recent history first. Ten years ago, Skåne had a strong presence from AstraZeneca, but the company chose to leave in 2012 and left behind a region that needed to transform itself; and that is exactly what happened. At the time, many people thought it was an impossible mission, but today I am proud to say that the establishment of Medicon Village in the premises of Astra Zeneca in 2012 has evolved into a center for research and innovation in life sciences where more than 150 companies and nearly 2,200 people work today. There are companies working on very ambitious projects and offer high-quality services, which has energized Skåne once more. So, we could definitively say that the

region has rebounded.

I believe that large pharmaceutical companies looking for a new place to conduct projects, especially in an era of outsourcing, will find that Skåne is a perfect place. Besides, Skåne is part of the Greater Copenhagen metropolitan region which has one of the strongest academic ecosystems in Scandinavia. We have seen an increase in big pharma companies looking at us to start collaboration programs.

Moreover, I must say that it is not only the legacy of AstraZeneca, there is also an important telecom industry tradition here. That has produced a great synergy between telecom and healthcare that has produced a health-tech hub. There are many companies working on digital solutions that have the potential of transforming the healthcare system, which is crucial in an era of demographic changes and an ageing population. The data and image analysis work that is being done here is internationally renowned.

The skilled workforce within software development has also led to a growing automotive industry presence today, which is relatively new. The workers left behind by Sony Ericsson were appreciated by the automotive companies. Invest in Skåne has made an effort to assist players like Bosch and Volvo cars with businesses here and they are very satisfied because they found an incredible number of qualified engineers.

How does Invest in Skåne leverage that high-skilled workforce to attract more R&D operations?

Finding the right competence is a challenge for everyone. When companies invest here, the first thing they think about is the R&D ecosystem, but the first thing they actually ask about relates to the talent available; and, like most regions, we lack engineers, but we are very good at transforming ourselves. Going back to the AstraZeneca departure, it was a tough pill to swallow at the time, some people thought it was the end, but all of a sudden, we had a high amount of capable and experienced professionals eager to work; and, as I said, the same happened in the telecom sector after Sony Ericsson’s departure. That story is something that we try to tell everyone that will listen because it really sets us up as an ideal destination for companies intending to open or move R&D facilities.

What is the role of Invest in Skåne of connecting international companies with business opportunities in the region?

We focus on attending conferences to meet with big pharma and present them all the available projects that are open for in-licensing and/or collaboration, which is around 80 projects. They are divided into therapeutic areas and the clinical stages they are at. We share that information with big pharma companies after having looked at their pipelines; that way, we know which projects fit their needs. We act as a matchmaker.

That is the part that relates to the in-licensing of programs, but we also look at larger investments so organizations can establish large operations in the region. Unfortunately, big pharmaceutical companies are reluctant to relocate, which is why we play to our strengths in project partnerships.

Invest in Skåne is still a relatively small organization in size, but we have a great reach and focus to compete with other regions.

So, when it comes to life sciences, you are putting your strengths in the partnership and collaboration opportunities?

Yes, I believe that is where we have to start. It is difficult to get a company to establish here if we do not show that they can have partnerships first. We are trying to build our strategy from the ground, which will improve the chances of success.

Also, there have been many companies establishing the sales and marketing offices even though the market is relatively small, with just over ten million people. The rationale behind that is, probably, that Sweden offers good partnerships and is a great country to conduct clinical trials. Our R&D credentials are impeccable.

Carl-Johan Sonesson, Chairman of Region Skåne, recently told us about the goal of becoming Europe’s most innovative region by 2020. How do you asses the progress made in the region towards achieving that goal?

2020 is just around the corner and of course, I am optimistic, but it is a great challenge. I might say that in some areas we are already at the international forefront, especially in certain areas of research and development like diabetes, neuroscience, cancer, stem cell and inflammation. The goal is a great ambition to have and we should continue working towards that objective.

Why should the international business community have Skåne on their shortlist of places to do business in?

The ecosystem that has been created here is really something else. We are in a capital area, with Copenhagen just across the bridge, so the region has several big pharma players like Ferring, Novo Nordisk, LEO Pharma, and Lundbeck on an arm's length. The train from Malmö to Copenhagen takes just 20 minutes, which creates great opportunities for companies. We are a very well-connected area. Altogether, the region has four million people and a high percentage of them, around 42,000 people, work in the life science sector.

What have been your main priorities since you took over as managing director five months ago?

Within life sciences, we recently began a collaboration with our Danish counterparts, Copenhagen Capacity, and Medicon Valley Alliance to establish the region as a hub for microbiome research, with funding from the European Union and the Greater Copenhagen committee. We want to attract R&D facilities and investments, taking advantage of the regional stronghold within microbiome and the fact that the microbiome market is at an early stage of development and we have only seen the tip of the iceberg. The combination of our great tradition of research with the industry's capacity will put the region on the international microbiome map. The research done at Lund University covers functional food, probiotics as well as the more recent field of prebiotics where preliminary research has shown that it can slow down Alzheimer's disease, for example. The possibilities are amazing, and the region intends to differentiate itself in the area. It is a three-year project that, hopefully, will put us at the forefront soon; no other place in the world is making the effort that Medicon Valley is doing.

What final message would you like to share?

That Skåne is the perfect spot for collaboration. We have a long tradition of excellence in Lund University and many small highly innovative companies. In addition, I must mention the skilled workforce present here, which I strongly believe is quite unique. Everyone is welcome to come to Skåne and tap into the ecosystem. That openness leads to innovation.

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