

CONICET – Santiago Villa & Mariana Berenstein, General Manager & General Coordinator of the Technology Transfer Office – Argentina



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The National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) is the main organization in charge of the promotion of science and technology in Argentina. Santiago Villa and Marian Berenstein, general manager and general coordinator at CONICET's tech transfer office, discuss the challenges of innovation in Argentina and the organization's place on the world map of scientific research.

CONICET works very hard to provide effective answers to the needs of the country. In order to fulfill that purpose, one of the best tools available is technology transfer. Could you please explain to our readers the main activities that have been put in place by your technology transfer office?

Santiago Villa (SV): The first CONICET office was created in 1958; however, its work has changed so drastically over time that CONICET today is nothing compared to what it was like back then. Today, CONICET strives to provide concrete solutions and answers to meet the scientific and technological needs of Argentina, and the world at large. Under the umbrella of CONICET, the main areas of focus of the technology transfer office are patents, agreements, on-site research, advisory services within the public and private sectors, start-ups and joint ventures, and high-level technology services. CONICET is Argentina's leading scientific and technology research institution.



Mariana Berenstein (MB): We created an entire department for technology

offer open to companies so that they can come and ask for anything that they might need from patented technologies, know-how, infrastructure, high technology services, etc. They can take a patent or they can ask for support in a particular area, or solutions to an issue that they might be having. Furthermore, our operational processes are standardized, but our services are highly personalized.

What is the structure of CONICET?

SV: CONICET is divided into 13 different scientific and technology centers what we call CCTs and two multidisciplinary research centers. These regional centers, or offices, enable decentralization and the direct management of 192 research centers and institutes. It is interesting to note that 90 percent of all CONICET centers are managed jointly with national universities, which greatly encourages postgraduate learning.

What is your assessment of patent protection in Argentina?

SV: It is standard in relation to the level of technology patents. If you go to the Supreme Court, you will not find more than 50 cases in the last twenty years. Having said this, everything here reaches the Supreme Court, unlike in the US. In Argentina, we do not have many IP problems, interferences, infringement trials, etc. so I cannot give an accurate assessment based on these few cases that have reached the Supreme Court. It is also important to note that Argentina is more interested in exporting our knowledge. Argentina is an important market for certain areas of technology, but it is not important for every area. We are always looking to export our knowledge abroad to Europe, the US, and Asia for example.

After organizing several different trade missions, what is your opinion when it comes to assessing the level of what Argentinean companies are providing in places like China and Singapore?

SV: Generally speaking, we have good feedback from these markets. It is tricky because in truly important markets like China, the problem is not our capabilities, products and services, but rather the amount and scale that need to be fulfilled.

What are the key indicators to ensure the success of the technology transfer office?

SV: The problem is that we have many different models here. Every year-end we have a different key indicator, but what remains important for us is to have continuously clear processes and transparency. It is important for us not only to maintain efficiency, but also transparency. That is a key indicator for us. Every area of our office is now under a standardized process, we have set rules for everyone and everything to follow.

Another indicator would be our number of agreements. It is really an indicator of activity and something that we focus highly on. For the future, we will put more effort into acquiring more international partners and increasing international activity.

What is your strategy for increasing the number of international partners?

SV: In order to focus more on business development and international partners, Conicet has recently taken the strategic decision to create a new Managing unit for strategic technology projects so that we can coordinate efforts on selected or more advanced projects in activities that, today, further exceed the capabilities and mission of the OTT. In other words, we would work on a small structure with high impact. One of the key indicators in the future would be the success, or not, of this strategy.

What is lacking in Argentina that would foster more innovation and technology in the country?

SV: You have to build the basis of negotiation with people who are willing to do that. So, for example, new management in companies—more flexible, younger managers—would be one way to accomplish this. At the end of the day, the most important change has to come from the mindset of people; it has to be a cultural movement. Another aspect would be a change in law and taxation; it does not necessarily always have to come from the businesses themselves.

Where do you see CONICET in five years—time, in terms of areas and opportunities?

SV: CONICET is an important institution under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Productive Innovation of Argentina, a big player at a national level, and the important thing to keep in mind is to avoid believing that we are the only ones in the industry. We have to focus on sharing our knowledge within the industry and the government. We are not the only players in this area.

We need to start working more intelligently with universities in Argentina. Proximity is important and so we have to focus on relating to scientists in other places across the country. The strategy would be to start working on building up more capacity within more universities nationwide, and giving them their own style while simultaneously working together. We have two options: to take everything and take over the industry; or to establish a system of sharing and strong relationships, whereby we exchange knowledge and experience within the industry to strengthen it as a whole.

MB: Like Santiago mentioned before, nearly 90 percent of all CONICET centers are managed jointly with national universities, but I think that we also need to further build inter-ministerial relationships and relationships between our partners—peer relationships.

What motivates you to keep going on a daily basis? What are your sources of satisfaction every day?

MB: We share the same view now as we did when we first arrived. What is pushing us is to oversee the trends of the market. So that is why we are doing more than the key indicator is asking us to do. We are fine with fulfilling the requirements of the office, in half the time sometimes; but if we really want to see results, we have to go a little bit further and we have to start looking outwards.

SV: It's the feeling that you are making things happen and impacting people's life in a good way. For me, it's the ability to prevent or solve a problem.

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