

Interview: Gail Garland CEO, Ontario Bioscience Innovation Organization, Canada

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The CEO of OBIO discusses Ontario's challenges and opportunities in life sciences, highlighting some of the key initiatives that the organization is taking to help local companies bridge the gap between research and commercialization.

What was your main objective in founding OBIO back in 2009?

The main motivation for founding OBIO was the impetus provided by a group of CEOs in Ontario's bioscience industry who saw the need for the development of an organization that focused on policy and advocacy. It also needed to represent the needs of the industry in order to grow Ontario's bioscience ecosystem and advocate for the types of policy that would allow that growth to happen. This was in the middle of 2009, in the depths of a recession. Companies were operating with little cash on hand, and there was no path out without having some policy and advocacy support to help them complete their development cycles.

What have been some of the key milestone achievements over the last four years?

OBIO successfully lobbied for and was able to advocate on behalf of industry for a special one-time fund from the Ontario government to respond to immediate capital pressures for Ontarian biotech companies. Simultaneously, the industry requested OBIO to develop an implementable strategic plan to enable industry to work towards building a vibrant and sustainable biotech ecosystem in Ontario. OBIO has built a pan-Ontarian plan called Ontario Bioscience Economic Strategy Team (OBEST), a collaborative effort engaging stakeholders from financial capital markets, MNCs, Ontario-based companies, hospitals, research institutes, and federal/provincial/municipal governments. OBIO prioritized nine implementable strategies and worked with industry volunteers to implement those plans. At the end of 2012, OBIO focused on high value activities while developing expertise and strategy. Many OBEST activities create opportunities for promulgating unique ideas to engage and build industry, implement policies to support that, and to encourage industry to stay and grow here. Additionally, the industry was looking for a vehicle to articulate the thought leadership ideas and work from OBEST, essentially a push and pull to exchange great ideas. To do this, we formed the OBIO Think Tank.

What was your strategy to achieve some of these milestones?

OBIO's original objective was to bring Ontario-based life sciences companies together to work on the common goal of building the ecosystem and creating vibrant, successful companies. In four years, we have surpassed that goal in many ways, particularly through engagement. We started working with small, Ontarian companies, and over four years, we have engaged many stakeholder

groups that contribute to OBIO's success now, as well as the ecosystem's success. These are groups like industry organizations, trade groups, professional organizations, and multinationals. This success can be attributed to OBIO tackling issues in novel ways that have brought people to the table, and created and built their interest in OBIO's work, which they see as novel, relevant to the issues, and being action-oriented. Every year we ask our members for input on the state of the industry and what they would like OBIO to do moving forward. OBIO acts on that input, and has continued to engage new stakeholders in its work. For example, OBIO has an innovation adoption initiative, which catalyzes commercialization of human health technology and bioscience technologies in Ontario, and contributes to patient-centered care in Ontario and better patient outcomes. This initiative helps with the efficiency and sustainability of the healthcare system, fiscal constraints, and the contribution that this makes to Ontarians on a socioeconomic level, and our overall economy. Companies that can sell their products here can export them. Ontario healthcare priorities are not unique to Ontario; if we can align Ontario companies behind our healthcare priorities, we are keen to develop technologies to address those priorities and to create products for the world.

In what ways can Canada bridge the gap between great science and commercialization?

The development of procurement policies will encourage companies to stay and grow in Canada. Ontario companies are developed to become world exporters, but selling in Ontario and Canada, will better contribute to their longevity here as Ontario-based companies. Our Capital Access Advisory Program (CAAP) is also a response to developing and building the industry beyond seed-stage companies. Ontario has done an excellent job with supply side policies and economics, and a number of companies have come out of academic and research institutions. Thus, demand-pull will be a key principle to retaining and growing companies here.

Why haven't procurement policies been a key priority for the Ontario or Canadian government?

I think it has been a priority, but they have not been able to deliver on that priority. This area has not yet been fully exploited as an opportunity to drive the commercialization of research to build the industry. We need to recognize that there is an alignment of interest here. Part of this discussion comes from research in other jurisdiction in the world that have created "pull" strategies and a recognition of alignment. Beyond research, you need policies and programs that focus on commercialization to get a return on investment. I also think that Canadian culture plays a role. Canadians love seeing money invested in research. I think OBIO has an educational opportunity to explain to people that the industry cannot stop at research, but must rather go to development, healthcare and access. That is strongly supported by the general public.

Do you see Ontario becoming a world leader for bioscience commercialization in the future?

OBIO's focus on being actionable is very important in terms of having and executing a plan. Successful global jurisdictions have plans, which is why OBEST was created. In terms of being good at both commercialization of innovation and building a generic capacity, our perspective is that Canada has a track record of being good at both. The common element in building any industrial ecosystem is entrepreneurship. I think we have that. The real issue is support for growing successful sustainable companies that fill out the ecosystem and create jobs and wealth. Companies that stay here create more jobs.

We see the formation of bioscience ecosystems in many places worldwide. What is Canada's competitive edge in this regard?

Canada's competitive advantage is its resourcefulness and ability to use and develop its natural advantages into multiple areas of growth. A successful and vibrant bioscience ecosystem is one of those. Canadians live in a rich economy, are well educated, and have good natural resources. Canada has opportunities to be good at anything it chooses to be good at. Specific to healthcare, Canada has a multicultural population that provides microcosms for research. Canada also has the advantage of its stability to plan and invest over the long term, and there is a reasonable expectation that sudden changes will not throw investments off track. In the long-term, stability is hugely important in healthcare. Canada is economically stable, so there is an opportunity to bring all these elements together.

You mentioned in last year's industry profile that there was a significant skills shortage in a number of areas. How is Ontario going to fill that gap, and how can OBIO help?

OBIO has identified and developed education and awareness jobs as one of its talent gap priorities. A number of the organization's programs have evolved from that initiative. Our Executive Exchange Series (EES) program brings companies together for workshops and Insiders' Insights Leadership events. Every event OBIO holds has an education and awareness perspective as an added value. OBIO always addresses talent or competency needs to help companies bring knowledge into their organization that will help them with their development program, such as IP, regulatory, clinical trials, corporate governance, etc. In terms of talent, there is a chance for policies that will support job creation in the industry and allow industry to train people on the job and gain experience. OBIO sees the need for pull strategies and policies to support them. Right now, academia is educating people as a push. We need industry to have the positions for these people to go into. The healthcare industry is not unique in trying to address the changing world of job skills and some of that is on-the-job training only. OBIO identifies those skills and searches for opportunities and positions for people to learn these skills.

Furthermore, OBIO's initiatives have brought and will continue to bring academia and industry to the table. The organization has collaborated with academia both at the university and college level. It is important not to think of academia just as PhD scientists. Ontario's colleges play an important role in training people for industry.

OBIO's CAAP program allows companies to get access to international investors. What opportunities has this brought?

CAAP's key advantage is that it is the next baton in the relay race beyond startup, and getting companies that much closer to commercialization. Innovative players will be able to see the next stage of company and strategically react to them. These partners and investors are creating a coterie of high potential investable companies in Ontario that benefit the whole ecosystem.

Since OBEST's inception, what have been the key developments?

OBEST first focused on the nine strategic initiatives that came out of the group. In 2013, we have focused on three main priority areas, where we felt that our activities could really add value and contribute to the growth of the industry: access to capital, innovative options and healthcare priorities. Ontario-based companies have the opportunity to align their development programs with the healthcare priorities of Ontarians, and that creates the potential for them to not only sell to Ontario but the world. Multinationals' transparent processes allow them to determine if their novel technologies are going to meet Ontario's requirements for technology.

In terms of alignment between healthcare priorities and innovation, we have companies that are squirreled away working on Ontario's healthcare priorities. However, increasing awareness of the existence and development of those technologies here so that they are ready to be pulled through is

the short-term opportunity. Another area of focus is interconnectivity of education and awareness. OBIO's interconnectivity initiative is creating virtual marketplace, working with a third party collaborator to build that. It will help forge partnerships of different kinds: company to company, company to research, and vice versa, because through this virtual marketplace they will be able to find each other and exchange information.

What is OBIO's internationalization strategy for promoting Ontario worldwide?

OBIO is focused on building a sustainable life science industry with a fully populated ecosystem. If we are successful, Ontario will be on the global stage for exports and not just for research. OBIO's developed programs contribute to that. Creating a coterie of high potential investable companies is a key element of attracting investors to Ontario. The bigger that coterie of companies is, the more Ontario becomes known as a place to look when making an investment. As companies commercialize products, they become world exporters. With innovative option policies, companies can stay and grow here, and multinationals can sell their products here and see Ontario as a good place to invest.

OBIO's mandate is to advocate on behalf of building a strong sustainable health science industry and ultimately a fully populated ecosystem. Ontario has an ecosystem that is very academically dominated, but needs to be filled. With demand comes strategy. We are sticking to our mandate, and executing on our plan. OBIO's success will place Ontario on the world stage because we will be exporting our solutions to healthcare challenges, as well as exporting products discovered and manufactured here.

What does the international community need to know about OBIO's developments?

This is a magical moment for OBIO; there is new engagement and support for building Ontario-based companies from OBIO's multinational partners coming from other stakeholders' groups with which we engage. There is a vitality and willingness to invest time and energy in working towards a common goal. CAAP helps companies get ready for that next level of investment, identifying their goals and areas of improvement to prepare for VC investment in consultation with our VC steering committee. There has also been serious work on the innovation option initiative with twelve multinationals and mid-sized Ontario companies. OBIO has been able to leverage those relationships with multinationals to find expertise that can support our work with Ontario-based companies through CAAP. They are thrilled to be asked to help and to make that contribution to building Ontario companies. That is an illustration of that magical moment of the synergies that are building here. Companies in the past looked at Canada as a small market and passed over the opportunities to help build a local industry and help take research to development. We tell them to think differently, work with us and help make that difference happen, and ultimately, everyone will benefit.

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