

Interview: Jean-Marc Juteau, Director, Biotech City, Canada

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The director of Biotech City in Laval, close to Montreal, discusses the advantages brought on by the cluster effect, and how this has played out at Biotech City, a government funded cluster of 80 companies and over 5,000 employees.

Your background has a strong focus on business start-ups and development, including the founding of REPLICor. What have you been able to bring from your business experiences to your current position here at Biotech City?



I am bringing entrepreneurship, and the knowledge of starting and developing a company. For the last 15 years, I worked in business development with pharmaceutical companies on an external level, and I was involved at the scientific level. I am consequently bringing in a mix of science and business, with a focus on SMEs. I also worked several years in Laval, and am very familiar with the environment. I have a strong background in IP and have been co-inventor on many inventions, which is critical for any pharmaceutical company.

How will you help biotech companies establish themselves with that experience?

Biotech City's primary job is to promote the region as a centre of excellence for biotech, pharmaceuticals and life science companies. The organization also exists to attract companies and retain them, which is just as important. Biotech City helps to promote partnerships between companies internally and also with foreign businesses. I often receive applications here from companies around the world looking for a place to install their operations and look for partnerships. My job is to put these companies together and help facilitate such partnerships.

Pharmaceutical companies used to be fully integrated, from research to marketing. That does not work anymore. Now they need to work in close collaboration with research institutes, small biotechs and CROs in a supporting environment. The Biotech City cluster represents such vertically integrated environment promoting the novel biopharmaceutical business model.

How involved are you in overseeing the various requirements that come with such a large group of companies that are different in size and structure?

It really depends on the client. Some companies are very autonomous, while others really need and want to be helped by Biotech City. The organization has a full team that can really help SMEs, including the Centre local de d'veloppement de Laval (CLD), which can help companies with the purchase of new equipment and providing of special loans. This group also can help to obtain money from other public and private sources and helps people who want to move or immigrate to Canada through its connections with the government. Many foreign companies love this, because under one roof you have our team to help promote and provide connections, the CLD with financial solutions.

So once they are here, how do you retain them?

Biotech City is always in contact with them. One of my jobs is to meet each company, which, given the number of companies, is no small task. We keep ourselves informed of the companies' needs. The key is information. There is no other way to do it; you need to be informed of what companies are doing, their financial needs, projects, HR, and so on.

What is your perception of innovation versus entrepreneurship, given your experience in both?

I co-founded REPLICor with three university academics that were not necessarily skilled in business, but we learned quickly by working together as a team. We, at the Biotech City, work in team with the companies, the local research institutes (INRS and CBE) and the Biotech Incubator (CQIB), which can help companies substantially. The CQIB incubator has labs and equipment, as well as the capacity to incubate a company virtually by finding the right people and helping develop a business plan. Biotech City is the only technology park in Quebec and perhaps all of Canada that is fully integrated. The entire site is reserved for life sciences comprising research institutes, the incubator, lab space for lease and land for development. A significant portion of land was developed, and now there is a tremendous cluster of companies, including pharmaceuticals, biotech, CROs, medical devices and other services. Half of the companies are actually in the park, and the other half are nearby. A company can start from nothing and grow its entire life in Laval, which is conveniently located extremely close to Montreal and the International Airport.

Of the various types of companies in Biotech City, which do you see as being the most important?

The biopharmaceutical industry is very important but we also have several CROs providing services to biopharmaceutical companies and the medical device industry for clinical tests.

Biotech City is home to more than 80 companies and institutes with 5,000 employees. How do these various types of companies benefit from each other in terms of having that close proximity?

Human resources play a key role here. A cluster of companies creates a density of an industry, which in turn allows for the sharing of employees. Metropolitan Montreal is excellent for that. The city has several very well known universities, and thus there is a important reservoir of scientists that can be hired. If you want to get these people, you have to have all of these companies in the same place. For pharmaceutical companies, client location is not so important because they sell all over the world. In some ways, their real clients are their employees. Additionally, being close to research institutes whose facilities you can use allows for close collaboration. While competition does exist, more often companies can benefit from each other. Furthermore, when I have new prospects, I always show them the most successful companies, which usually sells the idea instantaneously. It all boils down to human resources. I would also add that Quebec is very welcoming to R&D, and the province has the best tax credit system in Canada and one of the best in the world.

How is Biotech City financed?

It is government-financed. The cluster is totally autonomous from the industry. If finances came from the private industry it might create conflict of interest. Biotech City treats all companies equally.

Biotech City enjoys a number of partnerships with similar organizations based in Europe. How do these partnerships work on a concrete level?

This works as an exchange. The primary goal is to ensure that companies talk to each other. The cluster is looking for partnerships. I show visiting international companies everything that Biotech City has to offer and similarly we go abroad with local companies to not only attract more companies back to Quebec but to create international partnerships as well. It is really an exchange; we go, they come and everyone exchanges.

Can you use those partnerships as a means of attracting more talent back to Quebec?

It happens automatically. Currently it seems that more Asian and European companies are looking to open subsidiaries or to move to Canada. They want to open markets with great opportunities in a growing economy. Partnerships with similar organisations from these regions increase the number of

new companies in the Biotech City. Automatically, these movements bring talents from all over the world.

To what extent do you think companies within Biotech City are actively conscious about the fact that they are part of this real community in Laval?

I hope that they feel that way! Companies tell us that they are happy with our services. That being said, companies established here are expanding. They feel that the environment is great, and that applies not just to Laval but the greater Montreal area. Biotech City is undoubtedly important and serves as a great environment with amazing infrastructure.

Looking ahead to the future, what is your strategic vision for Biotech City for the next five years?

Our strategic vision is to have more diversity of companies in the industry. I would also really like to see growth in the IT sector for life sciences. I would also like to have companies in all stages, from start-ups to mature, marketed companies. If you maintain a good balance, the region's economy will continue to succeed for a long time

What is the personal motivation for this job?

I was an entrepreneur for many years. Sometimes you need a new challenge. While I have always been active in science and entrepreneurship, a few years ago I wanted to go back to either a university or an organization like Biotech City in order to utilise my experience in a different setting.

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