

Interview: Paulo Wickbold Marques Head of Operations, Biolab Pharma Canada



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Upon opening an R&D center in Mississauga in 2017, Biolab Pharma Canada, headed by Paulo Wickbold Marques, became the first Brazilian pharmaceutical company to establish an affiliate in Canada. In this interview, Paulo describes Biolab’s bold leap from Latin America, the strengths of the Canadian pharmaceutical landscape and how the climate and Canadian skillset are helping to turn Biolab into a multinational business.

You have been in Canada for two years now and the R&D center in Mississauga opened in late 2017. What were your first impressions of the Canadian market?

Our first impressions of Canada were fantastic. Indeed, we established the R&D center here following the great feeling we had from visits to Canada in the early 2010s. The more we visited Canada, the more we realized it made sense to set up an affiliate here; the Canadian pharmaceutical ecosystem fits the demanding criteria that Biolab sets for an international subsidiary.

I was particularly impressed by the teamwork we see in Canada, the idea that everybody is working towards a common goal. Teamwork and a cooperative spirit are common Canadian traits, and appear to stem from the strong education system. Ultimately, the innovative work environment in Canada, where research, new ideas, and advancement are sought after, was of most interest to Biolab and something we spotted Canada has in abundance. We see innovation across the board, from universities, the MaRS Discovery District, to business, to local government; and we identified the need to be a part of it.

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Upon arrival in Canada, we felt warmly welcomed by all those we visited, including the Mayor of Mississauga, Bonnie Crombie, and John Tory, the Mayor of Toronto. Through productive meetings with government and stakeholders, we have opened many doors and had meetings with the right people to gain a solid understanding of the market. We were keen to see and appreciate how things work differently in Canada compared to Brazil and we found the business network reactive and responsive. I am happy to state that we have gone from strength to strength since our arrival in Canada. Consequently, the one piece of advice I would offer to companies looking to set up shop in Canada is to bring an open mind.

What most surprised you upon moving to Canada?

The talent pool in Canada was a particularly pleasant surprise. Putting the team together here was quick and painless: we completed 36 interviews in three weeks and found it to be a pleasure speaking with enthused and passionate Canadians.

During the first stages of opening the company, we were very impressed with the incredible caliber and skillset with which Canadians, both individually and as a nation, are equipped. We were blown away by the experienced, motivated and highly qualified candidates we found applying for work at Biolab Canada, and were delighted with the potential for growth that comes with such a capable team. It is curious; sometimes the Canadian reputation for modesty trickles down into the professional space: in here professionals aim to enter the market better prepared and we managed to find incredibly talented people even for entry-level positions.

Aside from building a strong team, what other priorities did you set yourself in establishing the affiliate here?

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Familiarising oneself with the work and social culture here is critical. We wanted to get things right the first time and therefore spent time studying and learning about the market and work practices. It is not merely a case of considering the legal framework, regulation, the technicalities and getting to know the numerous pharmaceutical organizations in Canada, but ensuring we have a positive, attractive work environment so that once we have a strong team in place, we can incentivize our people to stay and work hard. The company culture is crucial for me.

Sourcing the right materials, equipment and building the laboratory is a second priority, but we found that to be straightforward once we had set foot in the country. Progress was quick due to the ready-made business network in Toronto and Mississauga so that creating solid, reliable partnerships came easily.

Why choose Canada as the location for Biolab's first international affiliate?

Canada benefits from a sophisticated innovation system, attractive tax breaks for companies and government incentives within the pharmaceutical industry. At Biolab, we searched for a country where innovation is a top priority, and Canada fits this criterion: the country offers the most fertile research landscape, and we are an innovative company that wants to get ahead in R&D. The commercial and manufacturing potential is a bonus. Furthermore, the regulatory standards in Canada are stricter compared to our home market, which means that we will benefit from accelerated market access in Brazil.

How does Biolab's global focus manifest in Canada?

Biolab's global emphasis is on R&D, and we are proud of the successes we have had so far. For example, we recently chemically synthesized a new molecule. We are the first Brazilian company to do so, but there was no regulatory pathway in place back in Brazil, which meant that the authorities were struggling to evaluate and approve our drug. In Canada, we can capitalize on the pre-existing R&D operations and take them further, to bring more exciting molecules and developments to market.

Further, in Brazil the innovation ecosystem is inchoate and there is significant room for improvement before it will reach the level we see here in Canada. The signs are positive, but innovation is a new characteristic of the Brazilian market, and Biolab is at the forefront. Biolab has been at the center of Brazilian innovation for over a decade, and in 2013, 50% of revenues came from innovative products. More and more local players are entering this market, but we are one of the few players with research facilities in Brazil.

Following our positive experience in Canada, other Brazilian pharmaceutical companies are following our lead and are actively exploring the market here. To this date however, we are still the first and only Brazilian affiliate in operation here.

Which products from your portfolio are a good match for Canada?

We are looking to introduce our product Vonau® to the Canadian marketplace shortly. Vonau® is a fast-acting anti-nausea and anti-vomiting, Ondansetron medication that dissolves on the tongue. Our manufacturing process is more cost-effective than that of competitor products, and as a result, it will be an excellent first product to bring to market in Canada. We have ten other products we intend to develop from scratch here that we will take to market without any relation to our Brazilian R&D operations. The clean slate approach allows us to get to grips with the Canadian market and encourages us to make our mark on the pharmaceutical landscape, all the while understanding how the R&D facility here behaves.

To bring these products to market we will either have our own sales operations or find partners to license out to. For the time being, we would like to focus on the capabilities that the Canadian R&D center can provide. In a long-term projection, we will bring both manufacturing and commercial aspects to the Canadian affiliate, to spearhead Biolab's international operations. We would like to set a firm mandate in Canada before tackling the US, European and potentially Asian operations.

To what extent do the Brazilian and Canadian health systems differ?

Despite their two separate systems, the end goals of the respective healthcare legislations are the same: to ensure the drugs pharmaceutical companies bring to market are safe and cost-effective. From a regulatory standpoint, we do not observe too many differences between the Brazil and Canada, and in fact, the changes we see are often a result of the climate. In Canada, we develop products in stability studies within the zone 2 spectra: from minus eight degrees to 35 degrees, whereas in Brazil, zone 4B, we focus on 45 degrees with 60 percent humidity. We leave products in these controlled conditions for up to nine months to study the rate at which these drugs denature or change over time. There are subtleties to each market, but we have the experience and skilled staff to tackle potential issues efficiently.

On a personal note, you have seen the company grow from 65 employees to over 2600 globally. What has been the most exciting moment so far?

The establishment of the Canadian operation is without a doubt the most exciting event of my career so far. It is Biolab's first big movement into international operations and being part of a family business, the potential and opportunities for me here are boundless. It is the first operation for which

I am wholly responsible, for which I am proud and keen to make a success. There is some risk involved in creating a spinoff in Canada, but with risk comes opportunity and the Canadian culture is a productive and positive environment to build a business. The Canadian R&D center is not just a continuation of Biolab Brazil—in fact, I am the only staff member who came from Brazil—and is an entirely new operation benefitting from Biolab values. The Biolab identity and culture is the only thing we intend to bring North, whereas everything else, from HR to strategy is fresh and marries Canadian work practices with the Biolab values.

How would you describe Biolab's culture?

We are a family company and as such want everyone to feel involved and interested in their work. Our shareholders are still in the business, and the family's next generation, myself included, are already working and taking part in positions across the company. We operate an open door policy and try to integrate all employees into the business. We try to give people reason to invest in the company by investing in themselves. Biolab is not about the improved quality of life for our consumers but creating fantastic experiences for those involved in all facets of our operations.

From a CSR standpoint, I am proud that Biolab takes part in several programs that focus on community action, for example, helping children cancer patients, and using sport and physical activity to combat social problems and turn the focus on family values. These strong family values come to define Biolab today.

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