

Interview with Imanda Wapenaar, Executive Director, WestHolland Foreign Investment Agency (WFIA)

28.07.2012

Tags:

[WestHolland Foreign Investment Agency \(WFIA\)](#)

WFIA is quite a remarkable organisation that has been, since its inception ten years ago, reporting very good results. The annual results last week showed another strong focus on the Life Sciences sector. What drives the agency to place so much effort on attracting investments in Life Sciences in the region?

Naturally, we devote significant efforts to the life sciences sector because it is one of the most important sectors in the region. A key factor that makes this region important in terms of life sciences is the Leiden Bio Science Park. This has been a very dynamic cluster of companies together with a highly reputable university hospital. Delft is another important region where most of the medical technology companies are based. The key strengths of those clusters are in fields such as robotics and nanotechnology. Additionally, there is strong collaboration between Leiden and Delft. Together with the Science Port Holland and the Erasmus University, this region has grown into a strong life science region and a hub for medical technology. There is a strong willingness to cooperate, not only between these bigger clusters but also with towns such as Zoetermeer, where AstraZeneca is located. Moreover, you will also find several manufacturers of medical products such as Toshiba Medical Systems and Atos Medical. This all falls under life sciences. There is also an agri-business component related to this. WestHolland is the greenhouse capital of the world has a lot to offer in terms of high value plant products. As a result you see the botanical department of the University of Leiden working together with the more commercial research parties within the greenhouse sector.

WestHolland is strategically located between the larger cities of Amsterdam in the north, Rotterdam in the south and Utrecht in the east. How do you manage to convince investors to look into the WestHolland region, rather than opting for a large city like Amsterdam?

The Leiden Bio Science Park has really connected the region. There is a strong community with initiatives such as the Life Sciences Café where companies can get together. This forms a very good network between companies, universities as well as government.

The physical accessibility is another strength that does not necessarily compete with the larger surrounding cities. The Leiden Bio Science Park, for example, is in fact located closer to Amsterdam's International Schiphol Airport than the city of Amsterdam itself.

The facilities for multinational corporations to start-up their branch offices are all here. In addition, there is the YES!Delft foundation in Delft, serving as an incubator for smaller national and

international start-ups. It is a very inspiring environment.

Apart from attracting new companies, WFIA has also been involved in building better relationships with those companies that have already been established here for a longer time. This is mainly to encourage further development, and particularly also to prevent a relocation elsewhere. Together with different other stakeholders, the WFIA has been working hard in the past couple of years to obtain the commitment of Japanese innovator Astellas to the region. This journey has been successful, with Astellas aiming to successfully complete its move to the Leiden Bio Science Park by the end of 2012.

Is there no risk that the Leiden Bio Science Park will overshadow the other qualities of the region?

When talking about pharma, the Leiden Bio Science Park is a key strength in the region and will obviously receive a lot of attention. When we talk about other sectors, we have for example the aforementioned medical devices niche in Zoetermeer. In the end, the activities are quite well spread out over the region.

The companies that come to establish themselves here obviously look for an attractive local workforce. WestHolland already has some 10,000 university graduates. Do you feel the international community realizes the region's potential in terms of human resources?

When we first talk to potential investors, we try to make them aware of the local talent the region has to offer. The people here are very well educated and largely multilingual. There is a large mass of universities in the area that strongly support the annual influx of new human capital.

Are budget cuts and relocation towards lower cost regions a threat, or not?

To some extent yes, but less where it concerns knowledge. WFIA's investor relations department has been established to support the day-to-day relationship building with these types of players. Especially in these rougher economic times, it is important to ensure these companies can afford to stay here.

You act as a matchmaker between the foreign investor and the various local stakeholders. Which stakeholders are the most crucial in this process?

That strongly depends on the sector and the exact activity the investor wants to establish or expand here. If it concerns life sciences, WFIA will first of all look into the Leiden Bio Science Park. Zoetermeer is then again more suitable for marketing and sales activities, as well as distribution to some extent. The Hague is our largest stakeholder and is of course very important. When companies come to visit the region, we make sure tours are customized to their needs, so the stakeholders strongly vary per situation.

Many of our interviewees have praised the tax climate in the Netherlands. Does this really play a role in their decision-making process to establish operations in the Netherlands?

Absolutely, even though it is not really the case for smaller companies. While many other factors play a role, the tax aspect plays a very important one. For companies engaged in research activity. For example, the InnovationBox can offer great advantages. Moreover, there are many tax treaties between the Netherlands and other countries, which facilitate international business.

WFIA has been actively reaching out of its national borders, for example through participation in the Shenzhen Technology Fair back in November. How high are such activities on your agenda?

WFIA never waits to be approached by foreign investors. We are always out there, engaging in events all over the world. Doing so, we can take companies with us, government officials etc. You cannot wait for people to come here and find WestHolland by themselves. WFIA's strengths are its dedication and people. We aim to support these initiatives.

Last year you have completed 32 projects, of which half still originate from the USA and China. Do you expect to see a change from where these projects will originate in the future?

The WFIA expects to see more projects from India. Recently, the Agency has placed a representative in Mumbai. Russia is also coming up increasingly. Most interestingly, once one company establishes itself here, the others generally automatically follow. That is why we are so proud of having Astellas, Centocor and Crucell here.

The Netherlands is considered to have an open culture, which in theory represents a welcoming environment for expatriates. Yet, what can WFIA do to prevent culture shock?

There are a couple of things. For example, when expatriates arrive here in the Netherlands, WFIA can show them around to different schools to make an informed choice on where to place their children. We also work with Access, which is an English language volunteer organization made up of expats here in the region. From doctors to childcare, expatriates can find most of their information in one place.

A lot of effort is directed towards the English speaking community, which is why there is now also an Asia desk. Our purpose is to organize similar support and facilitate integration, for example for Chinese and Japanese expats. We also organize a cricket tournament for Indian expats.

Where do you see most opportunities coming from in the future?

Sector-wise, most of them will come from industrial biotechnology. With DSM located in Delft, next to the Biotechnology faculty of the technical university of Delft, the region is also very strong in fermentation. The pharmaceutical side of the sector will also remain strong of course. There is still space available at the Bio Science Park and investments will keep growing and growing! There has also been an increasing trend to make flexible office space available. This would further encourage start-ups as well as networking.

Do you have a final message for the international community looking to invest in WestHolland?

WestHolland is a very dynamic and growing region with easy accessibility, relatively low cost and a willingness to facilitate international investment. It is a good location to grow your business in Europe

[See more interviews](#)
