Challenges to Reversing the Brain Drain so as to Grow and Develop the Australian Biotechnology Industry: A Human Resource Perspective

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There exists a limited talent pool of individuals having specific technical skills to take a therapeutic good through the various stages of commercialisation. More specifically, in the past two years, many Queensland based companies have requested Davidson Group to identify and select clinical research and development, regulatory affairs, validation and quality assurance personnel with at least three to five years relevant industry experience pertaining to the development and manufacture of drugs, diagnostics, vaccines and medical devices. Additionally, synthetic organic chemists, qualified to PhD level and often holding post-doctoral experience from an international institute or university, are regularly sought by emerging Australian biotech companies. Unfortunately, these highly sought after Australian scientists, who play a key role in drug discovery and design programs, often do not return home to Australian start-up companies due to the poor remuneration packages on offer and the enticement of globally-recognised multinationals in Europe and the US that can offer more significant career opportunities and greater financial security. Joining such a global organisation enables an Australian scientist to build a well-branded CV that could not be developed in Australia due to the lack of multinational head offices located in our country.

Another major drawback for the Australian Biotechnology industry is the deficiency in the number of mentors from the upper echelon of science and technology disciplines residing in Australia. Our budding talent are drawn to, for example, the San Francisco Bay Area in California where, expatriate candidates tell me, they attend seminars and symposia alongside Nobel Prize winners with whom they are able to discuss their research and career ambitions and from whom that can obtain guidance and advice.

There is also some aversion displayed by Australian companies to wait for three to four months for a high quality, suitably experienced individual to see out their relevant notice period with their overseas employer before relocating and being able to commence employment in Australia. Australian start-up companies often approach Davidson Recruitment with an 'immediate need' for an expert to join their team so as to achieve an important commercialisation milestone. This often reflects a lack of forward planning and forecasting of human resource needs on the part of Australian biotechnology firms and their management teams.

It is not unknown that a limited talent pool of individuals exists at the senior management, executive and Board levels, possessing adequate management skills required by high-growth start-up companies (refer PMSEIC Working group report - 2002).

Remuneration packages and their inclusions are an issue, as is the size and global significance of the Australian Biotechnology industry compared with the industry and its companies in the northern hemisphere. It would be advisable for Australian start-up companies to offer Chief Executives a significant equity stake in the company that they are to lead, together with a moderate, yet competitive base salary and other typical CEO remuneration inclusions. Lifestyle, high quality education and a great climate are some of the advantages that Australia can leverage to attract first-class executives and managers to our shores. Such issues as taxation on existing assets held by foreign workers immigrating to Australia have been addressed in previous PMSEIC working group reports. Professor Michael Vitale, Australian Graduate School of Management at the University of NSW, has also undertaken some valuable research into this aspect of the Biotechnology industry.

Another problem for the industry is the lack of production facilities with large-scale biological manufacturing capabilities that are globally competitive, cost-effective, and hold relevant regulatory compliance for producing clinical grade goods. Furthermore, there exists a limited pool of scientists and engineers with the associated large-scale fermentation and protein purification skills to operate these manufacturing facilities. This talent pool resides overseas in North America, UK and Europe, and many of my colleagues from university have gained employment with large contract-manufacturing organisations since graduating. Dr Damian Hine, University of Queensland, could provide further information on this topic.

Other key issues associated with attracting local and foreign investment to the Australian Biotechnology industry have also been addressed by PMSEIC working groups and Dr Mike Hirshorn, (CEO St George Innovation Fund) has substantial expertise in this area.

Reference

The Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (2002), Ninth Meeting, 5 December, 'Management Skills for High Growth Start-Up Companies: Unleashing Australia's Entrepreneurial Potential'.

At website - http://www.dest.gov.au/science/pmseic/publications.htm

Footnotes

[1] Member of the Prime Minister's Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) 2003.