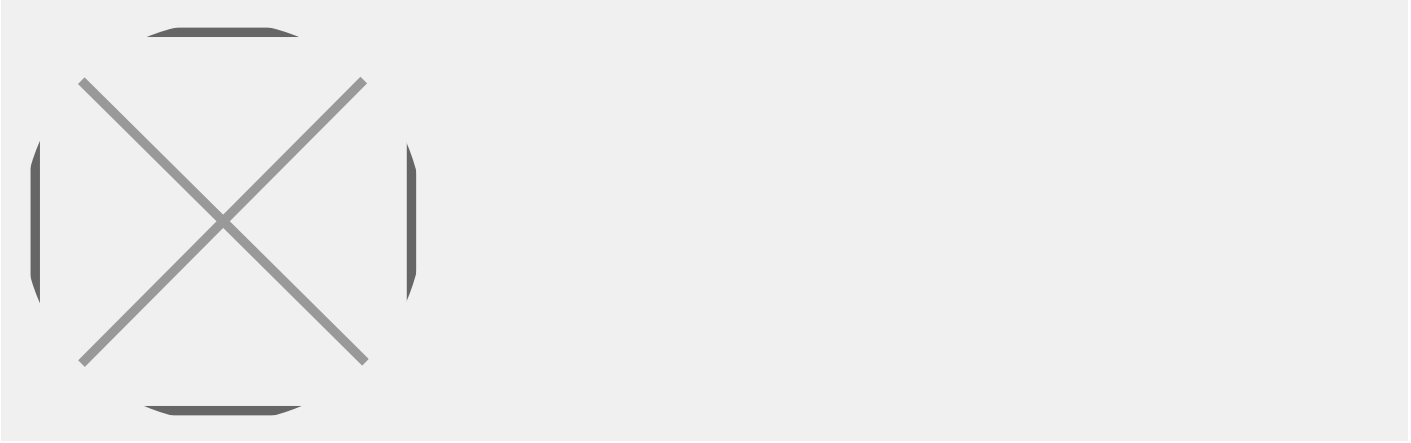
Interview: Wilber Huang, Chairman, Abnova, Taiwan



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Tags: Abnova, Diagnostic devices, Human genome, Biotech, Innovation

Chairman of Abnova Corporation Wilber Huang discusses the company's core strengths, Taiwan's bilateral relationship with China's biotech industry, and offers some advice to future start-up biotech companies in Taiwan.

Abnova was founded during a very exciting time in the biotech industry. Can you tell us a bit more about what exactly was happening at that time and what might the next area be in which Abnova intends to direct more focus?

Abnova started in 2002 in the midst of the fervor surrounding the sequencing of the human genome. The biotech industry was at the top of a bubble, and the value of many companies had peaked. To maintain the heat, the quest for the next wave in the biotech revolution began, with numerous industry experts advocating one field in particular: proteins. Like many of our peers, we saw protein applications as having great potential now that researchers had understood the genome.

At the turn of the century, understanding how protein cells function, interact and cause disease was a pioneering area in our industry, and 'proteomics'—an interdisciplinary field that built on the findings of the human genome project—was widely regarded as the next step. Yet unlike the sequencing of the genome, which had produced a tangible result, proteomics had nothing to show for itself due to a lack of quality tools and research. As a young scientist working in the US and equipped with a medical background, I saw potential in generating products that could fill that void.

We started to produce antibody reagents, and by building a solid infrastructure in Taiwan we were able to manufacture products efficiently and contain our costs. We made it until our IPO in 2009—despite a long period of financial uncertainty—and ultimately, we provided a healthy return for our investors. Today, the next wave in biotech appears to be in diagnostic devices, which is a field that Abnova has entered aggressively by building on our strength in antibodies.

What has made investors in Taiwan more comfortable with investing in biotech companies?

Investors know that biotech is a risky industry. And yet, the incentive to invest has been supported by the realization that Taiwanese biotech companies are streamlined compared to their US counterparts. The US economic mentality of championing 'Home Runs' is antithetical to the business culture in Taiwan. Here companies are more cautious, dabbling only with what is deems 'acceptable' risk.

The Taiwanese biotech community consists of small and mid-cap companies. It's important to note that the government is actively promoting these nimble businesses, even if they are not producing robust cash flows. The symbolic effect of the government financially and politically participating in the industry leads to a positive psychological impact.

But with that said, Taiwan's biotech companies cannot sell a dream forever. Eventually, they have to start making real money. Moreover, focusing on the Asia Pacific region is too narrow. The challenge facing Taiwanese biotech companies is to prove that their products can work on a global platform.

Why do you think Taiwan's biotechnology companies have not achieved global recognition yet?

It takes time. Smaller companies do not work on the same timeline as larger companies. Compared to international giants, we don't have the sales clout to quickly have a huge impact on the global market. Taiwanese companies need to start putting their products to the litmus test by promoting them for partnership with the big players. I understand there is plenty of talk going on, but I want to see contracts signed.

In recent years, Taiwan's bi-lateral relationship with China has improved significantly and consequently many people believe we have their attention. However, I urge caution. The devil is in the details.

Is biotech the right industry for Taiwan? Is Taiwan the right country to build Abnova?

For decades, Taiwan has been too focused on the ICT industry, structuring itself as a manufacturing- and assembly-led economy. This is no longer sustainable and the government understands the country needs to diversify into new, innovation-led industries. Biotech has all the potential to succeed in this sense, and Taiwan is definitely the right place to build Abnova. This country has exceptional technological infrastructure and human resources.

What would be your advice to aspiring start-up biotech companies in Taiwan?

If you are a young, ambitious person trying to participate in society then you should consider starting up your own company. There is nothing better than learning and doing at the same time. When you are young entrepreneur you make a lot of mistakes, but the experience you gain in all areas of business is vast. You develop a wide-ranging skill set that is not only appropriate for the biotech industry, but all walks of life.

One must be passionate about what they do. Working for someone is not the only option. It may be good to get experience at the beginning, but at some point, take that independent venture. My advice: do not make a life, but build a life!

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