Interview: Rikus Wolbers and John Schalken – Novio Tech Campus and SMB Life Sciences, The Netherlands

25.11.2015

Tags: pharma, pharmaceuticals, The Netherlands, Rikus Wolbers, Novio Tech Campus, John Schalken, Nijmegen, R&D, manufacturing, life sciences, East Netherlands, NXP Semiconductors, Kadans Science Partner, innovation, Science Meet Business program, Radboud university, NXP Semiconductors,

Rikus Wolbers, Director at Novio Tech Campus, a key international incubator for R&D and manufacturing companies who are active at the interface of life sciences and high tech, and John Schalken, Program Director SMB Life Sciences, give an overview of the impressive developments in the Nijmegen area and the potential of the Novio Tech Campus as an eco-system for both start-ups and multinational companies.

John Schalken, Director, SMB

Novio Tech Campus was founded two years ago in the Nijmegen area. Could you give us a brief overview of the Park's history and the key developments that have occurred over the past two years?

RW: After a long period defining the project, we signed an agreement three years ago with several governmental departments, the municipality of Nijmegen, the regional development agency East Netherlands, NXP Semiconductors and Kadans Science Partner to transform part of an old semi-conductors manufacturing facility into a modern science park specifically designed to host life sciences and high-tech companies. We are still moving forward in both spheres thanks to our partnership with NXP and to our partnerships with the local academic hospital. In the future, we want to simultaneously develop these two spheres as quickly as possible, but above all foster the crossovers between the two disciplines, in terms of knowledge and of products. There is an incredibly broad range of products we can launch in the coming years thanks to the know-how of the companies and research partners present locally from these two backgrounds.

This potential is clear, as we have welcomed more than 30 companies in the past two years, overachieving our initial objective to attract a company a month. The interest in the Campus is increasing rapidly, and this confirms that our project is heading to the right direction. I think we have already reached the critical size to be considered as a serious player, in comparison with other innovation hubs in the Netherlands.

Could you explain us what are the strategic priorities and the main objectives of the SMB program?

JS: I am in charge of the Science Meet Business (SMB) program, a four-year old incubator aiming to support life sciences start-ups in the Nijmegen area. SMB is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Radboud university medical center and we are financially supported by EU funding and grants from the province. This program has three distinct axes: the first one, support, aims at working hand-in-hand with entrepreneurs on their business plans, addressing their weaknesses and solving their main issues. We thus help entrepreneurs to meet with the right experts or counterparts and ultimately we financially support the projects. Although these funds are relatively small, they remain particularly helpful for our startups. The second axis of SMB is related to facilities, as we help companies to pay the rent and access Novio Tech Campus facilities, which are ideally located near the university and the research centers, but distant enough to remain business-driven. Our third and final objective is related to the organization of our own events and business conferences, mainly focused on usual entrepreneurship pitfalls. We encourage a lot of networking such as our meetings Science Meets Business in the SBM Meet & Great.

Novio Tech Campus now hosts over 30 companies. In terms of location, assets and facilities, what sets Novio Tech Campus and the Nijmegen area apart from other innovation hubs in the Netherlands and around Europe?

RW: We are building the bridge from the science to the market, and also all the way around. Life sciences companies are capable of directly trying out and piloting their products within the Radboud University Medical Center, a definite asset and unique proposition in Europe. The second asset is the presence of NXP Semiconductors and its 700 experts specialized in cutting-edge chips' development. Along with NXP, other companies and research centers specialized in this field have transformed this area into the most consequent concentration of chip-related knowledge in the Netherlands. We are building our infrastructure around this core, and EPR, a Dutch printed circuit board specialist, will be the first campus to construct purpose-built facilities on the campus. However, our offering goes far beyond facilities and offices opportunities. We are more focused on creating a network of know-how around high technology. For example, the Campus also hosts very innovative the Rockstart Digital Accelerator Program, and we offer accelerator programs, pitching events and office/co-working space. Our close relationship with companies, incubators, and research institutes aids start-up companies in the campus to ramp up their development processes.

JS: The Campus is unique, as we are specialized in the life sciences and high-tech and the interplay between these two disciplines. Our university partners here in Nijmegen are at the forefront of international research in many disciplines. For instance, our expertise in malaria, oncology and urology is particularly acknowledged among the scientific community, and it is not a coincidence if many of our start-ups are focused in these areas. For instance, the company TropIQ, launched in 2012, is working on accelerating development of malaria-eradicating drugs. In total, SMB supports more than 20 companies, while 15 of them are start-ups and 70% are local companies.

The campus is focused on the developments that are taking place at the crossover between the high tech and life sciences sectors. What are some examples of innovative solutions coming out of the Campus in these domains?

RW: As one example, NovioSense, produces eye sensors that monitor glucose rates. To design this kind of products, the company firstly needs the expertise of the Medical School, but also the NXP cooperation to design the sensors monitoring glucose rates. This is exactly the kind of cutting-edge companies at the crossover of the two disciplines that we want to foster at the Novio Tech Campus. Within the Rockstart incubator, there is also a company called Bruxlab, which is developing a sticker to be placed on the patient's cheeks to monitor its jaw tension. Once again, this kind of innovation is healthcare related and implied state-of-the-art sensors to allow data monitoring.

You have been overachieving your objective to attract one company a month in the past two years. How much potential is there for the park to grow further in terms of

companies in the coming year?

RW: We have a brand new office building waiting for new companies that can also be managed as a multi-tenant building. Companies also have the opportunity their own premises on the Campus, just like EPR did recently. Furthermore, the money earned from the lease of these facilities is fully reinvested in the park in order to ensure the Campus continues to grow. We also work in close collaboration with other smaller incubators in the area to allow start-ups to take off in these hubs, before eventually moving to our Campus once they will reach a certain size.

JS: Three current industry trends are particularly favorable to the Campus. Firstly, big pharma companies are currently spending more money on acquisitions and mergers than on in-house research, increasing the importance and potential of start-ups and SMEs in the life sciences research space. Secondly, Dutch universities are more and more focused on applied and marketed research, working in a closer contact with companies. This shift may seem unimportant, but it represents almost a revolution in universities' mentalities and is extremely promising for further healthcare innovations in the Netherlands. Finally, that local governments all over the country are really bolstering local investments and supporting local innovation hubs. Things are moving really fast, and even if we still lag far behind the Boston area, we are steadily following the same development model.

Which type of companies would like to attract in the Nijmegen area over the upcoming years?

RW: Our mid-term objective is to gather an interesting mix of start-ups and more mature companies. On the high-tech side, we currently host a larger part of developed companies, so we are looking to attract more start-ups, while in the life sciences field start-ups already represent the majority of our members and bigger companies are our major target. Reaching this kind of breakdown between mature companies and start-ups would indisputably bolster the interplay between established companies with their important network and younger companies that are 100% focused on innovation.

JS: Some important pharma companies such as Sanofi are already cooperating with LeadPharma, one of our companies, for drug or fundamental researches as well as for clinical trials. I am pretty confident that big companies will steadily become more and more interested in investing in this area, and will eventually decide to settle their facilities here.

What does the region need to do to attract a major global pharma R&D facility like that of Astellas or Janssen Therapeutics in Leiden?

RW: First of all, we need to build and strengthen a virtuous and strong base of companies and partnerships. I think that to attract these MNC companies, it is firstly important to make sure there are enough smaller companies in the area. We, however, acknowledge that it will probably not be easy to attract a big international pharma company, because such companies do not frequently open brand new facilities and rarely move existing R&D facilities. Nevertheless, we work hand-in-hand with the Netherlands Development Agency to follow closely any lead in this regard and to be sure we will get the opportunity to showcase Novio Tech Campus assets if any opportunity of this kind knocks on our door.

JS: These companies also need to rely on skilled and talented people, and in that respect, there are a lot of people in this area that have strong experiences in bringing healthcare products on the market. Beside infrastructure, the human factor is clearly one of the best assets of the area to attract bigger international healthcare companies.

However, I deeply think we are not in competition with other science parks, such as Leiden or Utrecht, even if we are geographically quite close. There is such a growing demand for world-class innovation hubs that we can perfectly develop simultaneously our membership base without competing to attract the same companies. On the contrary, we are truly looking for deepening our collaboration with other innovation hubs.

Overall, who would you say should consider bringing their business, technology, or capital to Nijmegen, and why?

JS: Companies that want to be successful and that want to access to a great expertise network. With only two years of activity, we are also the “new-kid-of-block” in the science parks sector, being more open-minded and innovative in building the Campus! Companies should understand that Novio Tech Campus is about business, and particularly about bringing innovative products to the global market.

RW: Indeed, we are really experienced, but we approach the life sciences in a novel way. We are not following the old patterns, and this makes the Campus such a vibrant place!

How will you define success for Novio Tech Campus in the next five years?

RW: We want to raise awareness of Nijmegen’s potential and our strong value-added proposition in the life sciences at both the national and international levels. The Novio Tech Campus will thus represent Nijmegen at its best, thanks to the combined efforts of the local universities, the National Development Agency and local companies. Our main objective is to ensure that people perceive

Nijmegen as one big campus bringing together top-notch research centers and innovative companies.

Click here to read more articles and interviews from the Netherlands, and to download the latest free pharma report on the country.

See more interviews