Christophe Cizeron – President, Lyonbiopole, France



Between 2007-2016, the number of biotech companies doubled in the Lyon region and there was a sharp increase in employment by 80 percent

29.11.2018

Tags: France, Biotech, Lyonbiopole, Lyon, Cluster, Association

Christophe Cizeron, president of Lyonbiopole, discusses the important economic and industrial position of the research cluster in the Rhone-Alps Region as well as the challenges posed by domestic and international competition.

You are one of the stakeholders that helped to originally conceive the idea of Lyonbiopole. What is the difference between Lyonbiopole as it is today compared to what was established back in 2005?

I was indeed there at the inception of the cluster and contributed to its emergence. I conceived of the project with the industrialist Christophe Mérieux, who was extremely involved in the initial phases and subsequently became its first president. This period was important because this was the first time in Lyon that we were able to federate a set of actors around health, particularly in the areas of infectious diseases and diagnosis. This was a strategic decision because we asked ourselves at the beginning of the process whether we should be more general or more specialized.

From the outset, the cluster attained the status of “global pole” or center of excellence and was able to wield a certain amount of autonomy and independence thanks to its revenue streams. Lyonbiopole has based its financial model on private financing which is very important. No less than 62 percent of the funding today comes from private financing, which increases our credibility from the perspective of private enterprise.

Following the death of Christophe Mérieux, Philippe Archinard took over the presidency and we must applaud him for the dedication with which he has managed to accelerate the growth of the cluster over the past decade. There has been a certain degree of mission adjustment over time. The workload has gravitated downstream from an initial science and project focus more towards corporate services. Our scope has also enlarged to include oncology, neuroscience and skin biology. In short, the cluster has modified its priorities to respond to and mirror the needs of an evolving life science industry.

How would you describe the overall performance and impact of Lyonbiopole?

The results of Lyonbiopole have been simply exceptional. Today, the cluster counts more than 200 members. It has managed to maintain relationships with academics as well as research centers. There are also many structural projects, such as a program we are currently working on with the Institute of Technological Research. The pole has maintained its important function as an ecosystem facilitator and enabler. Between 2007-2016, the number of biotech companies doubled in the Lyon region and there was a sharp increase in employment by 80 percent. If we look at the long-term impact of Lyonbiopole, we can thus clearly see a very strong positive impact on employment rates and the fabric of the region.

Discussions have been taking place at the government level about the future of the 71 competitiveness clusters and whether it is better to have multiple competing small biopoles or a mega cluster that can hold its own on the international stage. Where does Lyon stand on this issue?

There is definitely a tendency towards inter-clustering as a way of achieving critical mass. Currently we are working to broaden out the geographic scope from Lyon all the way to Grenoble and trying to encourage collaboration between the two metropolitan regions, such as working closely with the Center of Nuclear Studies (CEA) and Minalogic both in Grenoble, the Axelera center of excellence as well as the respective clusters for chemistry and the environment.

Bound up in this region, we have all the ingredients we need to achieve a great deal. In technology, there is a lot that must be done, especially in AI, predictive medicine and big data. However, we have all the tools available to us to develop these various fields, we just need to put them to use. We possess some 70 clusters in France and it makes sense if there is a greater degree of

uniformity and cross-cluster collaboration.

What is your vision for taking Lyonbiopole to the next level?

Historically, Lyon has been very strong within the health sector. I recommend that you read a recent report by the Montaigne Institute that analyses the progress being made locally vis-à-vis the twin topics of innovation and health. A positive report such as this gives resonance to the work of the cluster and can help inform our strategies for the future.

Today one of our overarching priorities is to position the pole as an international reference point. We have a very solid ecosystem, but we must push further in order to take the pole to the European level and make a mark for ourselves on the international stage. Our strategy today is to accompany enterprises on new projects, which are often highly complex and include the participation of multiple different clusters. We can provide important connections between partners, financing, project engineering and project execution. Medical research and innovation are becoming increasingly globalized and we have to align with these tendencies and be able to accompany life science entities wherever they need to go.

The life science field is also becoming more multidisciplinary and we need to be able to reflect that too. One example of branching outwards is our unprecedented partnership with the National Centre for Space Studies (CNES). The CNES is interested in applying space technology to the health industry and has been searching for the right angle to connect. Ultimately, Lyonbiopole was chosen as an ideal partner because we have a strong, established ecosystem that is structurally very well organized which allows the CNES to access to a broad array of private sector actors that are of interest to them including startups, medtech and biotechs. Our broad-minded and outward looking orientation was also a factor why they chose to team up with us.

Joining forces with other like-minded structures both at the national and international levels will also help us assert ourselves more. The Rhone-Alps region is one of the top ten regions in Europe for life sciences and approximately 100,000 people are employed in the sector in this region. That gives us a great head start. Lyon was the first French pole dedicated to health to be labeled gold standard, which allows us to create more connections with European consortiums. We also have many historical connections and ties that we are able to leverage so as to deliver upon our objectives.

Currently in France, Paris is positioned as the epicenter of industry and the other major metropoles in France do not have comparable agglomerations, but if we can strike the right sorts of collaborations, we can position ourselves as an excellent alternative to Paris and establish a leadership role nationally and internationally. There will be certain opportunities to seize as well such as the impending fallout from Brexit.

To what extent do you find yourselves competing with Paris?

Historically, France is a very centralized country and society so there has always been a strong concentration of resources in Paris. But what has been insisted upon since the first mandate is that our horizons must be bigger than France; our horizon must be Europe and beyond. Today, our aim is to show that we are a clear and organized. Health in Lyon and the Rhone-Alps region plays an important strategic, scientific and industrial role. The German group Boehringer Ingelheim, which is a founder of Lyonbiopole, has recently invested a very large amount of money in the region and established production and research centers, which are very positive signs for us.

We are working on how we can help to develop startups, not merely in the initial incubation stages but also, in the subsequent phases. More often than not it comes down to a question of financing. We would like to develop tools, which will aid in accelerating growth and achieving critical mass. The goal is very much to be able to nurture these small enterprises to the point where we can help turn them into larger enterprises that are able to be sustainable over a longer cycle, and ultimately internationally competitive. This is about transcending the SME paradigm and ensuring appropriate support structures are in place for each stage of an innovative company’s lifecycle.

What role do large industrial companies such as Sanofi or bioMérieux play to help to identify promising startups and to aid them in their growth and development?

We have founding members that are very big heavyweights in their field and logically very influential in terms of capabilities, gravitas and know-how. That has been one of the key ingredients in the success to date of the Lyonbiopole. Having that industrial backbone on board right from the very start has been tremendously helpful. The relationship also flows two ways. Experienced medtech and pharma midcaps can provide crucial guidance and mentoring to pioneering biotechs and, at the same time, the startups keep their mentors up to date with the latest trends in technologies. We want to ensure that our big companies also generate returns on

their investments and these sorts of relationships is one way that they become exposed to fresh ideas and thinking.

You mentioned gaps that exist between the incubation phase and the stages that follow. Where do you see these gaps and what are the tools you are implementing to resolve them?

There are issues with training and the capacity to recruit talent. Within this, we are looking to bolster our network with research institutes and other services in Lyon to ensure that our partners are properly supported when it comes to sourcing human capital. It is not only about financing, but also training, building the network and the physical infrastructure, as well as about being able to scale up and spread one's wings internationally.

Do you think that in the next ten to 15 years, we will see a cultural shift with regard to entrepreneurialism in France?

We are already seeing a cultural shift on some level with the younger generations. However, we must distinguish between general entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in the biotechnology field. It is much easier to launch an internet company than to establish a biotechnology company. With the life sciences we are talking about a very complex and challenging industry. We want to persuade the new generations of the value of having a go and taking risks. Aiming high and having the audacity to take a risk is not something that should be stigmatized.

How does the fact that you are not a life science insider help you in your role as President in advancing the ambitions of Lyonbiopole?

While I am not able to deliver specialist information in terms of life sciences, I am able to provide a different perspective and knowledge due to my prior professional experiences. I do understand what is happening in public affairs and how to establish an interface between the public and private sectors, which is tremendously important. The second advantage I bring to this position is the international dimension. I travel a lot and I am able to see how quickly other countries can develop their projects. As I am not from the industry, I am focused on the general interest and common sense. I am able to be as objective as possible and I bring ambition and energy to the

role.

How helpful is it to have a very pro-business president in government right now?

I think it is positive that the president strives to make France a technological leader again and is intent on fostering innovation. He has big ideas for the future of the competitiveness poles and is sending out strong signals. However, there are issues with the proposed 2022 plan when it comes to financing. This is not a good sign because, if the state reduces its financial contribution, they are unlikely to remain as present and engaged as they are now. We, of course, understand that the government is encouraging competitiveness clusters to turn more towards private financing or funding from Europe, but the State needs to maintain its role as the main overseer. This goes beyond merely financial support. Steps need to be taken to guarantee this participation.

See more interviews