Asbjørn Overgaard – CEO/Managing Director, Copenhagen Capacity



Our goals are threefold: Ensure that Greater Copenhagen is a continued growth engine for all of Denmark, Copenhagen becomes the most sustainable capital in the world, and that we continue to be a digital frontrunner

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Copenhagen Capacity is Greater Copenhagen's official organization for investment, promotion, and business development. Its CEO/managing director, Asbjørn Overgaard, outlines the fundamentals attracting life sciences firms to the region, stakeholders' key investment concerns, and the work still to be done on closer alignment with neighbouring Sweden.

Why was last year the right time for you to take on this new challenge at Copenhagen Capacity and what excited you about it?

The timing suited the entire family as we wanted to settle down in Denmark following years living and working abroad. Copenhagen Capacity interested me due to its small, agile size and specific focus on the Greater Copenhagen area.

Our dedicated employees have a history of working in the life sciences industry and it was possible to see the tangible difference that Copenhagen Capacity could make for companies. The organization aims to attract companies, talent, and specialists from around the world to the Greater Copenhagen area.

How significant is the life sciences industry in your work at Copenhagen Capacity?

Life sciences play a very important role as it is one of Denmark’s most important industries and its largest export by value. The cluster established in Medicon Valley in the Greater Copenhagen area is the largest and strongest life sciences cluster in Northern Europe which has allowed it to focus more broadly to include green transition and digital technologies.

How have you found this first period in the job through the pandemic?

My position started in June of 2020 in the midst of the lockdown, and I was not able to meet all the people working in the organization until months later. Although last year was difficult and under resourced, we impressively managed to reach our targets.

The inability to travel changed the typical working process for Copenhagen Capacity with events and conferences switching to exclusively online participation. We managed this change and became better at working online, however, it was not easy to network due to the lack of informal face-to-face chitchats.

A number of relocation and expansion projects were delayed as a direct result of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the beginning of the vaccine rollout heralded a positive change in business attitude causing a catch-up effect throughout the spring of 2021 with enormous growth in the life sciences.

What types of investment profiles are coming in and what types would you like to continue to see?

Any investment that grows the cluster is welcome. In the past year, many startups, health technology and biotechnology companies have decided to settle in the Greater Copenhagen area. Moreover, larger global companies have started clinical trials in the area, engaging in collaborations with startups and hospitals on development.

What is attracting these companies to Denmark and to Copenhagen specifically?

The Medicon Valley is an interesting pool of companies in the area with many employees, hospitals, universities, science parks, and startup hubs. Despite the area spanning two countries, it takes less than an hour to travel from one side to the other.

As a result, international investors have access to some of the largest global companies, startups, research institutions, and medical infrastructure across two Scandinavian countries with registered populations and access to a number of these databases. Additionally, an extensive talent pool is available to companies deciding to locate here. It is one of the most dense clusters in the world with more than 1% of the population working in the private life science industry, including 6000 PhD students in Medicon Valley alone. This security of attracting international talent is relatively unique and decidedly Copenhagen's main selling point.

What are the key concerns that stakeholders have about investing in the Copenhagen region?

Stakeholders are predominantly concerned by the tax levels and living costs as the Greater Copenhagen area is undoubtedly an expensive place to live. From a tax perspective, an important distinction/clarification is that in Denmark personal taxes are relatively high while taxation on companies is significantly lower than many other countries. However, there is a lucrative expense scheme for expats that offers a low tax level for the first seven years that they work in the country. Furthermore, this scheme offers full access to all benefits available to the average Danish taxpayer such as free top-level healthcare and free education from kindergarten to a PhD. Moreover, the social contribution paid for as an employer is extremely low at one percent on top of the salary.

Do you have a specific strategy in place in terms of attracting investment from Asia?

Copenhagen Capacity attracts many investments from Asia. Our primary focus markets in Asia are Japan and China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong) as well as Singapore. Furthermore, we work closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Danish missions around the world to make the initial contacts and attractions. Once foreign companies show their interest in establishing themselves in Copenhagen and are convinced to visit the country, meet the collaboration partners, and explore the different opportunities available here, our multilingual advisors take over, and guide them through the process in their own language to avoid cultural hiccups. Based on the market, and field the respective advisor delves deeper into the benefits of establishing their business in Denmark and facilitate their integration. Japan has been in focus for several years, due to its strong pharma and life science industry that has resulted in numerous Japanese investments in the Copenhagen area over the years.

To what extent is the Danish Medicines Council's move to stricter data requirements and delays in bringing products to market risking Denmark's status as an early launch market and clinical trials destination? Is this something that you are communicating with other stakeholders on?

Copenhagen Capacity is aware of the concerns and our role is to have an open dialogue with the existing investors here ensuring they are satisfied with the environment. We raised these concerns with the relevant public agencies and have explained the importance of these factors in maintaining Denmark's competitiveness.

Do you think there is more work to be done regarding the pooling of health data or movement of workers between Sweden and Denmark?

I believe so, and this is an ongoing process. Recently, ministers from both Denmark and Sweden met to touch on the potential improvements. In the last 20 years, the collaborations between both countries have improved significantly with international companies on the two sides attracting talents and increasing movement across borders.

Nevertheless, improvements are possible and dialogue between the two governments is essential. The coronavirus exposed some of the differences between the countries in managing the virus. Their focus switched from a regional into a more national focus which resulted in stricter border control leaving local governments and municipalities powerless in this situation.

In the Nordic countries, we have a long history of working closely together, following hundreds of years of war. Before the EU was a reality, travel between the countries was open and borderless with a Nordic passport union.

However, during the pandemic the different regulations experience working with foreign investors and talent has revealed problems with movement. Fortunately, more collaboration is occurring between the hospitals on both sides as well as an increase in the number of clinical trials which are shared projects for the two countries.

What is the rationale behind having a city-specific investment-promotion body for such a small country?

Copenhagen Capacity works closely together with Invest in Denmark which have a focus on all of Denmark including Copenhagen. However, it is important to have this planning agency for Copenhagen for attraction purposes with life sciences specifically in mind. The majority of life science activity occurs in the Copenhagen area and Medicon Valley.

In addition, Copenhagen Capacity as a regional body does cross-border work with the Swedish side which is especially relevant concerning Medicon Valley which stretches into Sweden. As a result, marketing efforts are shared in attracting companies and promoting the Greater Copenhagen area in general.

What would you like to achieve for Copenhagen Capacity, and for Copenhagen as a city in the post-pandemic world?

Last year we launched and a new ambitious strategy with a strong focus on sustainability. Our goals are threefold: Ensure that Greater Copenhagen is a continued growth engine for all of Denmark, Copenhagen becomes the most sustainable capital in the world, and that we continue to be a digital frontrunner. With that in mind, and committed to achieve our goals, we will pave the way for the metropolitan region to become an even greater lever for Denmark’s sustainable growth. Moreover, Copenhagen is opening itself up to the world and initiating the important role of a capital in the country to collaborate and attract investments across Europe.

Additionally, ensuring the continued growth of the life sciences sector and addressing any concerns raised is crucial for maintaining Denmark’s position as one of the best places for drug development.

A new model is being developed in collaboration with the Danish Life Sciences Cluster for public-private partnerships to innovate together across the entire sector. Denmark has a strong public health system, and it needs to be used better for innovative development between private companies and municipalities, elderly homes, and hospitals. Furthermore, innovation in clinical trials needs to be extended to include other areas of development beyond life sciences.

The international component must constantly be considered to continue attracting international companies and talent. Therefore, we must persist with the success of recent years and expand the focus to include growing industries such as digital technology and sustainability that will complement the life sciences industry.

Is anything else you would like to share with our international readers and potential investors?

Copenhagen offers easy access to a network of people with many companies and public authorities in a small area that can offer solutions. Furthermore, it is both beautiful and clean, and as the safest city in the world it offers a comfortable life to those that choose to make it their home.

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