Scientific (and Talent) Discoveries at Applied Biological Materials Inc.

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Rob Henderson
All right. Hello, everyone. My name is Rob Henderson. I'm the president and CEO of BioTalent Canada. And welcome to this latest installment in our podcast series, The Science of Talent. This is a series where we talk to innovative companies who have been building their resources and attaining their business objectives from across Canada, and their focus on their people, their most important resource, and some of the innovative and maybe unique ways that they've been approaching their human resource elements, especially in these days of remote working and COVID and diversity, inclusion and all sorts of things. So today, I'm really happy to to be joined by Ryan Saranchuk, who's the Chief Operating Officer of Applied Biological Materials. Welcome, Ryan.

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Ryan Saranchuk
Thanks, Rob.

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Rob Henderson
Thanks for joining us today. So, listen, right off the top, I have a little bio here of your company. But you know what? I think everybody would rather hear it from somebody who's much more of an expert. So tell us a little bit about ABM. What do they do? How long have they been established? A little bit of that.

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Ryan Saranchuk
So, yeah, Applied Biological Materials started 18 years ago right here in Richmond, B.C. And we've grown over the years using talent from co op and different programs such as that to expand and service the life science research reagent community. Our primary customers are researchers in universities throughout the U.S. and Canada and the rest of the world, and we supply them the research reagents to do their work as well as we also have some pharmaceutical clients on the R&D side of things that we supply different reagents to.

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Rob Henderson
And yeah, so you guys would be, if the analogy would be the biotech industry is shoe manufacturers. You supply the leather.

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Ryan Saranchuk
Correct. Yeah. We manufacture all the reagents. We do a lot of PCR. Our core business is actually around viral vectors. And that's what our CEO Peter Lee was trained on during his time. So that's kind of where his expertise comes from. So, we basically for people that don't know what a viral vector can do, basically we can utilize it to either express or downregulate gene expression. And that's the primary base of, like I said, our products as well as we've expanded into other areas, such as PCR, other enzymes that are used in cloning. And then we also supply a wide range of cell lines that can help researchers, you know, study specific diseases or whatnot. We've built a catalog around that and quite the extensive library over the years.

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Rob Henderson
So the period of COVID has been probably not unlike a lot of other innovative companies across Canada, biotech companies. It's been a period of expansion for you. Right? In terms of your client base and your scope?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, it actually caused us to pivot a little bit because a lot of researchers were initially furloughed or closed their labs, you know, work from home. You can't really do science very well from your kitchen. So we had to kind of pivot. We actually used some of our core technology to create COVID detection kits that were utilized in different industries throughout the world. And that was kind of where we pivoted to. And now slowly, as things have been coming back online, you know, different areas of the world are now opening up. We've had growth from our product lines again. And, you know, Covid's not a thing of the past, but a lot of the world is seeing it that way now. So a lot of those kits that we developed, the sales aren't coming in anymore. So now we're back to our core products and expanding that and focusing on the growth we can achieve there.

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Rob Henderson
So explain the kind of growth that you've had, Ryan, like in especially in terms of your team numbers over the last couple of years since COVID hit, what kind of growth have you had in your team?

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Ryan Saranchuk
So initially there was a contraction, but since then we've in the last two years from that point expanded about 20% from kind of that lull that that occurred and kind of grown the team. We still have a large array of co-ops that we work with to help train them and build their career skills so they can participate in the biotech community and better it for both the research side as well as companies such as us that supply and facilitate and foster that that research in the universities.

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Rob Henderson
Right so how big is your team now?

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Ryan Saranchuk
So we're currently at 60 to 65 employees and they range basically anywhere from the lab to the office to R&D to business development.

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Rob Henderson
Yeah. So you're right at that sweet spot where we found a lot of small and medium sized enterprises go to where before like it's usually around the 50-60 mark that before they've been able to get along without an H.R. dedicated resource or an expert in HR, and then just around 50 or 60, the pain of not having that expertise on the team has really started to they've really started to feel it. So where are you at? Do you do HR? Is it spread around largely to you and your team or do you have somebody dedicated for human resources?

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Ryan Saranchuk
So currently we actually are looking into getting better resources in that area. We're currently working on hiring an HR manager to bring that skill set. We've had a variety of people work on it the past. More recently we had a little bit more of a specialized individual, but due to career opportunities, they've moved on. So now we're looking for someone that actually can help us build that aspect of our business and both help the employees adapt to our workplace, but also help our management team, a lot of whom have come from scientific backgrounds and we've kind of built from the ground up with them to help them better manage performance management. And we've also worked with a program at BDC to help with that and build our business performance and around that, that aspect of talent and talent development.

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Rob Henderson
And that's interesting you say about BDC. I've certainly encountered several companies that have worked with BDC and even some venture capitalists or the folks that IRAP at the NRC to help build out. Because you mentioned that, you know, a lot of your folks are science types and certainly in the small startups when you're in the SME space of the bio economy, a lot of the people that are managing HR are science types and they haven't been trained in this stuff. They don't know their way around. Like it's not like you're, you know, in their spare time they got a CHRP designation for, you know, as an H.R. professional. So, tell me a little bit about the challenges of that that you had to face over the period of growth over the last couple of years in getting scientists to think like people managers and the other recruitment or retention challenges that might have come along with that.

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, there definitely are challenges in that area. Some of them include, you know, getting those people and helping them grow quick enough. A small - medium sized business does change and evolve quickly. And part of the challenge around that is helping those individuals grow at a pace that we need to continue that upward momentum and focus them around that continual need to change themselves and adapt and grow with the company, because that's ideally what we want to do. We want to help people grow with our company so we can actually keep talent and grow it as well. And so a lot of that has been based around that side of things. And then with regard to mentorship, we do a lot around that because as I said, a lot of our team does come from grassroots. They started out in the lab and they've worked their way up to managers. So now we utilize them to help the young scientists kind of adapt to the pace of the business and what we need from them and also, you know, deal with adversity. You know, science has intrinsically got this this failure aspect to it. And that's often where a lot of the innovation can come from. And often you learn just as much from a failed experiment as a successful one. But when you're in the trenches working on the experiment, that's often hard to see or forgotten about sometimes. So that mentorship and aspect of just helping them be confident in what they're doing is making a difference and continue with good science so we can expand, you know, our products and R&D, new items that does always have that failure in it. But from failure, as I said, there is there is always growth and knowledge that is gained.

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Rob Henderson
Well, let's go into that a little bit, because that's an interesting concept. You know, I mean, I'm a big fan of failure. I'm not sure if you're familiar with, I'm not sure if it's apocryphal. But the story about Thomas Edison, when he when he created the light bulb, he failed 2,000 times before he found the right filament and the right formula to get the light bulb. And somebody asked him, Wow, how do you live with failing 2000 times? And he goes I didn't fail 2000 times, I found 2000 ways not to create a light bulb. So he looked at the failure as ticking off a box that's one that I've eliminated so I can get on to the next. How do you take this? And I want to get into this a little bit with, I mean, there's a generational gap, too, in the tight labour market. A lot of the available people are younger, the Gen Zs or the younger millennials that are in here, not all of them are either familiar with or comfortable with failure. And, you know, as you eloquently stated, your company and science is based on trial and error. It's a failure-based industry. So how do you in terms of and maybe you can tell me you mentioned your mentorship program. How does your mentorship program work or does it in terms of this avenue to get them more comfortable with failure so that they can understand that this is part of your secret sauce, it's part of your recipe for success?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah. Everyone does come to the table with a different set of past life experiences and in that, you know, different levels of adversity and working through those. So it's definitely something that does need to be improved. Well, not really improved, but, you know, taught to people to kind of have that sense that, you know, it's not all over. There's something to be learned from this and to kind of grow and further their research and be confident in what they're doing will, eventually, as you said, you know, it's a way not to do it, but that's telling us something on how to actually be successful in the end and then continuing those good practices of science, of, you know, variable isolation to ensure we're always searching for what that problem is or how we solve it. And, you know, there is in R&D, there's a lot around that. And, you know, mentorship in that does help young scientists grow and improve themselves and see that. Basically keep their good science. You know, the skills they've learned in university help them apply it to real world problems and grow basically their science career and help them further themselves for more discoveries in the future.

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Rob Henderson
Sounds like a great outlook. Have you found that some of these concepts that you've embraced and your team has embraced, have you found that this has improved your retention numbers? I mean, it's a tough labour market out there. So, I mean, recruiting is one thing, which is a big challenge. But of course, what we'd like to do is a lot less recruiting because we're retaining the good people we have. So let's talk about retention. I mean, have you found that to be a challenge or have some of the measures that you've instituted at ABM really bolstered those numbers?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah. Retention, of course. You know, tight labour market now is always an issue. The people I think we've been most successful with and done the best job with, I think have had that a little bit more intimate, one on one, you know, mentorship and help see them where the company is going. You know, not everything needs to be a success, the ones

that we've managed to work more closely with and foster this in them. It has definitely helped us retain them. And like I said, grow them into supervisors and help build our company around that base of good science, good scientists and helping them succeed.

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Rob Henderson
By 2029, there will be four jobs for every one candidate in Canada's bio economy. This is great news for those looking to pursue a career in the industry, for sure. But such a talent shortage could spell doom for employers, especially in small to medium sized enterprises that make up 94% of the industry. BioTalent Canada's newest labour market information study dives deep into the issues and makes evidence-based recommendations to help secure the bio economy's future. Download your copy today at BioTalent.ca slash LMI study.

Rob Henderson
Now have you found some of the older or the mentors, the ones who are doing the mentoring? Is there a formula you use or is it difficult to try to turn a scientist into a teacher? Or do you find that that comes naturally to them?

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Ryan Saranchuk
No, it's something I think, you know, like everything in life, you know, you always have to be looking to improve yourself. And so it's just kind of something we've worked with people on to have that sense of, you know. As we've grown, you know, to build your team, you have to do some of these things that, you know, might be out of your comfort zone to help further your department or your area of expertise and grow your area around those individuals because they will then, you know, allow you to do more things and then take over some of the things you're doing and then help them grow because then you'll get the next layer going and it just becomes this positive cycle. So we haven't really done anything specific. Like I said, we've done the BDC program recently that's helped us gain some of these ideas and concepts and ways of, you know, doing some of these things and performance management and it all kind of builds upon itself to make things more successful. And as you said, it helps retain people in a tough job market.

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Rob Henderson
I can understand. I like that. That sounds like it relies heavily I mean, as any good mentorship or, you know, a tutor teacher student relationship depends on communications. Right. Like, I mean, and you know, having worked in this industry for over a decade, unfortunately, scientists are notorious at not being the best communicators. So let's get into recruitment a little bit. In terms of the people that you're recruiting, what are the soft skills and some of the essential skills that you're looking for a brand-new employee at ABM? Or do you look for them? Do you do you look for a balance between the technical and the essential skills? Or do you find a couple of skills are the ones that you're really trying to focus in on to see if they have those?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, there's definitely skills we look for. And, you know, part of the interview process, we try and feel that out. They're not always the easiest things to discover, especially as you said, with a lot of us coming from a scientific background. We don't have that H.R. side of things all the time, but you kind of have to feel it out. Your references are often an

important aspect of that and working and asking the relevant questions to references to see how they've done in past environments. So you can assess things like teamwork, because that's a big part of things, you know, being able to collaborate because that's where the best ideas, innovations often come from, from having a diverse set of voices at the table, you know, that have different experiences, different ways of thinking about things. But with that, there can be conflict that occurs. So that's why that teamwork and that collaborative nature is important to have along with as a growing company, you know, things like adaptability become very key because as we spoke about before, that growth, you need people to be able to change and to have that mindset that change is a good thing. It's often never easy, but that change is basically how we grow as individuals and then that continues to feed the organization. And also, you know, science is constantly changing. New techniques come up. So being adaptable, being able to think on your feet and problem solve is also key because you know, you don't want people to always rely on their decisions going somewhere else. You need them to be able to think on their feet. You know what went wrong with this? How can we make this experiment work or this product work and be able to do some of that themselves is always key to helping expansion because, there's only so much one person can do. But when you have a team working together, it helps with that process and growth of everyone to basically get the products where they need to be and think, like I said, for themselves and critically think about where things may have went wrong or even reflect on why did they succeed? What did we do this time that actually made it work so.

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Rob Henderson
Well, that's a unique combination, right? Because when you've got somebody who's working in a lab, there are standard operating procedures, SOPs, things that they have to do. Compliance safety, you know, things like GMP, GLP, all of these things that you have to do in practice. So there's an element of compliance, right? Like there's a certain checklist that you have to go through each time, but at the same time, you're looking for creativity, adaptability. When things go wrong, can you pick yourself up and do that? So are there any kind of either special avenues that you recruit with or any special questions or interview techniques that you are doing to try to find these skills? Like how do you find out if somebody is adaptable or somebody is adaptive in terms of when you're interviewing. Do you, as you mentioned, references. Do you go through the references to see if they if they've exhibited creative thinking or critical thinking, something along those lines? How have you improved your recruitment processes to zero in on the kinds of skills that you think are really important for your company?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, there definitely are key questions you can ask, like, especially if you're talking to like a past supervisor, you kind of bring up issues of like what was a past adverse situation that they were able to overcome or not. And from that, you can kind of gauge that adaptability aspect to a certain extent. And, you know, even interviewing you're going to do different things and ask them different questions in regard to past experiences they had and how they may have overcome a challenging situation or, you know, in terms of teamwork. I know there's always the explain or conflict situation that's kind of a basic one. But that does touch on the teamwork aspect of things. But yeah, adversity, it's, you know, you can have people explain it themselves, but that's kind of something hard to gauge always from an internal perspective. So it's good to get that external point of view on that because tha a can be a more.

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Rob Henderson
Independent learning situation sort of thing, right?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, exactly. You're not looking at the problem yourself. You're looking at it from a different perspective and seeing how someone else dealt with the situation. And that often gives you a bit much better input on adversity.

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Rob Henderson
Understood. Now, so in terms of that recruitment element, how much has integrating co-ops or interns or work integrated learning situations? How much of that have you embraced or how much of that has impacted your strategy in terms of human resource management?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah. Co-ops, I actually come from a co-op background as a co-op in university, actually at ABM. And then upon graduation did come back.

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Rob Henderson
So you started as a co-op at ABM, left the company and came back and became COO?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Correct.

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Rob Henderson
Well, that's a that's a heck of a story for a co-opp. That's amazing. That's great. So that sounds like a fascinating story. Tell me how that how did that impact you when you started at ABM as a co-op?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Well, yeah, like I think many university students, you kind of struggle with what jobs are out there. I mean, there's the obvious things like, you know, university researcher or those types of things. But I think the corporate private side of jobs aren't necessarily well advertised, well known. Like I don't think a lot of, you know, even high school counselors, those types of things. There's I don't think there's a lot of background information that's often out there in those types of environments where people go for that type of advice on what jobs are out there. So that's one of the reasons I did co-op to kind of, you know, see what was out there. You go to university, oh, I'll be a doctor or something, you know. But first couple of years that often fizzles out. So, you know, then it becomes what else is out there? And yeah, co-op was, was key in kind of helping see what other jobs are out there. And alongside that gives you a set of skills that you often don't get from lab courses in universities just due to the nature of them, like they're meant to be learning experiences, but they're skills that just aren't practical necessarily to teach in a university type setting, like, for example, cell culturing. You need a lot of space investment in that. Hood's, all

sorts of things that take up space that just isn't practical to be done often in a large university class. So co-op does help with a lot of that and getting you those practical skills to succeed. And also, like I said, know what else is out there in the job world. Yeah, myself, I did co-op and then came back upon graduation. I actually worked in a variety of different departments here. I've done everything from a little bit of I.T. to lab work when I first started. IT since then, I did some shipping, customer service. I've kind of run the whole gamut of things.

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Rob Henderson
Chief Cook and bottle washer

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Ryan Saranchuk
Yeah, exactly. Little bit of everything. So, you know, that's kind of helped me fit into where I am now and grow those skills and knowledge that I needed for that. And yeah, a lot of it does go back to co-op and, and grant programs such as BioTalent and others like that do support that industry to, you know, take on those students who don't necessarily, like I said, have the skills yet just because they got the knowledge. And, you know, university is good for that and teaching the background information. But it's the skills that are often, I think, just like I said, due to the nature of it, don't have the opportunity to be taught that can greatly be benefit to anyone. Like I said, participating co-op I greatly endorse anyone to who even knows what they want to do or thinks they know what they want to do to do it. Because it does give you a different perspective on things. You can try things. It allows you to basically try a number of different jobs for short periods of time. And like I said, grow those skills, but also see what you like and what you don't like.

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Rob Henderson
And you touched upon something there, too, because, you know, 80% of the companies in the bio economy, in the Canadian bio economy are small or medium sized enterprises. And we were joking there about being chief cook and bottle washer. But it's true. I mean, you know, if you answer the phone, suddenly you're the salesperson, suddenly you're the reception person, suddenly you're the marketer. Suddenly, you know, you're the accountant and suddenly you're a C-suite, you know? I mean, it gives a great, well-rounded education that to your point, you just can't get in college and university. I mean, the colleges and universities do great in teaching the theory of science, but the business of science they struggle with. I mean, you know, that's a very that's a very difficult thing. So so tell me, Ryan, our time starting to get short here, what would you say? You're saying you're right. A lot of biotech companies aren't well understood. They're not well marketed. We don't tell our stories well and we don't really market our positions expansively to try to get the people that we have. What advice would you give having gone into a co-op yourself and having really sort of lived, you know, and continuing to living that and continuing to live that journey? Somebody who's interested in getting into biotech or maybe wants to dabble in it, maybe, maybe they're already enrolled in a science program. I don't know. But what would you say? What advice would you give to them for them to set upon a solid footing on a career path?

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Ryan Saranchuk
Well, yeah. Like you said, I think a lot of biotech companies struggle in getting knowledge out there and what they do, just because that's often not what the companies are built around. They're built around doing research, building product portfolios. They're not often, you know, out there getting the news out on, what kind of jobs they have available besides job boards. But yeah, definitely, you know, participating in programs like co-op, you know, universities and colleges across the country have programs and, you know, getting your company in there can help you both find talent and also, you know, get your name out there to would-be new scientists out there and things like that as well as, you know, career fairs. They're kind of taking a different path in the past three years due to COVID. And I think that that's caused them… it's not quite the same as what they used to be. And I think as things open up slowly again, I think that would be a good thing for everyone to participate in because it allows you to communicate with, you know, not just often a single person, but there's a number of people who stop by your booth or you, however, the venue is set up. And you can actually, you know, talk to a number of people at one time, what your company does, what kind of jobs you have, what opportunities there are. And that helps people and new graduates get interested and know about your company. Because often we're so focused on trying to either get investors or sell products that, you know, that that aspect of getting our name out there to the talent pool, I think often gets just by byproduct of what the companies are built to do, overlooked.

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Rob Henderson
And I agree and in a tight labour market like what we're facing right now, it's going to be that much more critical for employers to do that. Ryan, thanks very much for joining us today. This is Ryan Saranchuk who's the COO for Applied Biological Materials. And I wish you all the best of success. And I hope that ABM continues to enjoy the kind of growth it's had over the last year or so. And we look forward to hearing from you again very soon. Thanks again for joining us today.

[00:29:23]
Ryan Saranchuk
Okay. Great. Thanks, Rob. It's been it's been fun.

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Rob Henderson
Thanks very much for joining us on this latest installment of the podcast, The Science of Talent. My name is Rob Henderson. I'm the president and CEO of BioTalent Canada, the host of this series. We'll see you next time.