

Rob Henderson ([00:09](#)):

Hello everyone and welcome to our podcast, The Science of Talent. My name is Rob Henderson, I'm the president and CEO of BioTalent Canada, the host of this podcast series. And today we have Amir Akbari. We're pleased to welcome the president and CEO of Anessa Corporation here to the show. Amir, I'm really glad I can't wait to get into it with you. A little bit about diversity to inclusion, especially with a focus on Atlantic Canada, because that's where we know Anessa is from. So tell us a little bit about Anessa from what I've understood. We're talking about anaerobic digestion software. Right?

Amir Akbari ([00:45](#)):

Right. First, thank you for having me here, Rob. Anessa is a software company. We are specialized in biogas projects including anaerobic digestions. Our technologies are around the performing early stage for project development feasibility assessment for, we work with the project developers, we work with the investors, we work with the energy companies, that they are evaluating opportunities in their projects and we are also working with the operators once they have operation, how they can use the data and digitalization of their operation to improve the healthy operation for the digester projects.

Rob Henderson ([01:26](#)):

Fantastic. And now you've been with, you're the founder as well of this company, right?

Amir Akbari ([01:30](#)):

Correct. Four co-founders. Now we are close to 20 people.

Rob Henderson ([01:33](#)):

Wow. 20 people. So this is really cool. So you've been able to help create this company from the ground up and your headquarters are in New Brunswick, correct?

Amir Akbari ([01:42](#)):

Correct. We started in my basement, I would say that <laugh> unfinished basement. It was very cold in winter. Now we have our offices here with the 20 people in Fredericton and two people in Ontario.

Rob Henderson ([01:55](#)):

And with your success, I hope you've been able to finish your basement.

Amir Akbari ([01:58](#)):

Oh yes, yes. That was part of the deal.

Rob Henderson ([02:03](#)):

That was part the deal. That's a signing bonus. That's exactly it. <laugh>. Awesome. So I want to get into this because this is really interesting because both from the niche company you have, there's so many interesting things about your company. So first of all it's where IT and biotechnology and bioenergy intersect <affirmative>. So that I want to find out a little bit in terms of some of the skills and the talent that you're seeking out. The other thing too is a lot of people don't realize this bioenergy and bio refineries are such a huge concern in New Brunswick in particular, right? <affirmative>. So tell us a little bit about the ecosystem you found yourself <affirmative> in a little bit of your background and why you decided to create this really exciting company.

Amir Akbari ([02:44](#)):

Sure. My background is mechanical engineer. I'm by trade mechanical engineer. I came to Canada 2011 completing my master's degree at here at the University of New Brunswick. And toward my finishing my school, my background in back before coming to Canada was in energy and turbine manufacturing working with the Siemens company in the Middle East. And one of my older colleagues reached out to me asking about this waste to energy projects that they were looking into it to identify the right technology for it and asked me to help him with that. And I didn't know anything about the waste energy back then. One of my co-founder, who's our CTO now, he was doing PhD in the waste energy projects here at the University of New Brunswick. He was working on the simulation of those processes and I reached out to him asking about the project mean involving the project.

([03:40](#)):

And during the project we worked with the other experts in the domain and figured out there is no software solution for that in my entire life as an engineer students and working in the industry that I was using a lot of softwares, if it's was the simulation or CAD cam or any calculation, there was a software but there was nothing in the market for the waste to energy. That was the initial idea starting and talking a lot in that unfinished basement about this. And the company started with that idea. Then we focused on an aerobic digestion biogas simply because of the maturity of the market, maturity of the technology in the world. And since then we have grown it. And back to your point about the ecosystem, I remember when we started talking about the biogas in New Brunswick, there was a handful of people knowing about the biogas because there are some opportunities here in New Brunswick in Atlantic Canada per se, but not a lot of people know about that. We biogas...the benefit of it is yes, one part is the renewable energy coming of it, but where I get excited is using the waste for producing that renewable energy, which is the big bonus of the biogas compared with the other source of renewable energy. So that's where our story started.

Rob Henderson ([05:12](#)):

Oh that's fantastic. Now, so now you yourself, are you a newcomer to Canada as well, Amir?

Amir Akbari ([05:18](#)):

I am. I was 10 years ago. Now I consider myself not the newcomer.

Rob Henderson ([05:24](#)):

As you absolutely should. And where were you from originally?

Amir Akbari ([05:28](#)):

From Iran.

Rob Henderson ([05:30](#)):

Oh, from Iran. Okay great. So tell me in terms of that experience as a newcomer to Canada and an entrepreneur living in Atlanta, Canada... now when you first came to Canada, did you come to New Brunswick?

Amir Akbari ([05:41](#)):

Yes. So full disclosure, I didn't know anything about New Brunswick when I came to Canada. My wife back then, my girlfriend...she was coming to do her PhD here at the University of New Brunswick. So I ended up being here in New Brunswick and follow the girls. So that was my story. <laugh>

Rob Henderson ([06:04](#)):

Always a smart success move of you Amir.

Amir Akbari ([06:07](#)):

Exactly. But one thing that I always tell to a lot of friends that how I end up staying here in New Brunswick because I have a lot of relatives and families, we are talking about diversity and belonging. So right in different part of Canada. But I don't have any friends, I didn't have any families the back time in New Brunswick. But the people here made us to stay even a couple years ago before starting the company, she was graduated, I was graduated. So we were looking to find a job and trying to move to the other part of the Canada. We did a little bit of road trip and say okay, we are going to experience it by ourselves. And after that road trip we said no, New Brunswick is home now for us. So we started the company, she's working here in New Brunswick so we are all happier and we call it the New Brunswick home.

Rob Henderson ([06:58](#)):

What a great hometown success story. I hope Tourism New Brunswick hears this because they should be putting it on the airways for sure. <laugh> after this. So tell me Amir with that experience of being a newcomer and being here for 10 years and loving New Brunswick and being a New Brunswick career by choice. How did that help you? What was the perspective that you brought into as you wanted to grow the company? Who did you want to attract to the company? I understood, I understand obviously as an entrepreneur, skills are going to be absolutely important, but how did your perspectives as a newcomer influence you in terms of the growth you wanted to have?

Amir Akbari ([07:32](#)):

Sure. Well we were lucky. One of our co-founders, again we are a software company and one of our co-founders is the university prof at the computer science here at the university UNB. So we had access to a large group of talent coming out of university that through him and his networks there. But ecosystem here in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada as a whole, it's very small group and people get access to it. I was surprised at the beginning that we had couple mentors through Biob and groups there that were helping us to get us from the ground. And with one phone call, you can have access to a very successful business people that they can easily share their experience, donate their time, and that's a quality of the people that we have here for the ecosystem. We also have our challenges. We were trying to recruit the talent that coming from the biogas side, which is very limited talent here in the Atlantic Canada. We were again got lucky. I would say that the luck was with us, that we could find people either from graduating from Dalhousie University or University of New Brunswick or any other institutes that we could bring those people in. But still that's a big challenge for us to finding people from the market, from the industry with the experience. It's one of our challenges. As you said, we have a domain of the computer science and the biogas and meeting that, bringing those to a skill sets to under one roof is a big challenge here.

Rob Henderson ([09:16](#)):

So how did you bring in the principles in particular of diversity and inclusion into your recruitment? Because obviously if you're looking for the skills, and I understand that's paramount, for sure obviously going to be important for a startup like yourselves, right? But how did you bring in, you make sure that the company also was attracting and retaining as diverse a talent base as possible?

Amir Akbari ([09:42](#)):

Right. So one thing, I was one of those groups that consider myself that underserved minority at the beginning. So I experienced that. So at the get go we know how I experienced that and one big part for us was living by the examples. So how we can have that mindset in the organization with our management team, with our stakeholders that we have in place, that they understand the same thing and value the same thing. But I've seen a lot of reports, I've seen a lot of researchers that's showing how diversity can improve the productivity, which is great, but is it happening? Is it just a report or metrics that you're just measuring or you are actually making decisions based on that? So bringing that living, being a live living example, that was the key for us. Right now as part of our team, we have eight different origin of countries from different part of the worlds working with us, being part of our company. And that's a big success and I always love to see more of it. We always promote women and engineering. We always promote women and business. So that's a big part for us to be able to attract talent and more importantly retain them.

Rob Henderson ([11:12](#)):

Yeah. And have you felt that, you mentioned that diversity and inclusion increases productivity or there been many studies out there. Have you either measured that for yourself in your company or have you just felt that as part of a lot of people just say since we've made this change, since we've, we've really adopted the principles of diversity there seems to be a dynamism in the company that there wasn't there before. So tell us about that. Have you either measured that or quantified it or do you just feel it?

Amir Akbari ([11:39](#)):

Look we didn't adopt it, we had it at the get go. That was our approach. We don't measure it. We should actually one of our investors that asking us to do some of those metrics. But I'm going back to the same principles that I said, living with the examples. If we are bringing the opportunity or providing the opportunity for everyone from different background, different race, different ages, that they can be part of the journey, that's for me success. And we are seeing that successes as well. We work with the international markets, we are offering our solution international market, being able to understand the culture of our customers, being able to even communicate their same language that they're talking. It's a key for our success and growth, which we have the benefit of having different variety of people in the company.

Rob Henderson ([12:39](#)):

Today's candidates interview employers as much as the employers interview them to compete for talent, Bio economy companies must ensure their HR offerings are current and compelling. And a strong compensation package can make your organization stand out. BioTalent Canada's national bilingual compensation guide is a must have for any bioeconomy employer's HR toolbox. It provides an overview of salaries and benefits for 34 popular job functions within the industry to ensure your offerings meet or exceed industry standards. Don't miss out on top end talent for reasons completely within your control. Get your copy today at bio talent.ca/compensation guide.

([13:25](#)):

Now you say something. So that seems to be so apparent if you have a diverse workforce and your marketing your products internationally, it just makes intuitive sense that you would be better equipped to be able to sell into those other markets, those other national markets if you have a diverse workforce. Right. It just seems to be just that intuitive. You mentioned your investors, I mean and I'm wondering because I think the market is changing within Canada where depending on where you're at in the stage of evolution as a startup, if you're just at the friends and family or getting into venture capital at the time, is there a feeling amongst the investment community from your point of view that diversity and inclusion is an important, is a priority or that it's even considered amongst the investment community?

Amir Akbari ([14:17](#)):

Yes for sure. We have, four or five years ago when we were looking for the investment, there was some conversation but not actual things happening. But now people are seeing or the investors are experiencing it because again, EDI is not just a number that's sitting in the shelf. EDI is something that drives the growth of the company. They know the companies who have the better ADI in practice or policies. They can attract more people, they can have more better skillsets, they can have happy employees and happy customers at the end of the day. So that's the best mix for the investors considered for the companies.

Rob Henderson ([14:59](#)):

Well that's great to hear. There's gotta be more stories about that cause a lot of the stories about EDI and in particular in terms of, as we mentioned before, the productivity within the company comes from internally and that's fine and from a company cultural point of view. But it would be great to get some stories out there about how many investors are considering EDI as a priority for their investment dollar. That seems to be lacking. Do you think that's new in the market at this time, Amir? Or is it just been sort of hidden?

Amir Akbari ([15:29](#)):

It's new I would say, imposing that is new, but people were talking about this for a long time, but asking what's your policy about the EDI? How you're going to attract those diversity group for us? Your team is becoming more and more in the investor community in investment conversations. Before it was, most of it was around, okay, what's the business, what's the market? All of them happening again. But of course additional layer of it is adding, okay, how you're going to bring more people, how you're going to attract more skill sets with the different diversity and different backgrounds.

Rob Henderson ([16:05](#)):

Now how do you think, I know you don't have anything to compare it to having now being up to this in Canada, lifelong New Brunswicker in terms of since you've arrived in Canada. But what do you think, how does diversity and inclusion work in Atlantic Canada? Is that different than the rest of Canada? Have you talked with some of your peers and competitors where their experiences different and what are the unique features of the region that make it either an advantage or a challenge to promote diversity and inclusion within your working ranks?

Amir Akbari ([16:40](#)):

I would say it is different and big part of it relate back to the population that we have in New Brunswick or Atlantic Canada. We have a small group, small population compared with the other part of Canada. And subsequently we have less immigrants, less diversity of those groups coming in choosing to live

here in Atlantic Canada. But as I said I love the people here. That's how they are welcoming and open to this. The newcomers, new variety of the people and people here are less exposed to different cultures. That was my first reaction when I landed here in New Brunswick. That with the different variety and background, we don't have per se the Chinese or Korean or Persian neighborhood that you would see in a major municipalities across the country. That's a big challenge for us. That sense of belonging is a challenge. Every time I travel for the **trade sauna** or other events, I try to bring some souvenir, some cookie, something from the different regions that to show to our team at least that look there is something, at least something here, but that's changing. I remember 2010 or 11 that I started at UNB, there was everyone graduating, planning to leave the province. They were not planning to stay. But now that has shifted. So it is changing that dynamic and I think people are valuing the values we have here in Atlantic Canada.

Rob Henderson ([18:19](#)):

So you just mentioned one of them in terms of when you have to do some travel for the company, that you bring something back for your team...That's culturally relevant I guess to speak. Sure. Are there any other things that you think from a leadership perspective that you can impart to other small and medium size enterprises that are trying to diversify or trying to be more inclusive in terms of in Atlanta, Canada, I guess as you mentioned, the challenges is retention, right? <affirmative>, so many people will immigrate there, but unlike you they choose to go to some of the more heavily populated urban centers within Canada because there's a larger cultural community there and everything else. What are the things that you are doing besides what you just mentioned to try to ensure your staff stay with you and stay not only with Anessa but stay with within New Brunswick?

Amir Akbari ([19:07](#)):

Right. That's a good question. I think there are a lot of things people can do or we can do...one, two areas that I'm personally very keen and get excited about. That is living by example. You can show, you can talk, but you need to show on your professional and personal level of the engagement with the group. So if I'm just going to go because of my background from Iran and Persian, if I'm going to just go hang on with the only Persian groups, I'm not living that example. So that will reflect in my professional life as well. The other part is ongoing learning how we can learn to be able to understand different perspective, have a better communication skill sets. That's a big part that I'm personally very get excited and I try to promote my other colleagues or other peers that we need to know. My wife and I love travel, traveling. Every time that we get a chance, we go out and see different part of the world and that's eye opening that, okay, I'm not the center of the world. There are other people that they are living different type, different style, which is their life and it's eye opening for us to, as an education, not talking about sitting in a getting classroom and getting education. More of a life experience, education and learning and getting exposed to those different cultures.

Rob Henderson ([20:32](#)):

And have you found, we've just obviously as everybody else, we're getting back to work as usual <affirmative> and trying to get people back to the office or the lab or the refinery or wherever we're going. Right. Have you found over the last two and a half years, I mean you've been building the company since what, 2015 I think, right?

Amir Akbari ([20:52](#)):

15 was established, but 17 was the operation office.

Rob Henderson ([20:55](#)):

2017. So you've had about half the time pre covid and half the time post covid or during covid. Do you find either in the hybrid work environment that we now find ourselves in or exiting it where we're trying to get people back to the office, has that been more challenging in terms of promoting diversity inclusion? Has it been more difficult to find those diverse voices or hear those diverse voices over something like a Zoom call as opposed to around the water cooler around the lunch room?

Amir Akbari ([21:24](#)):

Yeah definitely. It's more challenging. It's the way that you connect with your colleagues, peers, and others over the Zoom or over online platforms are not easy, as effective as personal. My personal view with that was remote working is not going to work. My personal view, Covid changed that. So we worked two years successfully over the covid. Now we are in a hybrid. The second we started to see the changes, I implemented the policy, three days in the office, two days out of the office or flexible. That's what I love. I spend most of my time in the office trying to connect with people, learn about their personal life and understand their different backgrounds. But that added another layer of challenge in terms of, not per se for the EDI, but per se of retaining the talent. We here in Atlantic Canada, we see a lot of companies trying to recruit from New Brunswick or Atlantic Canada. While people can stay here, they don't need to go to San Francisco to work for the San Francisco company. So that's the biggest challenge. Now after Covid, we are experiencing as a small company trying to bring more talent and keep them in the office. That's one of the challenges we are seeing post covid.

Rob Henderson ([22:41](#)):

I can just imagine we've seen it all, but the labor market's pretty tight and while remote working has been just great for the worker, it's, it's brought in a new set of challenges for companies. Right, exactly. As you mentioned, where American companies and American dollars are hiring them away, <affirmative> now, do you think your company, because as you mentioned at the beginning you've got a green aspect to your sustainable development aspect, also taking waste gas and being able to recycle it and reuse it. So do you think that in terms of green corporate value that you possess, has that been an asset for you in terms of your recruitment efforts or in terms of attracting the kind of diverse talent that you want to your company?

Amir Akbari ([23:22](#)):

Definitely meaningful of the work that our team are doing. My team average age for my team is 34, 35 years old. So we had success of bringing younger generation that they care about what they are doing. Maybe in my age, we were looking at how I'm going to make money when I'm going to work, but the younger generations, they are looking for that meaningful work experience. It's money is part of it. Making the life is part of it, but the legacy that they're going to live after that work, it's important. And having that, being able to help multimillion dollar companies from New Brunswick with our solutions, that has been a very big driver for our team and bringing new team members to the company.

Rob Henderson ([24:14](#)):

And I don't know why. It seems to be a logical leap that a company that is has a value of sustainable development or greening the economy would also be diverse and inclusive. I guess it's the sense of open mindedness or forward thinking. I think we like to think that diversity and inclusion is a bit of a Canadian value in terms of the changing society. So let me ask you, as a leader, as a CEO and an entrepreneur, I mean, you've got so many things to juggle, right? You've, you mentioned your investors, so I know the

investors are there. You have to drive shareholder value, right? You're there within the ecosystem that's established in Atlanta, Canada and plugging yourself into it. And you're trying to also live your corporate values, which is, as you mentioned, sustainable development and diversity and EDI, right? Right. What kind of advice would you give to a CEO, whether he was a newcomer or not within Canada who's trying to diversify his workforce and trying to make that, really trying to incorporate that into the corporate values, <affirmative> and to live that experience. Would you have any advice for somebody who was running a small company who wants to really change up his workforce and make it a lot more inclusive?

Amir Akbari ([25:33](#)):

Yeah, there are a lot. I think one area that I would emphasize is just looking at what debt means and believe into it. Again, you can be lost in the weeds when you're trying to measure the metrics around that, but how you can practically have policy in place that you can benefit from it. That's a big driver for everyone. I think people or the leaders or the newcomers, they need to look at that with that lens on yes, having a metrics, having a policy sitting on the shelf. Great. Those are the requirements, but how in practice you are implementing that, and that's a challenging part. It's, it's not easy. We got lucky that we had a very open-minded team in place, very open minded shareholders in place that they value these metrics. At the same time, we should be able to not just be lost on those studies or I'm not disvaluing it, just be clear here. But what I'm saying that being more practical with those policies.

Rob Henderson ([26:45](#)):

And how do you, yourself as a leader, stay focused on that? Stay focused on diversity and driving diversity and inclusion to drive opportunities to drive the business. How do you, I mean obviously there's lots of stakeholders that are vying for your time. You've got a lot of focus that's divided right into different areas, investors, etc. How do you stay focused?

Amir Akbari ([27:07](#)):

On the EDI side we look at it as a competitive advantage for the company that we have that bring in wide variety of the viewpoints at the table. We are, when you have that different views at the decision making process, that's where I see we can bring value and see the results out of it. As I mentioned that one of the biggest part for us is how we can implement this more in practice and it's in the international market that we are working with. That was good example that I had a client in Germany and I have a German person working in the company. So before going to that meeting, before engaging the client, before engaging that partner, I'm sitting with that person understanding that culture a little bit and if needed, bring him to the table and have that show that yes, we are in that market same as the other region. So that's driving the results based on this metrics is my focal point. It's okay. How we are bringing value to our customers, how we are bringing value for our shareholders based on these metrics. That's a key for me.

Rob Henderson ([28:29](#)):

Amir Akbari, President and CEO of Anessa. Thanks for joining me today. It's been absolutely great. Not only has it been really interesting to hear it from your perspective is not a new newcomer, but can I call you an old newcomer? Is that okay?

Amir Akbari ([28:42](#)):

<laugh> All good. I still a newcomer 10 years, so there we go.

Rob Henderson ([28:45](#)):

Exactly. That's right. And from that experience and also a walking, talking, tourism advertisement for New Brunswick on how to establish and grow an exciting company with a sustainable development component within the biogas and bioenergy subsector of Canada. Thanks so much for joining me today. I appreciate it.

Amir Akbari ([29:06](#)):

Thanks Rob for having me. I really appreciate the time and enjoy the conversation.

Rob Henderson ([29:14](#)):

Join us next time for another installment of BioTalent Canada's podcast series, The Science of Talent. Thanks very much for joining us today. My name is Rob Henderson, President CEO of BioTalent Canada. We'll see you next time.