

Rob Henderson ([00:02](#)):

Hi, this is Rob Henderson and I'm president and CEO of Bio Talent Canada. Welcome to this installment in our series of podcasts called The Science of Talent. You're about to hear a conversation that's happened between Lester Wood, who's the vice president of People and Culture for BioVectra, who is in Charlottetown PEI. I think you'll find the conversation quite engaging, Lester's a dynamic, an interesting person and going down this road, we were talking about Bio Vectra as a company and a major biotechnology company in Charlottetown PEI and Lester started going into some of the details of what BioVectra was doing to attract and diversify its talent. And he got into the underrepresented group of gender diversity and assisting people who are transitioning genders and the special means and policies that they had in place in BioVectra. And I thought not only is this so innovative for the biotech industry, but for PEI and Charlottetown for a company there, particularly with the resources that we would think or assume that it has at hand to come up with us as extraordinary. Anyway, enjoy the podcast. I think you'll find out it's one of the best in the series so far.

([01:28](#)):

Today I'm joined by Lester Wood, who is the vice president of people and corporate culture at Bio Vectra. coming to us from deepest, darkest Charlottetown, PEI today. Welcome Lester.

Lester Wood ([01:41](#)):

Thanks Rob. Lovely to be here with you.

Rob Henderson ([01:42](#)):

Yeah, it's great. I know we've been wanting to get you on the podcast series for some time, so it's great to finally have you. I want to tell everybody a little bit about you before we launch into Bio Vectra's really incredible success story. So Lester Wood, he's got a Bachelor's in business administration from the University of New Brunswick at Fredericton. He's also got his C H R P, which is a certified human resource specialist designation. He also has 20 years of human resource experience and professional services, healthcare and oil and gas. That's an interesting eclectic background Lester, that you had before you came into biotechnology. It's quite interesting.

Lester Wood ([02:20](#)):

That it is.

Rob Henderson ([02:21](#)):

<laugh> appointed as a BioVectra's executive director of human resources in 2016, and then again promoted to vice president of people and corporate culture in 2020. So obviously the growth of yourself and your career at BioVectra, it's been paralleling the growth of BioVectra itself. So Lester, tell us a little bit, especially since you've come to BioVectra itself, what has that journey been like over the last four or five years since you've been there?

Lester Wood ([02:50](#)):

The pace of change both in the industry and at Hector has been I would say overwhelming, but exciting is probably a better term for it. <laugh> never an opportunity to sit back and rest on your laurels. There's always something bigger, better to be accomplished and just great. We were talking before the podcast started, what an incredible place, PEI is to do business, especially in the bioeconomy. We've got

a really strong group supporting us at the PEI Bio Alliance. The government of PEI is very much open to BNO business for the bio economy, so it's a pretty special place to be.

Rob Henderson ([03:36](#)):

So let's put the backdrop here of some of the incredible news that's come out of from PEI. And I agree mean I've been across this country as well, and I've gotta tell you, there's very few people who think of PEI as this biotechnology mecca, but it actually really quite very much is. It's something like 62 or 65 companies biotech companies, and not just in the life sciences that are in PEI. <affirmative> It's a major provincial industry. And so in the midst of it is the largest player, which is BioVectra. So let's put the backdrop of where this company came from over the last six or seven years to the really cool announcements that have happened in the last year in terms of Biomanufacturing and mRNA manufacturing there as well. So how many people were at Vectra when you joined the company Lester?

Lester Wood ([04:24](#)):

I think I was number 236.

Lester Wood ([04:28](#)):

Today we're at 630, well I'm in charge of headcount, so I tend to watch that number pretty closely.

Rob Henderson ([04:35](#)):

Okay, good. So they didn't line you up like in usual suspects and gave you a number like 236.

Rob Henderson ([04:38](#)):

Okay, that's cool. So 236 and what, sorry, what did you just mention?

Lester Wood ([04:45](#)):

630

Rob Henderson ([04:46](#)):

630 and growing.

Lester Wood ([04:48](#)):

And growing.

Rob Henderson ([04:49](#)):

And what are you expecting to add on in the coming year? If all factors work out?

Lester Wood ([04:53](#)):

I fully expect by this time next year, if we were to sit down, we'll be in the 750 range.

Rob Henderson ([04:59](#)):

Wow. That's incredible growth. Yeah, what a great success story. Yeah. And last year like this, in this last year's announcement, I think it was about six months ago, or no, I guess it was longer than that, about

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eight or nine months ago, the great announcement that the federal government was subsidizing the construction of BioVectra's mRNA vaccine.

Lester Wood ([05:18](#)):

That building is now weather tight.

Rob Henderson ([05:21](#)):

I hope so,

Lester Wood ([05:22](#)):

Just in time for PEI winter, but that's going to allow us to really charge forward over the winter and finish out that facility. We've started to staff it out and we should be in really good shape to hit our deadlines for production.

Rob Henderson ([05:40](#)):

What are the range of products? I mean, I don't want to go into exhaustive detail, but the range of products that come out of BioVectra that are I mean, obviously we we're getting into the mRNA vaccine category, but up until now, what has been your staples?

Lester Wood ([05:54](#)):

So really two lines of science, one complex chemistry and the other around biology. And so Charlottetown is primarily complex chemistry, and our Windsor, Windsor facility is primarily biologics.

Rob Henderson ([06:10](#)):

So you have facilities in Nova Scotia as well. And do you have any other offices? Those are the two main ones that you have right now?

Lester Wood ([06:17](#)):

Well, probably since the last time we talked I guess, no, we talked at the opening of the...our new lab facility. It was Castle's new building, but we have a third of that building as a new lab facility. And we're in the process of converting a building in the Burnside Industrial Park in Dartmouth into another lab facility. So total count now we're in seven sites, eight sites.

Rob Henderson ([06:46](#)):

Wow. That's a lot to manage itself when you're talking about team and culture.

Lester Wood ([06:51](#)):

But it's great from a... I'm really looking forward to having a footprint in Dartmouth itself. I think that's really going to help us in terms of recruiting to the more rural Windsor campus.

Rob Henderson ([07:05](#)):

So the incredible growth of, so like 230 to 200, what'd you say? 236? 236. You were to 630. 630 now. So that's almost a hundred per year in terms of growth or 75 per year over the last five or six years.

Lester Wood ([07:23](#)):

During a pandemic. Imagine where we'd be if there hadn't been a pandemic.

Rob Henderson ([07:26](#)):

And that's what I want to get to. So I mean pre pandemic, you were doing the growth. So tell me a little bit of the challenges that you were facing from an HR department that is staffing this up onboarding that many people, was it eight people a month or something along those lines. Consistently over several years. And what were the challenges that you faced before the pandemic as opposed to the challenges you're facing now?

Lester Wood ([07:51](#)):

At times before the pandemic, there were periods that were where we had trouble just finding bodies. So we got really creative around doing open houses and a lot of PR around who we are, what we do. In spite of the fact that we're a science-based company, you don't have to necessarily be a scientist to have a successful career with us. So I think there was a bit of education we had to do to in the communities in which we live and work because we're a bit of a mystery around what do companies in the biotech industry do.

([08:26](#)):

When we shifted to the pandemic, the big thing became, like everyone else, turnover. We were losing people almost faster than we could replace them. Luckily that seems to have leveled off. And in the last half of this year our attrition is back to what I would characterize as a normal rate. So we grew, plus we lost people. So to net the number of people that we netted, we almost had to hire double that number. So I've got a really great HR department that I'll be honest, for a lot of it, all we did was focus on recruiting.

Rob Henderson ([09:06](#)):

Yeah, I can imagine. So let's talk about that retention point for a minute there. Lester. What shifted? Why were you losing the people? I mean, I know Atlantic, Canada, they have a bit of a brain drain with some of their young students going off to some of the larger urban areas in Canada, it's a bit of a challenge that's kind of unique to Atlantic Canada, but...

Lester Wood ([09:25](#)):

It's a bit of a mixed curse. So yeah, we've got incredible number of really great secondary institutions that turn out really great employees. We have a wonderful opportunity for immigration in Atlantic Canada. Some of the issues with both of those is there's always bigger and better opportunities, at least on paper in Toronto or further west. Interesting thing is that has kind of turned around. Atlantic Canada is now one of the top destinations in Canada for immigration. So we're really coming into our own in that sense,

Rob Henderson ([10:08](#)):

Which is awesome. And that brings us to a little bit about how you had to adapt or BioVectra had to adapt its practices to that labor market that you wanted to tap into and how you changed, I guess, a lot of times in Atlantic, Canada as a traditional, I don't know, as across Canada, if the idea that it's a diverse and inclusive population doesn't necessarily come immediately to mind, but in fact it really is. Just for

the point that you just said. So how did you change or how did BioVectra adapt to making sure that its internal machinations and its culture was such that it would attract and retain a diverse workforce?

Lester Wood ([10:49](#)):

When I think back to when I joined BioVectra seven years ago the first time I walked the halls, I felt like I was back in Toronto. So it was this wonderful mosaic of who makes up Canada. And I applaud people who have the courage to immigrate. It's such an incredibly brave thing to do, to give up everything that is comfortable and familiar to go to something that even if you think what you're getting into, you really don't. It's going to be way different. So my hat's off to anybody who is brave enough to do that.

([11:32](#)):

In Charlottetown in particular, I'll start there. In the early days of people immigrating if you were brown-skinned or you were different, you really stood out. And it was really difficult to retain people because especially as people get to the point where they start to have children, and want to raise their children in their culture or in their religion it just wasn't possible. As immigration took hold here and we brought in more and more folks I'm happy to report that people are quite happy to stay, that they've developed community, that they're able to raise their children in the Canadian version of their culture, and they're able to practice the religion that they want to practice. So Charlottetown is a really changed population. My neighborhood, I live on a little cul-de-sac and half of us are non islanders. And of the non islanders. I'm probably the only one who is Canadian born. The rest are born outside of Canada.

Rob Henderson ([12:42](#)):

And I guess the difference is to your point, over the last 10 years, what has really shifted is that I know Atlantic Canada would be able to attract newcomers, but a lot of the times, because they didn't have necessarily the cultural glue in those communities, a lot of the newcomers would leave. They'd come in...

Lester Wood ([12:59](#)):

Yeah, we were stopping ground on the river from Montreal and Toronto to be honest.

Rob Henderson ([13:01](#)):

And so what changed? What shifted there?

Lester Wood ([13:05](#)):

Well, I think everything else with Covid, that everybody's definition of quality of life kind of changed and people put or reorganize their priorities. I think the lifestyle that Atlantic Canada offers in terms of green space, in terms of affordable living, in terms of the ability to have a house versus living in an apartment or a condo, of course, if that's what somebody wants... good schools, relatively safe environment, it's hard to get away with a crime on an island. And then just that growing population. And Charlottetown in itself is, I remember the first winter I was here, I was like, Ooh, this could be a long winter. But there's always a festival going on. We're big foodies, we've got the culinary institute, but we also celebrate the diversity of our seasons. And if you want to find something to go to - an art exhibit, a restaurant opening, whatever it is, there's always something going on.

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

Sure, understood. Now do you think, has BioVectra capitalized on that? Is that why you have been, because we talked about earlier that sometimes people who are not science, non-science types are not necessarily immediately we don't do a great job in the bioeconomy of branding ourselves and promoting ourselves outside our own industry to try to get those sales types or marketing types, etc, to come and work for us. What has your efforts been to try to attract some of those non-science types to BioVectra?

Lester Wood ([14:45](#)):

A lot of our senior non-science types are actually dispersed. So most of our BD team lives in the US or in Europe. So talk about diversity.

([14:58](#)):

In terms of really, it's probably the science types that are the hardest to attract especially as we head into the new science where we're going to have to bring in experienced hires from Boston, from California, from Texas because we're entering science that just doesn't exist here. So that's pretty exciting seeing those folks explore Charlottetown, make the conscious decision to relocate here. And then in the years coming to watch them really grow and flourish here and to tell the others that they left behind in Boston, in California, in Texas, that hey, what really great place to live, come join me.

Rob Henderson ([15:50](#)):

Bio Talent Canada's Student work Placement program or SWPP is a low risk, high reward program for employers. It can cover up to 70% of the cost of a student's salary to a maximum of \$7,000. Since inception. Bio Talent Canada's placed more than 10,000 students in SWPP program with Bioeconomy employers across Canada. So why do employers come back year after year and apply for more participants? Because the impact students make on an organization when empowered with the opportunity have proven to be significant visit biotalent.ca to hear directly from employers and students and to learn more about the program funded in part by the government of Canada's student work placement program...Well that's an interesting thing. Has that worked for BioVectra? Like that kind of an internal referral or employee referrals?

Lester Wood ([16:45](#)):

Yeah, it really has. You know Oliver, our CEO, who is based in New York, he travels the world for conferences and that kind of thing. And I think he is probably the biggest ambassador for Atlantic Canada and for PEI that there is out there.

Rob Henderson ([17:03](#)):

He absolutely is. He's also a real champion about people and culture and is something that, I've gotta say, having seen a lot of small and medium sized enterprises across the country, it's rare. And it's also part of the secret sauce because if you don't get that, it's pushing a rock uphill, a boulder uphill to get, get the kind of culture that is going to be amenable to being diverse and inclusive. Right.

Lester Wood ([17:26](#)):

Well and Rob, you get a lot of CEOs who say the right things, but their actions don't necessarily align. And that was truly one of the things that attracted me to BioVectra was just Oliver's stance on the important role that people and culture play. And he's certainly delivered everything that was promised to me during the recruiting process.

Rob Henderson ([17:49](#)):

Well that's awesome. So let's talk about that. Some of your internal machinations that has made BioVectra a welcoming company to a diverse array of staff from a diverse array of labor markets. Tell what are some of the things, if you're not bringing, giving away trade secrets here Lester, what are some of the innovative or creative means within that you've been able to make sure that diversity converts to inclusion, that you get that?

Lester Wood ([18:22](#)):

And Rob, I would take that a step further and say belonging is probably going to be the next hot word in that phrase around diversity, inclusion and equity. I think it's belonging. So you can have the perfect mix in terms of diversity, you can have equal opportunity for everybody, for all roles, etc, etc. But if you don't have belonging, if the people don't see themselves in your organization, if there isn't a hook you're still going to have a hard time keeping them. So they really need to feel that sense of belonging, feel like they've got a future, feel like they matter and see themselves in the culture and in the important work that we do.

Rob Henderson ([19:09](#)):

So how do you do that? What are some of the things, give me for instance, of something that you folks have been able to set upon that really work for BioVectra to instill that within your team?

Lester Wood ([19:25](#)):

So as you know, we've just been named to top 100 employers in Canada for the second year running, which is pretty freaking amazing if I do say so myself. For a relatively small company out of Atlantic Canada up against basically the rest of Canada. So we're pretty proud of that. A lot of what has had us land on that list and maintain our place on that list is we've got a really unique benefits offering and we started with choice. So we have levels of coverage at various price points hoping that everybody would see themselves in the right coverage at the right price. We're doing some really cool stuff. We no longer have a cap on mental health. So if you need to see a psychologist that used to be capped at 500 or a thousand dollars, whatever it was, excuse me, it's now unlimited. So you basically get the level of support you need to get your mental health where it needs to be with no worry about running out of funding from the health plan.

Rob Henderson ([20:41](#)):

Was that a pandemic thing? Was that a pandemic...

Lester Wood ([20:43](#)):

It was actually that and we joined with Blue Cross as a provider and when we were talking to Blue Cross and to the benefits consultant that we use, I said I want to be the leader in terms of benefits offerings for Atlantic Canada and they've really helped us get there. A couple of things that we're doing for 2023 is we're offering assistance for folks who are going through gender affirmation. So there'll be financial support as well as psychological support for that. We're offering support for couples going through fertility issues. And I don't know anybody who's listening who's gone through that or down that path. It gets very expensive, very fast. I've got friends who've spent a couple of hundred thousand dollars trying to deal with fertility issues. So we're happy to be able to help out even in the smallest way down both those paths.

Rob Henderson ([21:44](#)):

Are you able to, that's really quite forward thinking and certainly in an industry where 80% of the companies or SMEs and 70% don't have any dedicated human resources, it's quite something. And again, I guess I wouldn't say it's contrasts, but I think in a lot of people's ideas, they wouldn't think to go to Charlottetown or PEI for that kind of forward people and culture thinking. Is there a way that you're capturing because you're still grow, you've just said what your targets are for the coming year, you're still recruiting. Is there a way that you're able to brand that? It's a difficult thing to put out there?

Lester Wood ([22:25](#)):

That's actually the big mission for 2023 is to relaunch our employment brand, both internally and externally. And the other big initiative that I'm personally taking on for 2023 is around developing our people leaders. So I want to make sure we've got the best possible stewards of our employees that we can possibly have.

Rob Henderson ([22:50](#)):

So now from a diversity and inclusion perspective, Lester, because that is, as we all know, a huge spectrum in terms of, you just talked about some of the measures that you're talking about with gender diversity and all the rest of it that we're talking. What about some of the underrepresented groups like the indigenous Canadians and Canadians with disabilities? Are there areas of you focusing on that or are you trying to make it look like to show that BioVectra is open to all underrepresented groups?

Lester Wood ([23:18](#)):

So we really are open to all, I'll be honest though, we've got some work to do, especially around physical disabilities. Our buildings are quasi accessible at best. So as we build out new space and as we renovate, that's one of the things that I'm in there working with the architects on is to make sure we are completely accessible.

Rob Henderson ([23:44](#)):

And post pandemic. I know a couple of organizations, especially those with laboratories, when you have lab facilities, you can't work out of your basement. It's that work that's right from home. And that hybrid workplace is a challenge and you're not alone in that. I know a lot of bio like biocompany economy companies across Canada are struggling with that.

Lester Wood ([24:02](#)):

That becomes a big issue, Rob, in terms of equity. So if I'm tied to the lab, but you are able to come and go and work from home and not depending on the lens I wear, I can say I'm not being treated equitably. So there's some difficult conversations that have to happen around the realities of certain roles that some of us hold and don't hold.

Rob Henderson ([24:25](#)):

Yeah, no, absolutely. And BioVectra, and specifically to, I would say what you do, I mean which is Biomanufacturing, you're a bio manufacturer, I mean right? One of Canada's leading bio manufacturers. But considering there, and I mean our own labor market intelligence is shown that we're going to be about 16,000 positions short in bio-manufacturing across all sub-sectors, not just in biologics and everything that you guys do but across the country by 2029. So it's an uphill battle. What challenges are

you facing to try to attract? You've got the diversity and inclusion mantra and you're living it and breathing it, which is laudable and means that you're exposing yourself to those labor markets that other companies are not. But you're also looking at a specific skill set. So you have to not only diversify your workforce, you have to find the people with the right skills and the right training to come and be part of your company. What are you doing to do that? What skills are you looking for and where are you finding them?

Lester Wood ([25:30](#)):

So it's a two-pronged approach. It's buy versus build. And so with the new vaccine facility that's being constructed about 50 feet away from me we're looking at hiring experienced leadership, folks that have done it before, proven that they can do it before they'll bring with themselves. I aged myself this morning at the all employee meeting by saying they'll bring the Rolodex and probably half the audience looked at me like...

Rob Henderson ([26:03](#)):

Oh nevermind. I use that all the time. They should just look it up.

Lester Wood ([26:07](#)):

They brought their inbox. So our strategy is around to hire the key leadership. They'll tap others on the shoulder that they worked with before or they'll have a following who come with them. They'll certainly have the expertise as we train and retrain our existing folks or as we hire new folks into the facility. So it's a bit of a two-prong approach. Build and buy.

Rob Henderson ([26:35](#)):

And beyond...So in the terms of the skills that you're looking for, would you say there's those technical skills like good manufacturing practices and quality control and stuff like that that obviously are very important for any biomanufacturing company in Canada, but you've also got those, they call them soft skills, but if you don't have them, you and I both know their heart as nails. Those essential skills, those success skills that we're talking about, whether it's peoples skills or meeting organization reading, comprehension, numeracy, all of those things, which ones are, those are more critical for you? Which ones will you say, ah, if we've got these ones we can backfill the others, but these are the ones that are critical that we have to have. This has got to be our starting point for these new team members.

Lester Wood ([27:18](#)):

So at this point, it's really the technical skillset that we need, we need people who understand Phil finish, who understand, M R N A P D N A yeah, the softer skills. We can probably at this point train or will be hiring enough, at least initially that they'll bring that with them. And then when we get to the point where we're hiring at the operators level or at the entry level lab roles, we can partner with folks like you and Castle to train the skills and the knowledge that they don't have.

Rob Henderson ([27:55](#)):

So are you targeting certain specific areas or schools or urban centers to recruit from, or are you tackling on recruiting on the diversity and inclusion front, trying to find either the science or the non-science skills you're looking for or both?

Lester Wood ([28:13](#)):

A little bit of all of the above. So we are still in that requirement to educate who we are, what it is we do. And I don't mean just BioVectra, I mean the bioeconomy in general, especially here in Atlantic Canada. So we're kind of all across the map. Everything from being on campus to attract people right out of the various science programs out there, beating the bushes going through LinkedIn, trying to find experienced talent that's bringing 10 years of experience with them. And also looking at folks who are on the ground who maybe aren't in our industry but have an interest or the ability or capability to join our industry. So we don't really have the luxury of being able to pick and choose at this point. It's a little bit of right kind of everything.

Rob Henderson ([29:09](#)):

And would you say categorize this, today's labor market as probably the most challenging you've faced over your seven years at BioVectra?

Lester Wood ([29:17](#)):

A hundred percent, yeah. And the toughest in the 20 or 25 years I've been in hr.

Rob Henderson ([29:22](#)):

So you came from healthcare, you have oil and gas experience in the hr, so you bring a wealth of cross-industry knowledge to BioVectra as well. What would you give, there's so many small companies that I'd speak, I speak to constantly. A lot of them do not have the kind of depth of knowledge that BioVectra has in its people and culture department. So what kind of advice these, these folks are struggling to try to find talent as well. Is there one piece of advice or maybe a couple that you could give to them that you think that they could take to heart in terms of their people's challenges?

Lester Wood ([29:59](#)):

So I think it's really articulating your value proposition. So what is unique about you that you're going to offer that employee? So is it a particular area of science? Is it a particular niche in the market that you've captured? Is it something special and unique that you're offering employees? Just figure out what your value proposition is and just get out there and hammer away and let people know what it is.

Rob Henderson ([30:29](#)):

And I guess it helps though a little bit that I mean a lot of people would think that being in Charlottetown PEI might be a hindrance to a company. But as we spoke to about before Lester, this has actually been a bit of your secret sauce. It's been a bit, that alignment has been actually a bit of a trampoline for BioVectra, hasn't it?

Lester Wood ([30:46](#)):

It has for sure.

Rob Henderson ([30:47](#)):

Oh, that's fantastic. Lester Wood, Vice President of People and Cult and Corporate culture for BioVectra and Charlottetown PEI. Thanks for joining me today. I really appreciated the talk. I hope you'll come back because we want to track BioVectra success story and I'm sure as you continue to grow to your 600

plus 750 target for the coming years, and as you reach it, it's going to be, I really want to hear some of the other innovative things that you're doing to attract the right kind of people to BioVectra.

Lester Wood ([31:19](#)):

I'd love to come back, Rob, and if some of your listeners are with smaller companies and don't have dedicated hr, maybe we could do a session on their questions around how do we help them resolve some of their HR issues.

Rob Henderson ([31:31](#)):

I love it. I think that's a great idea. And I know that there's a big need out there. A lot of these companies haven't had haven't been in a labor market like this where demand has outweighed supply to such an extent at this point. And I know they would love to learn from you and from a company like BioVectra. So thanks so much for joining me today.

([31:57](#)):

And you've been listening to the latest installment of Bio Talent Canada's podcast series and Science of Talent. I hope you enjoyed the great conversation I had with Lester Wood, and if you did we invite you to like and leave a review for it. And if you really liked what was saying, what you heard because it is pretty progressive what Lester and BioVectra are doing, tell a friend, share this with somebody, share this in your social media feed so that some other people can listen to it as well. Thanks for joining me. We'll see you next time.