Rob Henderson (00:11):

Welcome to the latest. This is the latest installment of the Science of Talent. This is BioTalent Canada's podcast on all things skills and talent related in Canada's Bioeconomy. I'm your host Rob Henderson. I'm the president and CEO of BioTalent Canada, and Wendy Hurlburt joins me today, who is the president and CEO of BC Life Science's. British Columbia holds a critical leadership role in BC's dynamic life sciences ecosystem to support the sector. She uses a collaborative approach to cultivate relationships between local, small and medium size enterprises, as well as global partners, educational institutions, and of course the ever-present government. Building on that, Wendy also elevates the sector as a highly regarded spokesperson in key markets worldwide. She's knowledgeable as a promoter and advocate for the sector and helps attract new business and investment opportunities for the province. Before she joined Life Sciences BC, Wendy held multiple leadership roles with companies such as Johnson and Johnson in strategic and business planning, finance partnerships and business development. As well as prior to J and J, she held a chief financial officer roles for both the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario and Lexmark International. Welcome, Wendy. Thanks for joining me today.

Wendy Hurlburt (01:22):

Thanks, Rob.

Rob Henderson (01:23):

So let's start it off a little bit. Tell us a little bit so we can get to brag about your corner of the world. Wendy, tell us a little bit about what's what the resurgence, I wouldn't say resurgence, but the ongoing dynamism of the sector within British Columbia. We hear a lot, so much of so many good success stories that have come out both on the small side, on the IPO side all of this. So tell us a little bit what makes BC's sector so unique in the Canadian landscape of biotechnology?

Wendy Hurlburt (01:53):

Thanks, Rob. I think there's a couple of things that the core of the life sciences sector generally across Canada, but I think BC has particular areas of expertise in this. And as you would know, the life sciences sector, the core origin of it really is world class science. And so we are blessed in British Columbia with world renowned academic and research institutions that have over multiple years been able to attract, retain and develop world-class researchers. And so the life sciences sector really gets born out of world-class scientific ideas that can be translatable either into product solutions or services. And I know we're going to talk a little bit about the pandemic, but I think it's important to remember where we were before the pandemic. And at that point in time BC, we released a report with the BC government that was a deep dive into the life sciences sector based off of 2018 data.

(02:57):

And what we learned at that time was the life sciences sector of British Columbia was actually the fastest growing in Canada at that point and one of the fastest growing in British Columbia. And it was really the first time that the province had looked at that. And what we also learned is we had part, particularly strong areas of expertise in antibodies, in medical devices, in personalized medicine oncology. And so where we are today comes a lot from where we were and that ongoing investment in research and research that was going to result in, as I say, innovative product solutions and services, which led us to be particularly well positioned when the pandemic hit.

Rob Henderson (03:45):

So why do you think that is, Wendy? What is it about British Columbia and the ecosystem that you and that all of those associations and companies and investors have built that attracts such a dynamic array of talent?

Wendy Hurlburt (03:58):

Well, if I start at the beginning being in the science, I meet a lot of researchers and what are almost household names in the world of science today. And I ask them why they're here. And they often will tell me, because originally when they came here, they were able to conduct their science. They either came because there was somebody that worked in their particular field that they were able to study with or research with, or they saw an emerging cluster in the area of antibodies that they wanted to come and be a part of because of that collaboration that could happen. And I think one of the things that really does distinguish BC is it is a very collaborative ecosystem. And maybe that's because we're kind of an outpost in Canada. We're way far away from the epicentre <laugh> as much as we like to believe we're our own epicentre.

(04:51):

So I think you've got a very strong collaborative ecosystem. And as you look at some of the science that is really world-leading, that is happening in bc, we're very good at bringing cross-disciplinary science together to create a human engineered solution. If you think of a drug-eluting stent, for example, that's chemistry meeting essentially pharmacology. So there's a lot of that. We have our Canary Medical right now that is designing smart hips and needs. So that's a medical device combined with digital health. And I mean, the list goes on. So being one very collaborative, having the ability to attract talent and retain talent, although we're going to get to this too, we have a long way to go. And being able to be very supportive in that research environment in order to order for people to work on the scientific areas that they want to explore and advance them

Rob Henderson (05:53):

Well, that's tell you collaboration's a heck of a lot better reason than what we always think. And that's killer whales and good skiing.

Wendy Hurlburt (06:03):

Well, we do have that too. That's

Rob Henderson (06:05):

True. You do have that too, which is an additional attraction probably for the families of the scientists.

Wendy Hurlburt (06:09):

I have tried to have us evolve from, we have mountains. It's a beautiful place to live, and we're really nice. And by the way, we do have a few things going on.

Rob Henderson (06:19):

And by the way, the science isn't bad either. Yeah. So that's good. So let's talk a little bit about the pandemic Wendy. We had in the impact of the pandemic, not all of it bad on the industry in terms of it raised our profile. Not many industries are called upon to save the world, and it's nice to be in one that rose to the occasion but at the same time, it had an impact on the industry. And I wanted to know from

a British Columbia perspective, what have you seen to be the biggest impacts as a result of the pandemic that either business owners or CEOs or people have been telling you?

Wendy Hurlburt (06:59):

So I think going back to that economic report and the first time that the BC government had looked at the life sciences sector, I refer to it as the gift that keeps giving because it also helped define the sector. And it for the first time gave a definition and gave vocabulary and language. So when the pandemic hit, all of a sudden we were being called upon as a sector broadly across the world, and we at least knew what we were talking about, right? Because they understood that the biotechnology sector was part of the broader life sciences sector. They understood that we actually had world class science. So I'm now talking very myopically within our province and our country. I think they also while some of the gaps that existed were known, the extent and depth of the gaps that existed within Canada were not as well known. But we very quickly were able to assemble ourselves to help identify those,

Rob Henderson (08:03):

I guess it goes to the size of the sector and the fact that we're made up of mainly small and medium sized enterprises, and that gives those companies the ability to be nimble. They're the ability, I mean, I know it's a cliche term now, but the ability to pivot and that resiliency, I think we found not only in British Columbia, but across Canada with the biotech sector where they were able to capitalize on some of the opportunities that presented themselves in particular in bc. What did you find resilient? What did you find the sector pounced upon? Was it vaccine development? Was it in terms of that? Was it changing around laboratory facilities? Was it PPE development? Where did you see the opportunities that were really seized by some of your stakeholders?

Wendy Hurlburt (08:51):

Well, the first thing that happened was as now I'm talking the sector collectively, the first thing that happened, other than we could talk about the specific companies that were doing super important work, that ultimately led to really important in innovation, that arguably had a massive impact in helping us get through the pandemic. But interestingly enough, one of the first things that happened in the sector in where I was sitting was eight leaders got together and said, wow, look at what we're facing. What can we do? And within 24 hours, 185 people were on a distribution list saying the labs are going to close in four days across our academic institutions and our research facilities, and we need to get all of the PPE and all of the equipment out of those labs because we're not going to be able to realistically get back into them for the next three months. So let's come together and really make that happen. And LSBC, we believe that you're best positioned to manage this for us. And within 24 hours after that, we had a whole PPE equipment collection process that one of our members opened up their warehouse, warehouse for us. And remember, this is when everyone was closing their facilities,

Rob Henderson (10:12):

Right, of course.

Wendy Hurlburt (10:12):

So that we could resort it and distribute it directly to the front lines. And to me, that was an amazing example of very busy, very smart people recognizing, had the knowledge to recognize what we were about to face, and in a small way said, we have something that we can give immediately. Well, we go back to our day job to figure out how to create vaccines and do all these other things. The interesting

thing about that was as someone coming from a medical device background, I very quickly brought in an employee that had used to work for me in another organization who was unemployed at the time and said, Hey, can you come help? Can't pay you, but it's a great way to be involved, which he agreed to do. But we also created a very sophisticated Excel spreadsheet because in Canada, we need to track medical devices if they're under ever recalls,

Rob Henderson (11:12):

Of course.

Wendy Hurlburt (11:13):

So we created our own manual tracking system, so we knew where everything went. And in the back of my mind I thought, well, somebody may want to be compensated for this one day. We yanked a whole bunch of equipment out of places and nobody did.

Rob Henderson (11:27):

Oh, well that's fantastic. That's a really neat story about how, again, that whole spirit of collaboration that you mentioned upon earlier. But you touched on something really interesting because at the beginning of the pandemic, as we all experienced there was this sort of contraction of the economy a great deal of unemployment because of those industries that had to contract. I'm thinking of the arts tourism recreation, the hospitality industry, aviation, all of these things. Suddenly we had this glut of people that were there now that created an opportunity for some nimble biotechs to go after marketers, some people maybe non-science types, but certainly a good available talent pool. But then everything turned, it was about at the beginning of, at the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021, everything turned and suddenly we were experiencing and are experiencing right now, one of the tightest labour markets that we've seen in years skills. Did you find that you were either not available or most in demand for some of your, the biotechs within British Columbia, either during or just coming out of the pandemic?

Wendy Hurlburt (12:40):

Well, I think you're correct. There was a massive contraction of labour in some areas. My experience of it was the majority of our members doubled down and they found very creative, you've used the word resilient, ways of trying to keep their operations open where they had especially work that they were doing that they felt was critically important to Covid19. So we have some organizations that are suppliers of reagents. Their demand was never higher. There was a time period where across the country reagents were in a critical short supply. So after we finished our PPE drive, I was working with the province trying to find reagents for the testing labs.

(13:38):

I think there was not the same degree of stoppage of work. It's not to say that there wasn't, right, but we already know that BU business skills are all, we're already in great demand for the life sciences sector. So those that they had them didn't appear to want to let them go or let you know. But the other thing that happened is, you know, have an organization like Accelera who had been working on antibody discovery and their proprietary plot technology platform related to that. And in January, 2020 we're told that they were going to get one of the first blood samples of a Covid 19 patient. So they doubled down in using their technology that they had been developing and had been part of the DARPA project and were the first ones that discovered what antibody needed to be made.

Rob Henderson (14:36):

Well, and I guess that's what successful companies do.

Wendy Hurlburt (14:39):

Exactly. And in that case, that's because back to my earlier comment, that's because of the years of research and development that they put into their proprietary technology platform. And so in March, 2020, about a week after the pandemic was announced Abela and Eli Lilly announced a development agreement where Eli Lilly was going to take that antibody and develop it into the first therapeutic available. And from a discussion I had last week, I believe 2.5 million people received that product.

Rob Henderson (15:21):

Today's candidates interview employers as much as the employers interview them. To compete for talent, bioeconomy 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. You make a good point. You mean companies like Excel are those success stories that we've seen? They don't necessarily respond as a result of the markets or as a result of what's going on. What they do is lead through it. And as you mentioned, they doubled down and they went for growth, and they came out on the other side as this remarkable success story certainly not only for British Columbia, but for the industry and for Canada as a whole.

Wendy Hurlburt (16:28):

And the interesting thing about Accelera is, so that's one product, but they have numerous projects that they're working on with partners because their platform technology is well positioned to be utilized for discovery of numerous different things. And I think that's the other thing about some of the BC innovation and some of the BC life sciences companies right now. I mean, we still have the traditional companies that are looking at one molecule, but we also have numerous platform technology companies right now we've got lots of organizations that have partnerships with small and large organizations as they try and advance as they try and advance discoveries. And of course then you get into the mRNA and the lipid nano particles, which is also a hotbed for British Columbia.

Rob Henderson (17:28):

So we've mentioned a little bit of Accelera. Let's talk a little bit about that. What are the companies that you see now coming out of the pandemic with this incredibly tight labour market? We already know Wendy, because I know you're well versed in the labour market intelligence and research that's going on. You're spearheading some of it out in British Columbia. We know that. So I know you're well versed with some of the numbers. We're not going to have enough students coming out of our programs to fund our companies. That's not unique to BC that that's pretty much a pandemic of its own across Canada itself. We're not tapping into enough of our newcomers and our foreign trained professionals. We don't have great numbers in the numbers of Canadians with disabilities and indigenous Canadians that we're when our ranks. What have you seen in the companies, in the innovative companies that are trying to attract and retain top talent like Accelera, like Zymeworks, like Stem Cell technologies like many of these companies out in British Columbia, and you have an educational framework that's second to none out there too, with the leading academic institutions out there. What do you find, what have

been some of the innovative techniques or things that companies have done to try to attract more well and also stop the bleed from talent to go down below south of the border? What have you seen that have been some of the more unique opportunities that some of your companies, your member companies have seized?

Wendy Hurlburt (18:52):

Well, I think it depends on where the company is. You've got these companies that are growing exponentially right now that are competing for talent in ways. And then you've got the smaller companies that are still growing, but some of their skills are incredibly specific for what they need at that particular stage or milestone they're trying to achieve. As Rob, we had our career connect day, which Bio Talent Canada is one of the fan founding partners on this. We had that last Friday. It was interesting. We had numerous probably about five to 10 companies speak about their company or talent or trends at various points during the sessions. I was really struck with how the companies have really built out their value proposition for their employees, and it's beyond come and work here and you can pursue your science that you're super interested in. They were really talking about their culture and what it means to join their organization and what type of benefits they have. And I would say it's not that life sciences companies haven't had benefit programs before, but they really have built them out as a value. And let me help you understand about not only your career opportunities and the work you're going to do, but what it means to become part of our organization and how we're going to support you.

Rob Henderson (20:20):

And I think that's probably, it's not new for the larger companies, but let's face it, we knew that a lot of the smart, small and mediums as enterprises, it was a buyer's market where there were five candidates for every job. There seem to be a lot more candidates out there that were willing to join these companies. Also, to your point, you mentioned it a little while ago, those business skills that are absolutely critical to a company's success are they now looking for, because I mean, let's face it, the science, it has to be built on world class science, but it's not just science that drives a company, it's sales, it's accounting, it's marketing, it's all of these things that are not necessarily science focused. And more to the point a lot of skills that you don't get, you know, don't learn in a microbiology program. So what are these companies doing that you have seen to attract some of those business skills, some of those industry agnostic skills that we mentioned to them, not just focusing only on STEM and the science and technology of what they're doing?

Wendy Hurlburt (21:21):

Well, I think there's a number of initiatives that are happening. Some are happening by companies individually. Some of them are happening more collectively some are happening through government. So let's talk about a few of those for a minute. As your report your labour market study has suggested and as referenced 65,000 jobs to until 2029 and have gone through a number of initiative, have gone through where some of those gaps are, some of them are in science, some of them are in business. And so your report calls out the quality, the regulatory, the operation systems, and many of the other skills that you've got that you've had. And you've got the initiative on the National Occupational Standards, which is trying to help people at least know that they're talking about the same jobs and what skills you need to do those types of jobs, which is really important because if you're a sme, you're trying to grow and you haven't necessarily even defined what skills you need to be a really great regulatory person,

Rob Henderson (22:27):

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Right?

Wendy Hurlburt (22:28):

Because you've been in discovery mode, you haven't had to get ahead for that or get think ahead for that. So I think though, the initiatives of what are the business skills and what skills are core to be able to achieve that is really important. So you've got initiatives like micro cred, micro Cade, microcredentialing, that is happening. You've got initiatives that are happening within the academic institutions. But what we're also really trying to do is tap into experienced people and have them either expand their skills if they're already within the life sciences sector or bring people in from other industries, because there's a lot of diversification that is also happening in all across Canada of our eco economies right now. So how do we retrain people? So initiatives like what Castle does with the Biomanufacturing is really important. We across Canada are trying to build up a biomanufacturing sector.

(23:27):

We don't have one. So as a result, we also don't have a lot of trained people in that space. And so being able to build that up is really important. The other thing is helping, and as you know, career connect day, this is one of the objectives, trying to demystify what types of people can have in biomanufacturing that are broad mean, sorry, not in biomanufacturing, in life sciences that are broader than just the science jobs and demonstrating that breadth of careers so we can bring people in from other sectors and help people understand, I can be a finance person, I don't have to have a PhD in microbiology,

Rob Henderson (24:06):

Right?

Wendy Hurlburt (24:07):

Go and have this amazing career in this super interesting sector. In December, we brought to Canada a course called Biotech for the non-bio executive, which was specifically targeted to the non-science people for them to understand the basics of the science, but also layered on that was a little bit of, Hey, by the way, do you know people with these amazing skills could have amazing careers in this sector?

Rob Henderson (24:38):

So think, and maybe I can bring you into a little bit of a controversy there. Do you think that we do enough? I think we're particularly bad at telling our stories to organizations and to industries that are outside our own. It's a very complex industry. We know it relies on science and a depth of knowledge of that. I think sometimes there's an intellectual snobbery or an academic snobbery that we bring to it. Whereas if we think that everybody who has to couldn't work in biotech to your point, needs to have a PhD, don't some marketers, finance people, sales. Do you think we tell that story particularly well outside of our industry so that we can attract some of those non-science types into the industry to help us drive the business part of the bioeconomy?

Wendy Hurlburt (25:27):

I think we're getting better.

Rob Henderson (25:29):

We have to.

Wendy Hurlburt (25:33):

I had a meeting with an individual in the BC government many years ago who I feel gave me a gift because the comment was, I'm not really clear what the life sciences sector is. And that was a pretty risky thing for a government person to say, who's meeting with the head of Life sciences BC,

Rob Henderson (26:00):

But quite refreshing, I would think.

Wendy Hurlburt (26:02):

But as I say, it was a gift because I explained that it was a sector, it could be considered forestry or mining or pick a sector. And I said, for the same reason that I don't understand the science of how you get something out of the ground, I do appreciate that mining is an important sector for this province. And I said, with all due respect to the brilliant scientists out there, you don't actually need to understand the science to understand the importance of the sector to the British Columbia economy. And I am often heard to say, you get a double heli benefit from the life sciences sector because in addition to it being one of the fastest growing sectors that is raising record amounts of capital into our province and creating jobs, the innovative product solutions and services that are created are critical to the long-term sustainability of our healthcare system. And let's let the scientists worry about the science and let's work on building this sector, which is so important for the future of the province.

Rob Henderson (27:13):

What I couldn't agree more like you mean especially in centers like Vancouver and Toronto and Mississauga, Montreal, these economic development departments don't understand the science. What they do understand is that the sector itself pays 20 to 30% more for the same jobs in as other industries that were highly educated and therefore highly philanthropic and very good corporate citizens where the kind of industry that any economic development department or municipality would kill for or should kill for because we are an attractive entity and we should be one that is the focus and prioritized by governments. And you're right, you don't have to have a PhD to understand the industry. No. And you have to be at the PhD to be the innovator in the science, but otherwise,

Wendy Hurlburt (27:58):

And so in fairness to not throw it all on the scientists because it's not on all on the scientists of course not because I said one of the, in addition to what I'd said, I also said scientists sometimes have trouble dumbing down their brilliant science. But I said on the flip side, business people tend to be a little bit impatient about what they don't understand. Agreed. So if they've said it a couple of times and they still don't understand it, sometimes they walk away. So I, as part of career connect day, has really been to try and bury the business and the science community together. But I also think we as a sector, I think have gotten better of talking about the sector and talking about, of course it is all rooted in world class science. That is the price of entry, and that is what distinguishes the life sciences sector from other sectors that are broadly in the technology space.

(<u>29:01</u>):

And so it's really important. This conversation should never be ever interpreted as it's not, the science is not the cornerstone of this sector. But I think we've also done a bit of a better job of talking about the impact and why it's important as opposed to just explaining what the science is. As an example Accuitis, they made the delivery mechanism for the vaccine that was the cornerstone of the Pfizer BTech vaccine.

And they have a great way of describing what that science does as opposed to making that, expecting everyone to understand the intricacies of what a lipid nanoparticle is.

Rob Henderson (29:44):

And to your point, it's going to good that, I mean, it's unfortunate that they had to do it under such adverse circumstances, but the fact that they're getting better at recruiting and retaining and understanding the people equation that's going to have some long-term benefits beyond even a tight labor market for these organizations because they've upped their game. Before it was people came second to the science and to investment, and now it's a question where they're realizing, I guess, under adverse circumstances that the people really they're going to becoming a little bit more scarce. So they're going to have to get a little bit better at the people game.

Wendy Hurlburt (30:19):

Rob, I would say the companies that are the strongest right now always put their people first. Agreed they were recruiting the best and the best have stayed with them. And back to your question, but what are companies doing now? I mean, one of the interesting dynamics that has been happening in BC is we've had recruiters for us companies recruiting our talent and not asking them to move.

Rob Henderson (30:46):

That's a game changer.

Wendy Hurlburt (30:47):

So a bit of a game changer. And while we have been trying to recruit talent from different places, and some of our more established organizations have the budgets to try and bring talent in from other places around the globe, so that value proposition is super important. The ability to be creative about does somebody actually really need to come to the office every day? Certain jobs obviously require it. How can we create a flexible workforce? How can we ensure that people's develop, how can we make sure that we're also developing our own people so that we can solve some of our talent gaps within our own people? Right. And then to your point about what about the underrepresented groups of people, how do we make sure that we are developing them and growing them and educating them so that they're either ready today or right, they're ready in the future. I mean, you look around at graduate, the people graduating today are a lot more diverse than the people graduating 20 years ago.

Rob Henderson (32:00):

Ain't that the truth?

Wendy Hurlburt (32:01):

So how do we make sure that we really do create those environments that we end up with a diverse workforce, which isn't only about a numbers game, it's equally, if not more important about diversity of thought. Agreed. As we try and grow.

Rob Henderson (32:21):

And that's grow companies, and that's the seed of innovation. That's really the diversity of thought. Yeah. And that's true. So do you think that is, I was going to a end with this as a question, but you've sort of posed it in your response. Do you think that that is the greatest challenge that lies before the life

sciences community of British Columbia in terms of continuing foster, that sense of dynamism and success that you've already bred into it, is that diversity of thought going to be the biggest challenge to make sure that they maintain that, especially at the small and medium sized company level?

Wendy Hurlburt (32:51):

I think that, well, you referenced, we're doing a labor market study specifically on bc, so we're going to get some really interesting data on this. My sense is that the talent challenges that we face right now are both a quantity and a quality problem. So there's lots of data. We're going to create way more jobs in this sector. On the assumption, the momentum of the scientific development and innovation continues, then we have people to fill them in addition to let, let's find the people. But we have to be developing people that have the skills that are needed into the sector. And so that requires our academic institutions to really be thinking about what are those skills of which they are. And as you know, they're partners in our labor market study. It's about retraining people, whether they're from different sectors or even within our own within our own companies.

(33:55):

One of our speakers this week, last week at Career Connect Day was the VP of Regulatory from Stem Cell technologies. And I introduced the session as mm-hmm <affirmative>, we'd like to hear from leaders in their meandering pass. Well, she wins the gold star for meandering pass <laugh>. And she is an amazing woman that did not start off knowing anything about biotechnology originally. And so we've got to make sure that we're training our own people, that we're recruiting the right type of people, that we're making sure that people have the opportunity to be trained in some things that are very technical and some things that are more generic across multiple industries. And we as an industry need to continue to demonstrate the really exciting careers that people can have.

Rob Henderson (34:49):

And I think you've c come up the catchphrase that we need to use in our recruiting, looking for people with meandering pasts for sure.

Wendy Hurlburt (34:56):

I love talking to leaders in this sector

Rob Henderson (34:58):

That sounds great because it's true.

Wendy Hurlburt (35:00):

Everyone's career paths are meandering. My own was meandering course and they're just

Rob Henderson (35:04):

Making, of course, as was mine.

Wendy Hurlburt (35:06):

They just make sense to the individual. But the other thing is, I think that I hear from companies that they are looking for the type of people that are eager to learn, excited about innovation, really excited about the world of the possibility, excited to collaborate with different types of organizations. There are

some skills that people absolutely need for certain jobs, they need to come in with those. But also our companies are prepared to train and coach and mentor and help people develop their skills because many of our CEOs as have that, has been their journey.

Rob Henderson (35:50):

Right, absolutely. And that whole, those success skills, as you mentioned, that were so critical, that adaptability, right. And that whole, was it lifelong learning capacity, it's going to be going. Wendy, thanks so much for join joining me today. I really I've enjoyed our talk. We went all over the place, and I hope it had gave you a chance also to highlight the exciting life sciences industry that is there in British Columbia. Wendy Hurlburt is President and CEO of Life Sciences British Columbia. She joined me today on BioTalent Canada's podcast, the Science of Talent. Please join us next time on the next installment of this series. Thanks very much, and thanks again to you, Wendy.

Wendy Hurlburt (36:27):

Thank you, Rob.