



Wallonia's Long Game in Biopharma

The southern region of Belgium, Wallonia, has grown into a major European hub for biopharma research and manufacturing. Ludovic Waha, Senior Life Sciences Business Developer at the Wallonia Export & Investment Agency (AWEX) discussed some of the factors that have made Wallonia, and Belgium more broadly, an appealing destination for life science researchers, entrepreneurs and investors.

How recently has the Wallonia region begun to prioritise investment in the biotech and pharma industries?

Most countries in Europe decided to strengthen their life science industry after the COVID period. For Belgium and Wallonia, we have been supporting and financing this industry for a much longer time, about 20 years. Historically, a number of companies, with the support of the Government, grew and became major global players such as GSK, Baxter and UCB. This success paved the way for new medium-sized and smaller companies and led to the emergence of a genuine, dynamic ecosystem.

The rapid expansion of this ecosystem has been built on a winning trio of strong collaboration between universities and research centres, public authorities, and the industrial sector, each playing a complementary and essential role in innovation, growth and industrial development.

What are some of the ways that the region has facilitated that growth?

We had some challenges years ago, one of which was real estate. I had the opportunity to meet CEOs from foreign companies who wanted to come to Wallonia. They explained to me, "We are looking for 10,000 square meters of labs," and I was not able to give them solutions. At this stage, the government, but also the private sector, decided to invest in science parks. Today, we have the ability to promote labs and offices anywhere in the region and there are more than 100,000 square meters available for new companies arriving in the country.

Belgium has 11 million inhabitants, and the industry is investing each year +/-6 billion€. It's quite a huge investment for a small country (compared to Germany or France). We also have public funding for companies. The public funding agencies are able to support and propose dilutive funding from a few euros up to several million to support the development of companies.

How has it worked in terms of attracting talent and corporate investment from abroad?

Everyone in the world knows that Belgium is strong in the biopharma industry. We actively encourage corporate investment through a range of incentives. These include investment grants, support for R&D activities and tax incentives designed to lower labour costs and benefit from a reduced



corporate tax rate. Furthermore, starting from this year, we are opening a brand-new EU Biotech Campus. It's a 25-million-Euro investment and with this biotech campus, we'll be able to attract talent both from the whole of Europe and also worldwide.

What are some of the other advantages that Belgium and the Wallonia region can offer the biopharma sector?

We are really strong in terms of clinical trials; we rank number two per capita in Europe after Denmark. Wallonia offers a highly supportive environment to move rapidly from early development to clinical validation, thanks to a dense network of hospitals and specialised service providers able to manage regulatory requirements and accompany companies throughout the clinical trial process.

In broader terms of quality of life, what might a job-hunter find appealing about life in Wallonia?

You probably know that we can offer chocolate and beer, but on top of that, the quality of life is really high. Wallonia is located in the very heart of Europe and within less than two hours you can be in London, Amsterdam and Paris. The cost of living is also much lower. If you compare per square metre in London, Paris, or Frankfurt, it's three to four times more expensive if you want to find housing.



Ludovic Waha

Ludovic Waha is a Senior Business Developer for Life Sciences at AWEX in Wallonia, Belgium, supporting local companies in their international development and promoting the region abroad. He holds a master's degree in economics from the Louvain-la-Neuve University (Belgium), with a background in finance. Ludovic joined AWEX 15 years ago as a Project Manager for Foreign Investment Attraction before moving into the Life Sciences unit.