

Bridging Gap

New mentoring program bridges the gap by building relationships

By Jill Osborne

Developing and commercializing biotech products and services takes more than good science; it requires business skills. Making a company profitable requires leadership, communication, business sense and a strong network. In today's marketplace, strong science and desirable products are not enough. Companies want and need strong business people who understand the science and can clearly communicate it to investors, companies, clients and other stakeholders.

Last September, The Biotechnology Initiative (TBI) launched a mentorship program to address human capital issues and strengthen the network of business and science expertise in the life sciences industry in Ontario. Canadian biotech's biggest area of opportunity is creating a more skilled workforce. This can be achieved by fostering opportunities for scientists to learn business skills and develop their network. TBI's program will facilitate this growth by connecting professionals with people further along in their career, who can provide advice and guidance, building business skills.

The program was developed to address the need for skilled professionals in the life sciences industry. Currently, more than one-third of Canadian companies are experiencing a skills shortage and Canada is suffering from a loss of talent to other biotechnology centres. In *Segmenting the data: Regional labour market information on biotechnology in Canada, 2008*, BioTalent Canada identified the need to find leaders who can manage and grow companies. It is essential for companies "to attract the best and brightest minds... to drive the development of their products and services," the report says. Through mentoring relationships, such talent can be identified and developed.

The life sciences industry is one with unique challenges. It is a high-risk business where professionals need to have two areas of expertise: business and science. For many scientists, these business and management skills are not a part of their academic training and must be learned on the job. Due to the competitive and fast-paced nature of business, scientists are often put into roles before they have the skills needed to do their job effectively. This

ultimately affects productivity and the success of the company.

"Business skills are essential in any industry," says Lorne Meikle, President, TBI. "I learned this first-hand when I got involved in setting up a publicly traded biotech company. I didn't have a mentor to help me find the most efficient way to do things. I had to develop these business skills on my own. Mentoring provides people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective. I want to help other professionals grow by sharing my knowledge with them and providing support where they need it."

There is a divide between the academic community, which supports knowledge sharing and teacher to student learning, and the business world, which is cutthroat and driven by profit. In academia students are supported. Their ideas and development are fostered to promote growth. In the business community, people at the same level are often in competition for jobs and those in high-level positions don't take the time to pass on knowledge or develop less advanced colleagues.

When people move from the academia into the business world there is a shift in both pace and focus. The learning continues, but in a more competitive fashion. Most people coming out of university have strong science skills, but lack the "soft" skills to be really successful in business.

For some people, these skills won't grow without a clear direction and guidance. For others, business skills will grow with time, however, this process can be accelerated with the help of a mentor.

"Universities are good at providing information and teaching people how to think critically," says Grant Tipler, TBI member, mentor and Head of Life Sciences at RBC Royal Bank. "They do not provide people life skills such as networking and approaching new people. Mentors connect people in a non-threatening way and create a learning experience like in academia within the business community."

TBI's program seeks to meet the industry need for professional development. It is the first life sciences-targeted career development program in Canada and has been created based on



research and feedback from people within the biotech community. Science and business professionals can participate at any stage of their career. Although the program is open to students, it is designed for professionals working in the industry seeking career guidance. The program is flexible. Participants determine their availability, time commitment, meeting schedule and frequency, allowing busy professionals to participate based on their availability. A simple online application is used to match mentors and protégés, who are paired by a mentorship committee panel based on the interests of the protégé, the experience of the mentor and their goals for participating in the program.

Once matched, the pairs determine their goals and outline a plan of how to get there, providing each other with feedback necessary to help each participant grow. To facilitate this, the pairs are provided with a guidebook and worksheets and receive ongoing training and support. Through quarterly networking events and an exclusive LinkedIn group, people involved in the program

not alone. They have a mentor in their corner cheering them on, providing a sounding board and giving support. A mentor wants their protégé to succeed and they provide perspective."

Mentors receive benefits from the relationship through building business skills such as coaching and leadership, and stronger management abilities. Practicing these skills in a relaxed environment will help a mentor translate new skills they learn into the workplace, and become more confident leaders. People involved in formal mentoring relationships where they have support and resources, as in TBI's program, become more supportive coaches in their organizations. Mentors gain access to a larger network and hiring pool of known candidates. Knowledge is shared through communication with a protégé. Reflecting on their personal past experiences and the current position of the protégé facilitates a mentor's personal growth and can help them better understand their younger colleagues. Furthermore, it gives them an opportunity to give back to the community while receiving satisfaction from making a difference in a protégé's life.

"I get a great deal of satisfaction from mentoring," says Tipler. "I have built deep and long-lasting relationships with those I have mentored. It is extremely gratifying when someone calls you, sometimes years later, and thanks you for helping. As a mentor you get a return on your investment of time. You get remembered and recognized.

Professional development in mentors and protégés will build a stronger life sciences community. Companies benefit from the growth, knowledge and increased confidence of their employees who mentor and are mentored. Natural leaders are identified earlier, which helps employees more quickly advance and employers instill strong people in leadership roles. Employees also gain a broader perspective and receive external feedback, which enables them to make better strategic decisions. By helping at the individual level, mentorship can make an impact at the corporate level and in turn strengthen the life sciences community in Ontario.

"TBI is an entry point for many life sciences professionals," says Tipler. "If we can help people have better and more meaningful careers, we are benefiting those people, ourselves and the industry."

TBI's mentorship program seeks to bridge the business-science gap in the biotech industry by providing mentors and protégés an opportunity to develop professionally and expand their networks. Just under 70 mentor-protégé matches were made in the first round of the program. Matching is conducted for new and existing participants quarterly, with the second round occurring in January 2010. **BE**

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can meet other participants and further develop their network.

"TBI wants to help people reach their goals and be more effective in their pursuits," says Meikle. "We want to make every mentoring experience valuable by allowing people to determine what they want to get out of the relationship. Many people join TBI to meet other professionals. This program is a natural extension of what we do, connecting people and providing a supportive environment conducive to professional growth. The program's wide scope allows people within life sciences to explore other areas of opportunity and share ideas."

Protégés meet professionals who are further along in their career who want to help others by providing guidance and advice. These professionals have developed skills and experience beyond the protégés, allowing for knowledge sharing, particularly in business-skill areas. Through building a mentoring relationship, protégés learn to better communicate in a professional setting. They gain access to a larger professional network and learn self-marketing techniques through connecting with new professionals. The protégé has an opportunity to ask their mentor questions about current experiences or opportunities and receive feedback on how to improve, increasing their confidence.

"Mentors can help open doors through introductions and providing confidence. They can help you feel empowered to do something difficult," says Tipler. "Wherever they go, a protégé is