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Policy reforms boost biotech talent pool

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Reforms in government policies and initiatives have helped in setting focus for bioscience companies, which has resulted in an enhanced manpower pool in Asia.

Singapore has emerged as a high potential destination for international biomedical companies to operate in Asia. Singapore's strong intellectual property laws, excellent connectivity with target markets, world-class infrastructure, exemplary safety and regulatory record, and a highly skilled 13,000-strong biomedical workforce, have allowed it to become a key global biomedical manufacturing site. Its present strategy is to focus on the medical device sector. Recently, the government enhanced its regulatory framework for medical devices in order to facilitate safe medical devices.

National and international companies can draw on Singapore's networks and talent to strengthen and grow their businesses in Asia. Leveraging on Singapore's existing strengths in engineering, manufacturing and biomedical research, the local medtech industry witnessed fast growth over the years, with the total number of personnel crossing the 10,000 mark.

Similarly, China implemented a series of policies to reform its medical system. China is undergoing significant improvement over the key aspects of its medical system reform. In 2011, the Ministry of Commerce, China, stressed on improving the work system and personnel competence to meet healthcare reform requirements and to launch personnel training programs, and enhance people competence.

Australia, despite its changing economic policies, has maintained strong overall employment conditions in the life science industry. According to a survey by industry association, AusBiotech, there was an expansionary sentiment from the year 2010-11 and 58 percent of companies are expecting to increase their number of staff in 2012.

Dr Anna Lavelle, CEO, AusBiotech, says, "The Australian biotechnology industry has performed strongly despite an unpredictable economic market and Australia continues to be a leading location for biotechnology in the Asia Pacific region

and the world."

Another emerging country, Taiwan, has identified seven areas in the biotech industry, including biomedicine, agricultural biotech, diagnostics, environmental biotech, functional foods, and clinical research, and is building its manpower strengths and capabilities in order to further the development of these areas. Taiwan is aiming to emerge as Asia's global center for genomic R&D, the ideal location for human clinical trials in Asia, the global hub for subtropical floriculture, and the most dynamic biotech venture capital industry. These projections have led to the demand for talent and technological resources in Taiwan. By 2011, Taiwan built a base of over 54,550 manpower dedicated to pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical devices sector.

Speaking to BioSpectrum, Dr Leah Lo, president of Pharmaceutical Industry Technology Development Center, Taiwan, highlights that Taiwan has a well-designed education system with several schools of pharmacy and biotechnology. "The graduate programs in Taiwan for pharmaceutical and biotechnology are also very diversified and well-recognized and the manpower requirements of the domestic industry are met through this education system. Besides the local education system, there are many Taiwanese experts in biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries who have worked overseas and have come back to assist the domestic industry with their valuable experience and passion," she says.

Earlier, Taiwan was focused mainly on its domestic market. Since the country is now pushing for international markets, domestic companies are training their staff to have a global vision. Through various channels of education and training, Taiwan is building its strength in biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry, in order to compete and work with the major players around the world.

SHL, a Taiwan-based international medtech company, has access to a large pool of talent related to manufacturing and engineering. "We recruit overseas professionals to transfer their knowledge to ensure that the services and products we provide are of the world-class quality. SHL has been actively recruiting talented professionals in order to support new and existing projects. SHL plans to hire an additional 1,000 staff by 2012, in line with the current growth projections in customers and projects," says Mr Roger Samuelsson, CEO, SHL.

Similarly, Malaysia is creating opportunities for bio-innovation through government procurement. Malaysia is facing a challenge of low availability of strong human capital. Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation (BiotechCorp) along with government agencies and private sectors initiated various programmes related to entrepreneurship, regulatory, specialized biotechnology skills and soft skills. By 2010, a total of 54,776 jobs were created under such programs and the agencies are looking to create 80,000 more jobs between 2011-15 under the National Biotech Policy.