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Samantha Su, Simranjit Singh: Finding skilled professionals is a challenge in Singapore

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In the biomedical sector, the combination of latest technology and a strong business model is considered to be ideal. Theoretically, the synergy created between them spurs the company to business excellence. In reality, however, this does not happen naturally. On one hand, many researchers from the biomedical sector choose research as their career path, endeavoring to solve scientific mysteries that could potentially lead to the discovery of a medical cure, rather than striving to grow a million-dollar biomedical business. On the other hand, many opportunistic businessmen, with no prior experience or strong technical backgrounds to sustain excellence, have ventured into the biomedical sector.

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Evidently, it is this gap that Singapore needs to address for the sector to continue outperforming expectations. Playing a supporting role in developing the industry, the government has put in place several initiatives to address current and future talent management challenges. Many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Singapore have since benefited from these programs to overcome their manpower needs.

Local home-grown start-ups like HistoIndex reinforced its technology competency by leveraging government support, through the Get-Up scheme, for the secondment of a researcher from the Agency for Science Technology and Research (A*Star). This, together with other financing and capability development support programs such as Spring's Startup Enterprise Development Scheme (Seeds) funding, has helped companies gain traction in its business growth.

Responding to SMEs' needs to build strong business leadership, government support has been made readily available through Spring Singapore's capability development initiatives. These schemes are aimed at cultivating outstanding fresh graduates to be future business leaders. In addition, the agency also promotes and supports the grooming of business leaders within the SMEs' current talent pool by offering scholarships and providing training opportunities, particularly in areas

like regulations, IP management and market access strategies, which are crucial for this sector.

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To address future talent management challenges, we need to cultivate the spirit of entrepreneurship in the next generation of graduates, as well as ensure a right environment to promote enterprising minds and ideation. In this area, Singapore's public universities offer 'entrepreneurship' as a graduate course and have established technology incubators to innovate and transform ideas into business opportunities.

In recent years, the sector had also been strengthened with the setting up of dedicated medical technology incubators such as the Biomedical Science Accelerators (BSA). The purpose of such initiatives is to encourage entrepreneurship, particularly in the field of biomedical sciences. In addition, biomedical industry associations such as BioSingapore function as a platform for budding biomedical entrepreneurs to interact with companies in the local community. This facilitation helps both companies and potential entrepreneurs understand the opportunities and needs of the industry so that they can develop creative new ideas and technologies.

In Singapore, where manpower is the primary asset, putting in place supporting infrastructure, developmental programs, as well as nurturing the current and next generation of biomedical science entrepreneurs are critical. In addition, a united effort within the public sector is necessary for positive impact. The Get-Up program, which was launched in 2003, was a joint initiative between four agencies - A*Star, Economic Development Board of Singapore, Spring Singapore and International Enterprise Singapore. This initiative has since reached out to more than 500 companies in Singapore.

Government's initiatives and emphasis in Singapore has resulted in the successful cultivation of 44,855 R&D personnel in 2011 (including researchers, postgraduate students, technicians and support staff), a 3.9 percent increase from 2010. About 65 percent of this population are PhD/Masters/Bachelor degree holders deployed in both the private (56 percent) and public (44 percent) sectors*. This talent pool of highly skilled workforce provides an opportunity for industry to leverage and build up its enterprise capabilities in Singapore.

In spite of all the efforts, there still are some issues that need to be addressed, including shifting of the public mindset to towards entrepreneurship in the biomedical field. The private and public sectors have to, therefore, recognize the need to cultivate highly-skilled, industry-ready individuals to work together to overcome these challenges and make best of the growth opportunities.

We should, however, not neglect the fact that increased public-private sector partnerships in various aspects, on top of talent management, could translate to more significant industry impact for Singapore as well. Various programs have been launched with this in mind. The Clinician Driven Innovation (CDI) initiative by Spring Singapore encourages public sector clinicians and SMEs to co-innovate solutions for imminent clinical problems. Also, various clinical translation support schemes for industry alignment research by the Ministry of Health (National Medical Research Council), A*Star and Economic Development Board encourage public sector clinicians, researchers and industry players to co-innovate and develop clinical solutions. It is only with synergy and the alignment of goals and plans within and between the private and public sectors, can this industry be propelled forward and see a sustained growth.