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Computers monitor the lab equipment at MBI International in East Lansing | Dave Trumpie

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Capital Ideas: Bobby Bringi

BY: IVY HUGHES, 3/25/2009

Bobby Bringi is the President and CEO of MBI International, a Lansing-based nonprofit that works with universities and companies to de-risk technologies and get them to market.

Before moving to East Lansing from Ithaca, N.Y. in 2007, Bringi co-founded Phyton Inc., a biotechnology company that developed a sustainable, plant cell-based fermentation technology to extract the anti-cancer element used in the drug Taxol from trees and plants, without cutting down the plants. Phyton eventually formed a strategic alliance with drug manufacturer Bristol-Myers Squibb to commercialize the technology.

Capital Gains' Ivy Hughes recently sat down with Bringi to talk about how he and his team are fostering relationships between industry, academia, and government-funded facilities to help introduce new bio-based technologies to the marketplace.

Capital Gains: What type of technology does MBI focus on?

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Bobby Bringi: MBI's focus is bio-based technologies, sometimes referred to as industrial or white biotechnology. Bio-based technologies use renewable rather than fossil-based or petro-based feedstocks, and involve the transformation of these renewable feedstocks into fuels, chemicals, polymers, proteins and other materials.

Renewable technologies are widely recognized as an area of tremendous opportunity and innovation, and the need for renewable fuels and chemicals with a lower carbon impact has never been greater.

CG: Can you explain the barriers in taking a new bio-based technology to market?

BB: Technology development typically begins with a breakthrough research innovation.

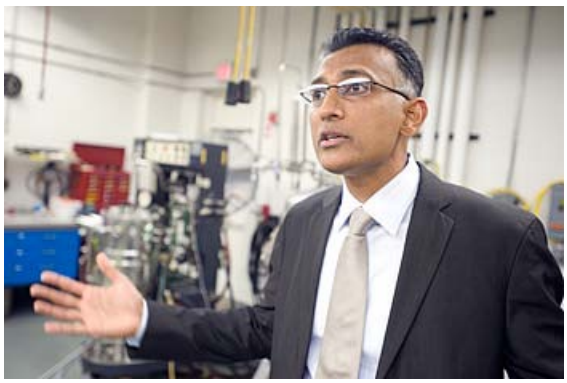
However, before the technology can enter the market, its commercial viability must be demonstrated. The gap between an early-stage innovation and its commercial viability is a critical one. MBI helps innovators and bio-based companies bridge that gap.

You see, when looking at early-stage technology from a market perspective, a high degree of uncertainty exists as to whether the technology is commercially viable. MBI refers to the process of demonstrating the viability of technologies as "de-risking."

De-risking bridges the gap between early innovation and commercial application by helping to determine whether commercial quantities of the product can be made at the appropriate price point and quality level. MBI conducts de-risking activity in collaboration with researchers at its specialized laboratory and pilot-plant facilities.

CG: What is the relationship between MBI and Michigan State University?

BB: MBI is a subsidiary of the MSU Foundation, and is thus well aligned with MSU. Such alignment allows MBI and MSU to collaborate at a strategic level and synergize MBI's de-risking capacity with MSU's formidable basic research capacity.



MSU has made a significant commitment to bio-based research, as exemplified by the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center initiative in cellulosic biofuels. Working in collaboration, MBI's de-risking capacity can accelerate the process whereby bio-based technologies reach the marketplace.

CG: How does MBI work with industrial partners?

BB: The technologies developed by MBI attract the interest of corporations worldwide seeking to capitalize on advances in biotechnology. MBI also engages companies by helping them de-risk their internally developed technologies. MBI also provides these partner companies the opportunity to access intellectual resources at MSU.

CG: What de-risked MBI technology has been the most successful on the market?

BB: One technology that has proven successful in the market is polylactic acid (PLA), the first biodegradable polymer. PLA differs from conventional plastics because it is made with the bio-based feedstock lactic acid, rather than a petrochemical-based material. Some of the de-risking work related to polylactic acid took place in collaboration between private companies, MSU, and MBI. That technology is the basis for a commercial operation, and the polymer has proven successful in the market for many years.

CG: How does MBI foresee working with start-

up companies?

BB: MBI's goal is to develop technologies and select, on a case by case basis, the appropriate mechanism to transition their entry into the market. This might necessitate a spin-off company, a joint venture, or simply a licensing agreement with an established company.

Generally speaking, we would like to help foster spin-off companies. We believe that such spin-off companies would benefit from staying in the area, since they could access intellectual resources and innovators, as well as MBI's laboratory and pilot plant facilities. In the longer term, we want Michigan and the Lansing area to be a hub for bio-based innovation. This is our vision.

CG: What could political leaders do to facilitate more effective development and innovation in this area?

BB: In an emerging area such as the bioeconomy, there is a critical need to foster partnerships between universities, industry and government. Political leaders can help by facilitating these relationships and allowing them to blossom.

The federal government has made a commitment to invest in renewable technologies. On a state and local level, political leaders can facilitate innovation by helping local organizations to attract federal investment.

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Ivy Hughes is the Managing Editor of Capital Gains.

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Photos:

Bobby Bringi, President and CEO of MBI International gives a tour of the Bio Tech laboratories

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