

# Job well done, Iskandar leaves big shoes to fill

The biotech grapevine has been humming recently with talk that Datuk Iskandar Mizal Mahmood, CEO of Malaysian Biotechnology Corporation, is leaving the post he has helmed since June 2005. I have learnt that it is almost a certainty that he is leaving and will join a regional company that has set up shop in Malaysia. Surprisingly, the company he will join is not in biotechnology.

Iskandar was a fast-rising merchant banker when he was tapped for "national service" to help clean up Malaysian Technology Development Corporation (MTDC) in 2003. He did that admirably and proved a quick study in understanding the ICT and biotech landscape. He was also quick to see the important role the media played and was open and accessible to us, a big difference from the previous CEO. A damaged MTDC badly needed that.

Iskandar's "reward" came when he was given a tougher assignment — to help build an ecosystem that will enable biotechnology businesses to start up and succeed. He practically had nothing to work with. All he had was a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility to live up to the mission he had been entrusted with. It helped that he is really smart and treats everyone fairly. As a result, he has gained the respect and esteem of the biotech community in Malaysia and even internationally.

In fact, I have not heard anyone criticise Iskandar, which, maybe, is not such a good thing. I mean, as a CEO in charge of building an enabling ecosystem from scratch, you are in a hurry and probably need to ruffle a few feathers and drive your own people as hard as you drive yourself.

Iskandar also consciously stayed on the right side of the bureaucrats, as painful as that must have been for him at times. But he

has always recognised that the government machinery is a critical element in creating a positive ecosystem and could not be taken for granted or dismissed as unimportant.

While I personally wish more had been achieved, I realise that Iskandar had a lot less to work with than Multimedia Development Corporation had when it was set up.

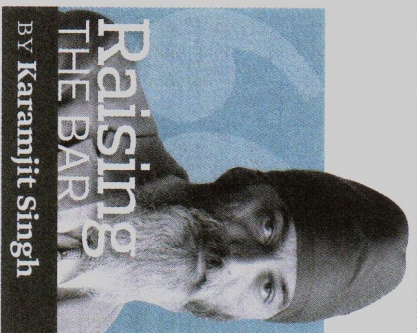
For one, industry players observe that he has not received the full-hearted support of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, particularly Minister Datuk Maximus Johnny Ongkili. In fact, I cannot remember the last time the minister attended a BiotechCorp event. His deputy was a stronger supporter.

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Besides that, dealing with bureaucrats and academics used to working at their own pace, blissfully lackadaisical over a national agenda, could raise anyone's blood pressure, which incidentally happened to Iskandar.

And no wonder. Normally guarded around me, he once shared his frustration at the slow pace at which a particular industry-university collaboration was moving, with the university point person clearly having issues with the industry partner. To make matters worse, a piece of fragile equipment was dropped while it was being moved from warehouse to the lab space at the university.

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It has achieved good things (see our cover story) and I think it will continue to do so, as long as the government makes the right choice in his successor. Here, I would really go with the person Iskandar himself has suggested. Making the wrong choice will undo all the good things Iskandar and his team have helped build.

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Datuk Rajen M, CEO of Holista Colitech Ltd, a biotech company listed in Australia, agrees. "Iskandar and BiotechCorp have built the industry up to a certain point and what is needed now, as we move into the all-critical commercialisation phase, is strong and sustained leadership. I hope the government accepts his recommendation for a successor." Rajen, who at times is critical of the gaps in the biotech ecosystem, nonetheless is full of praise for Iskandar. "His leaving is a loss for the industry. He has done a lot and leaves a strong legacy."

As for Iskandar, I hope his return to the private sector will rejuvenate his mind and spirit and have him ready to serve his nation again, should he be needed. Especially if the government gets serious about realising the potential of technology and innovation in Malaysia and is looking to appoint a non-politician as minister of an IT ministry. Yes, Iskandar, I am stirring it up! ■