

Association(s) for growth

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In April 2003, the biotech industry in India witnessed the birth of a new industry association. The Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises (ABLE) was launched with a bit of fanfare. Some hailed the formation of ABLE saying that the biotech industry finally has an association while a few even commented that ABLE is the need of the hour. But what is the actual picture?

The biotech industry in India has had an association for itself since 1994. Known as All India Biotech Association (AIBA), the stated purpose of this body is "to provide a common apex forum at the national level to represent the interests of all those engaged in various aspects of Biotechnology". In a well rounded statement, the main objectives of AIBA has been listed as "to promote and safeguard the overall interests of Biotechnology as a science, profession, industry or trade. That is pretty much any representative association would want to achieve. And so why form ABLE which is "envisaged as the collective face of India's biotech industry"?

There is obviously an expectation mismatch amongst a section of the industry. A feeling that there is a gap between what AIBA has achieved and what it should have. Therefore ABLE was formed to close the gap. Assuming that there is a gap in the AIBA deliverables, should those issues have been addressed with AIBA itself or is it better to form a second association? Whatever the answer, ABLE has just been formed and they should be given time to perform. But God forbid, what happens if they are not able to. Will the biotech industry see the formation of a third association?

A look at the history of trade and industry associations in India shows that we believe in numbers. Take the overall business and trade scenario. We have CII, FICCI, ASSOCHAM, FIEO and various export promotion councils. Or take the example of

the IT industry in India. There is NASSCOM, MAIT and ESC at the national level and numerous others at the regional level. There is no doubt about it. We believe in numbers. Why take a risk with one? More the number of associations the better it is for the industry. Keeping this in perspective the biotech industry has just formed the second association and so the industry can say that it is in control and on the right track.

Just think about this. If MAIT had done what was required would NASSCOM have been formed? Or for that matter why should NASSCOM have been formed when the Electronics and Software Promotion Council (ESC) existed? India would not have achieved international recognition for its software skills without the untiring efforts of NASSCOM. Similarly, the formation of ABLE needs to be welcomed but not at the expense of AIBA. The biotech industry needs untiring efforts from the two associations and cooperation wherever possible to ensure rapid growth and for putting India on the global BT map.

There is no need to examine closely the objectives of AIBA and ABLE. Most of it would be common and there is no problem with that either. So what is the precious difference between the two? One of the views is that ABLE represents the large companies while AIBA the medium and small ones. Another view is that ABLE is more South oriented and AIBA more North oriented. Yet another uncharitable view is that these associations are serving the personal agendas of a few people. Do we have to cast aspersions on one another? It is perhaps more prudent and practical to say that both ABLE and AIBA have a common goal and that is the growth of the Indian biotech industry.

What are the ingredients required for ABLE and AIBA for achieving growth? An association should be representative of the industry it seeks to address, should involve the larger players (they have the muscle), needs funds, strong government interaction (the Delhi factor) and a charismatic and dedicated leader. Both ABLE and AIBA have its strengths but neither of them fits the bill entirely (or at least not yet) and therein lies the problem. Both are tackling the issue of funds and both do not have a Dewang Mehta. These issues need to be tackled. There will be many biotech organizations with membership in both the associations. They want leadership and results. They would stick with the association that delivers.

In fact this is best illustrated by the success of NASSCOM. Started as an association for the software industry as MAIT was more representative of the hardware vendors, NASSCOM achieved more than the expectation of its members. Seeing its success, the ITES/BPO players have now taken shelter under the NASSCOM umbrella. Honestly, call centers are not IT organizations. They just use IT like other industries do. It's a symbiotic relationship. NASSCOM needs the BPO segment to achieve its projected export revenue numbers and the BPO players prefer to ride on the clout of an already established NASSCOM.

What that means is that in the future one may see a merger between ABLE and AIBA. But for the moment the industry has them both. And while they are both there, it should be ABLE and AIBA and not ABLE versus AIBA. Both should work for the growth of the biotech industry. The need of the hour is association(s) for growth. Let the biotech industry flourish.

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