

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

20 January 2010

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ACES 2009: Money makes the research go around

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Riccardo Pietrabissa: set up Italy's tech transfer network.

Riccardo Pietrabissa got into tech transfer the old-fashioned way: he made a deal. The bioengineering professor and vice rector at the Politecnico di Milano, Italy, started that university's patent office when the payment for funding his experimental biomechanical laboratory came due.

"My transition to the tech transfer office started in 1998 when I was an assistant professor. I asked the rector for a grant to establish the lab," said Pietrabissa, who is 53. "In 2001 the rector called and said he was happy with the lab, and reminded me I was in debt to him. He wanted to establish a patent office in the university, so I had to do that."

That was a dramatic departure from his research on biomechanics to simulate parts of the human body such as portions of the cardiovascular system or a hip joint. But he embraced the challenge.

His success was recognised in Paris in December at the [second annual ACES awards](#) given by the Science/Business Innovation Board. Pietrabissa won the Bridge Award for individuals who have done the most to promote technology transfer and a culture of innovation in Europe. The judges cited his role in setting up the Italian tech transfer network [Netval](#), which has grown into an association of 45 universities in Italy.

Bootstrapping tech transfer

Pietrabissa said he has learned his job by trial and error. "I try to understand what people want from the tech transfer office," he said. "Who is the real customer of the service? It is the researcher. We're trying to get the maximum benefit from the research results."

Adding to the challenge of his new duties, his job change came around the time Italy switched to support [Professor's Privilege](#), which gave professors in that country ownership of publicly funded research rather than the research institution, which is the case in the United States and elsewhere. "This is a problem," Pietrabissa said of the change to Italy's law. "Netval is striving to reverse the situation, but it hasn't happened yet."

Pietrabissa sees patents as a bridge to develop partnerships with companies, which he says consider him their best partner to establish relationships. "We want to see if a [manufacturing] company will continue to invest in our research after the first step is finished because they believe it is valuable," he said. Such agreements can pour money back into university research. About half of the corporate grant money for the university comes from multinational companies, and the other half from companies based in Italy.

A larger quest

Money is one part of the equation for Pietrabissa. "Money is a side effect for university. It is important in that it is a tool to perform better research," he said. Since 2002, the Politecnico has filed about 450 patents, some 300 of which he said have been granted, and there have been 18 spin-offs.

At the ACES conference, he was asked about the impact of the current economic crisis on the effectiveness of innovation. "The impact of the crisis in Italy and university tech transfer is the wrong question," he said. "The right question is the role of technology transfer and its impact in the crisis. Universities, industry, government and financial bodies all should work together to guarantee the benefit for all countries."

He added that spin-offs need to move fast and keep competitive so they can have an impact from an industrial and economic viewpoint. "I believe that entrepreneurship in Europe should enhance the competitiveness of Europe with respect to other regions such as the US or Far East."