

imec.istart, Data science and data security

Lost in information? ONTOFORCE's search engine connects your data

With a recent financial injection of 4.3 million euros, a new co-CEO, and plans for a sales office in the US, the imec.istart portfolio company ONTOFORCE is well on its way to become a successful scale-up.

From start-up to scale-up

The product behind ONTOFORCE is the semantic search platform DISCOVER, which is currently mainly used in pharmaceutical and biotech companies. The company was founded in 2011 and was one of the first start-ups to join the imec.istart program. Since then, ONTOFORCE – which still continues its collaboration with imec – has spread its wings. The company recently completed a new investment round of 4.3 million euros and has already established a foothold on the US market. This year, they have big plans to further expand their sales in the US, i.e. by participating in the Flanders New York Accelerator.

DISCOVER: a new generation search engine

In this day and age, there is so much data that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find an efficient and relevant answer to our search queries. Hans Constandt (CEO and founder of ONTOFORCE) first experienced this when he was searching the web to find relevant, scientific studies that could help his son – who struggled with a learning disorder. From this experience, the idea for DISCOVER originated. Essentially, DISCOVER is an optimized search engine which draws on semantic technology to find links between data across databases faster and more efficiently. Although the platform was originally intended as a B2C offering, it is currently mainly used within the pharmaceutical and biotech industries.

Hans Constandt explains: “There are thousands of health research databases, clinical trials, literature reviews, patient studies, etc. available. Before setting up a new study, scientists first need to check what kind of research has already been done – both internally and externally – on, for instance, growth hormone applications for a particular disease. In many companies, even internal information resides in hundreds of different databases, each with their own interface and search logic. As a consequence, just finding this kind of background information is a very time-consuming process. This is where DISCOVER comes in.

Our platform brings together all these databases – both internal and public ones – and integrates the data, identifying links and visualizing the search path.

One of the assets is that we use semantic technology to find logical but often hidden connections between internal and external data, allowing you to easily combine information from a multitude of different sources. As such, pharma and biotech companies can save valuable time and money that they can now invest in developing new medicines or treatments.”

In just three days, the ONTOFORCE team can set up a working platform customized to a specific client's needs, containing not just public databases but also connecting many internal sources, and bringing all knowledge together in one user-friendly hub. After a two-month trial, companies get the option to pay for a license per user per year.

ONTOFORCE has already convinced numerous pharma and biotech companies of the benefits of its technology. At the Bio-IT World Conference in Boston in 2017, multinational Amgen US even gave a talk explaining the benefits DISCOVER brought to them. They were excited about the fact that the platform brings both internal and commercial data within employees' reach, enabling them to easily find related research themselves without having to consult internal experts on the subject matter. Hans Constandt: "This talk was a big milestone for us. Their support opened many doors and generated lots of new sales leads. In the end, there is still no better marketing tool than word-of-mouth."

Although ONTOFORCE's main focus is on the biotech and pharma industries, the basic, underlying DISCOVER platform is open access, allowing anyone to explore this new kind of search experience. For instance, patients or their relatives can use it to find more specific, scientific information on their condition or to search for alternative treatments.

Hans Constandt: "A while back, I got a call from a father who wanted to thank us because – just when they had lost hope – he had discovered a clinical trial for his child through our platform. There is no money for us in this, but stories like this do give me lots of positive energy."

Flanders New York Accelerator: if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere...

ONTOFORCE was one of the first start-ups to join the imec.istart program in 2011. Hans Constandt: "Even after our imec.istart track ended, we have continued to collaborate with imec and with IDLab, an imec research group at Ghent University, through a number of different projects. I'm especially grateful for the networking opportunities that the imec.istart team created for us, not just in Belgium, but internationally as well. When we were first thinking of launching our software in the US (Boston), imec helped us find the contacts we needed. And today they are supporting us again, now that we are part of the Flanders New York Accelerator. The program has just started a couple of days ago, but I can already feel that we have come to the right place to expand our foothold in the US."

The Flanders New York Accelerator (FNYA) is a joint initiative of the Flemish Ministry of Innovation, ERA (Entrepreneurs Roundtable Accelerator), Flanders Investment & Trade and imec. The aim of the program is to help promising Flemish start-ups scale more quickly by helping them make a successful US market entry. ONTOFORCE is one of the six companies which were selected to join the first coaching track, which runs from January 22 to April 13, 2018.

Lies Boghaert (imec.istart internationalization coordinator): "The best thing about this program is that our Flemish start-ups are completely embedded in an American network of mentors and partners. They also get to work in an inspiring co-working space – together with other international start-ups – in ERA's offices in Midtown Manhattan. As part of the three-month program, they attend highly specialized workshops and networking events. ERA also provides each start-up with a US mentor who coaches them and introduces them to the right contacts in their field."

Through the FNYA, ONTOFORCE hopes to further expand their sales in the US. They are not new to the US market though: they already have one US investor and 80% of their 1.3 million euro turnover in 2017 was generated overseas. In 2018, they plan to double their overall turnover, amongst others by significantly expanding their US sales. They also have concrete plans to set up a sales office in New York and to extend their Data Science team in Boston, and they have just hired their first US employee.

Although ONTOFORCE is looking for opportunities in the US, they are firmly rooted in Belgium. Hans Constandt: “We will definitely set up a sales office in the US, but we also need the local expertise and know-how that we can find here in Belgium, so our development team will definitely remain here. We’ve recently completed a new investment round of 4.3 million euros, bringing in two more Belgian investors, i.e. Korys and biotech pioneer Annie Vereecken. Our current shareholders, PMV and LRM, also decided to participate in this investment round.”

Getting started: advice for other first-time entrepreneurs

When asked what advice he would give other start-ups, Hans Constandt says: “As a start-up, you don’t get a second chance. There is very little room for failure. You have to make sure that you have a working product as quickly as possible – it doesn’t need to be perfect – but it needs to show your added value. As soon as you have a couple of paying customers – by preference big players – it becomes a lot easier to convince others. Of course, you also have to make sure that you have a good product-market fit. In our case, DISCOVER addresses a real problem that companies in the pharma and biotech industries are struggling with.”

As for the key to their own success, Hans Constandt’s first, intuitive response is ‘people’. Hans Constandt: “Human capital is essential. Over the years, we’ve recruited a passionate and complementary team.

I believe that it’s very important to know what your own limitations are and to then surround yourself with people who excel at precisely these things.

You cannot do everything on your own. Our success is the result of the hard work of the people who joined our team, from our amazing HR and finance experts to our office manager, top developers, and data scientists. That is also why we have recently attracted Dirk Pollet as our new co-CEO. We are upscaling at a fast pace now, so it’s good to have an experienced person next to me who can support us through this process.”

Want to know more?

For more information on imec.istart’s other internationalization initiatives, read [this article](#).



Biography Hans Constandt

Hans Constandt holds a bachelor in medicine, a master in biotechnology and a master in information sciences. After his studies, he filled a number of different positions, from postgraduate researcher in bioinformatics at Ghent University, to senior IT analyst and data architect, and consultant. In 2002, he started his 11-year career at Eli Lilly, first as a bioinformatics account manager, then as a senior business leader and eventually as the global lead for large-scale knowledge management projects. In the meantime, he obtained a master in innovation and entrepreneurship from Vlerick Management School and later he also became an MIT alumnus (via a business accelerator program that ONTOFORCE participated in). As an entrepreneur and innovator, he is on a mission to digitally transform and disrupt the industry, advocating the benefits of smarter, open data. In this context, he received the 2017 EIT Venture Award and ONTOFORCE was also selected as one of the Gartner Cool Vendors in 2014.