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BIRD Foundation, business matchmaker

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An Israeli-United States effort is tops in technology alliances between the two countries, generating billions in sales from its beginnings.



Senior BIRD members at a recent board meeting. From left to right: Dr. Eli Oppen, Avi Hasson, Sharon Kedmi, (former) Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, and Dr. Eitan Yudilevich

By Sarah Carnvek

With some 830 projects on the go, the Israel-US Binational Industrial Research and Development Foundation ([BIRD](#)) seems to be the most successful matchmaker in Israel's business world. Adhering to a mission to stimulate, promote and support industrial R&D of mutual benefit to the United States and Israel, BIRD has helped generate more than \$8 billion in revenue since its founding in 1977. Just recently, the foundation announced that it was investing \$5.4 million in six new projects between American and Israeli companies, in the fields of communications, healthcare information technology and personalized medicine.

Among the latest projects are the development of an automated pill-dispensing system for home care by Israeli firm [Vaica Medical](#) and US firm [MTS Medication](#); and a healthcare website consolidating drug effectiveness and patients' experience data by Israel's [First Life Research](#) and US firm [Healthline Networks](#). "We have an expertise in matchmaking. We've been doing this for 34 years," says Dr. Eitan Yudilevich, executive director of BIRD.

Hotbed of activity

The BIRD Foundation promotes collaboration between Israeli and American companies by locating strategic partners from each country, making the necessary introductions and providing conditional grants of up to \$1 million for approved projects. The foundation supports projects without receiving any rights in the participating companies.

"Israel is a hotbed of activity for high-tech research and development. The culture itself encourages and rewards risk-taking and entrepreneurship," says Yudilevich. "I think everyone would like to have a BIRD with the US. It's a very special program. There is a lot of cooperation between different countries, but no one [else] has a BIRD-like program."



Israeli and US BIRD members (from left to right) Katherine Bauer, Ken Ferguson, Dr. Eli Oppen, Marc Stanley, Dr. Eitan Yudilevich and Magdalena Navarro.

Over the years, BIRD has logged many successful matches. Among the top commercial achievements is Argo Medical Technologies/Allied Orthotics & Prosthetics' development of the FDA-approved [ReWalk](#) device that allows a paralyzed patient to "walk" again.

Another link that BIRD instigated was between ACMI and CByond - now the same company, called [Gyrus ACMI](#) - which developed a compact endoscope with an integral miniature camera and internal LED illumination. And, of course, the [Opgal/Kollsman](#) cooperation that led to the revolutionary EVS system, which assists in the landing of business jets on low-visibility runways.

Putting politics aside

Yudilevich says BIRD's projects reflect global needs. From electric buses to semiconductor processing equipment to seasonal allergy treatments, BIRD recognizes opportunities and creates long-term success. And though the political climate surrounding Israel is frequently reported to be cloudy and gray, Yudilevich says that insofar as business match-ups go, skies are clear and sunny.

"The American companies get a lot of innovation from the Israeli companies and help financially from BIRD. I have not encountered someone telling me that they don't want to cooperate with Israeli companies because of the political situation," he says. "You can see the reactions of the CEOs and COOs who come here for the first time. I'm sure that when they go back and spread the word amongst their friends, they have a different perception than what they see on TV."

'A lot of great ideas out there'

In addition to the regular BIRD program, the foundation has two other subdivisions.

BIRD Energy is a program for US-Israel joint renewable energy developments funded by the US Department of Energy, the Israel Ministry of National Infrastructures and the BIRD Foundation.

The [TRIDE Fund](#), meanwhile, aims to stimulate and promote cooperation between Israeli, Jordanian and US firms to jointly develop and commercialize new products and technologies, and advance regional cooperation. And though BIRD has been around for more than three decades, Yudilevich says the organization is still very relevant in today's economy.

"We're always thinking about how to innovate within BIRD and look at the future. We're always looking at new subjects and new ways of helping companies. It's our culture to adapt to changing situations," he says. "There are still a lot of great ideas out there."

Technology in progress

Since its inception 34 years ago, BIRD has approved 830 projects with leading companies in the US including American Red Cross, Applied Materials, Bayer Pharmaceutical, Eastman Kodak, General Electric, IBM, Procter & Gamble, SanDisk and Texas Instruments, among others. While many projects have already gone on to great commercial successes, others are still in progress. And interest in these ongoing ventures is at a

peak.

HCL CleanTech-Virent Energy Systems

In January 2011, Israel's [HCL CleanTech](#) and the American [Virent Energy Systems](#) announced a \$900,000 grant from BIRD Energy, a program for renewable energy projects jointly developed by companies in Israel and the United States. The grant supports almost half of the \$2.1 million total project cost. The two companies hope to address the key hurdles limiting the market acceptance of biofuels and bioproducts made from cellulosic feedstock. The project combines HCL CleanTech's proprietary technology that converts biomass into refined sugars with Virent's proprietary technology to turn them into biofuel.

"Economically converting plentiful cellulosic biomass into renewable, fungible hydrocarbon fuels and products will enable broad market acceptance and is the most realistic alternative to displace petroleum and create a clean energy transportation sector in the coming years," says Lee Edwards, Virent CEO. Eran Baniel, CEO of HCL CleanTech, adds: "We are confident the integration with Virent will create new opportunities in the bio-fuels and bio-products space."

CIVCOM Devices and Systems-GigOptix

Israel's [CIVCOM Devices and Systems](#) and the American [GigOptix Inc](#) were recently awarded a BIRD Foundation grant to develop a low-power module for next-generation optical communications. GigOptix will develop an integrated 40Gb/s RZ-DQPSK optical modulator and the corresponding broadband amplifiers to drive the modulator, while CIVCOM will develop and manufacture the 40Gb/s RZ-DQPSK Small Form Factor transponder.

"The BIRD Foundation acts to encourage collaboration between Israeli and American companies in various fields of technology," says Dr. Eitan Yudilevich, executive director of BIRD. "Consumers' use of smartphones and the advent of cloud computing are requiring network operators to upgrade to faster 40Gb/s infrastructure to keep pace with increasing bandwidth demand. GigOptix and CIVCOM are combining outstanding US and Israeli human resources and technologies to develop an industry-leading telecommunications solution to address these demanding network operator requirements."

GigOptix is a leading supplier of high-performance electronic and electro-optic components that enable next-generation 40G and 100G fiber-optic telecommunications and data-communications networks. CIVCOM is a pioneer in the development and manufacturing of cost-saving dynamic opto-electronic components and modules, specializing in 10Gbps and 40Gbps telecom applications.

First Life Research-Healthline Networks

Israel's [First Life Research](#) has partnered with [Healthline Networks](#) to develop a web environment that will analyze and present patients' medicine usage. This new web-based application is meant to empower patients and provide an additional research tool to health professionals. The new venture is being funded partially by a BIRD Foundation grant.

The US company Healthline Networks is a leading provider of intelligent health information services that enables 100 million consumers a month to make more confident, informed healthcare decisions. First Life Research offers a comprehensive searchable medical database of objective patient reports.