
STOCK STORIES: BOLT THREADS

TOM SLATER

Tom Slater, joint manager of Scottish Mortgage, discusses why he thinks biotech company Bolt Threads has the potential to transform the apparel industry.

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Tom Slater: The rapid declines in the cost of genomic sequencing are offering up all kinds of opportunities in healthcare, but they're also starting to impact on industry at large. One company that is helping to drive that process is Bolt Threads. What they have done is sequence the genome of spider silk to facilitate them producing this material synthetically. Spider silk is one of those wonder materials that people have wanted to commercialise for many years, but it's been extremely difficult to do so.

Individual spiders don't produce enough silk. If you put the spiders together, they eat one another. Now, if you can actually turn this into an industrial process by growing the spider silk in bacteria, then you can start to actually commercialise it as a product - and that's exactly what Bolt Threads have done.

Why might this be interesting? Why would it be a market? Well, if you look at apparel as it stands today, you either use synthetic materials, which are easy to engineer but are not regarded as particularly high quality by purchasers. Or you use natural fibres, where people perceive there to be a quality, but they're very difficult to work with - you can't engineer the thread size, the stretch, etc. Synthetic natural materials offer the best of both worlds. The promise of really high-quality feel to the fabrics, but also the precise engineering that man-made fibres offer. And we think this is a potentially revolutionary technology for the apparel industry.

And we see also the opportunity to build on these initial products around spider silk to harness many other attractive materials that are found in nature, to make apparel and other forms of clothing, or other industrial materials, in a cost-effective way, and grow entirely new markets.

