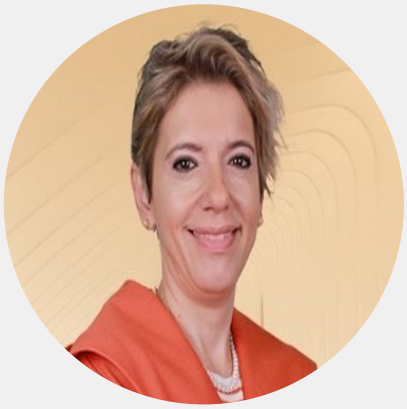
Gizem Akalin – Vice President & General Manager, GSK Gulf – on the Tremendous Growth Potential of the Region



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Approaching two years in her position as GSK's Vice President and General Manager for the Gulf region, Gizem Akalin, PhD, outlines the tremendous growth potential of her region, draws on her digital marketing expertise to reflect on the future of commercial teams post-COVID, and highlights why the UAE should become a hothouse for talent within GSK.

Can you begin by outlining your career trajectory up to this point?

I have been working in the pharmaceutical industry for close to 25 years, taking on a succession of commercial operations and marketing roles both in my native Turkey as well as in the US. Additionally, I spent two years on the other side of the fence at a creative agency, providing digital marketing and training solutions for the pharmaceutical and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industries. This was back in 2010, when the pharmaceutical industry was taking its first baby steps into digital.

Leveraging this experience, I was hired by another pharmaceutical firm to build up its digital capabilities and infrastructure locally, first in Turkey, and then to the entire Middle East, Turkey and Africa (META) region. This role encompassed the transformation of the firm's commercial

operations in the region; helping commercial teams to do their jobs better by building their digital marketing capabilities and competencies, infrastructure building, and learning and development opportunities.

In 2015 I joined GSK as MENA CIS area multichannel and marketing excellence lead, supporting teams across the region on digital capabilities and commercial operations. I then took on an expanded role covering all emerging markets (Latin America, Middle East, Africa, Pakistan, Russia, India, China, and Southeast Asia), which involved a lot of travel, especially to China. In that role, I had a seat on GSK's emerging markets leadership team and reported to the company's senior vice president for emerging markets.

In mid-2020, I was appointed as GSK's vice president and general manager for the Gulf countries, and subsequently moved to Dubai. This is a significant grouping that represents a large turnover and has more than 250 employees.

What priorities did you set out upon taking on this role?

We perceive the Gulf countries, especially the UAE, to be innovation-driven markets. Our main priority is to ensure that all our innovative new medicines are made available to patients here as early as possible. GSK has had a presence in this region for over 60 years and we are now looking to build on this history with both our legacy portfolio and our new innovative products. Another key priority is to engage in greater numbers of partnerships with local stakeholders.

We believe in this geography and see massive growth potential. All the GCC countries have stated their ambitions for either 2025 or 2030 to become more innovation-driven markets and are keen for innovation-driven international companies like GSK to support them on this journey. This is especially true in the UAE, which has specifically highlighted its desire to engage in a biotechnology-driven approach.

2022 has already seen significant changes for GSK globally, ditching the GlaxoSmithKline name in favour of the more streamlined 'GSK', launching a new logo, and finally spinning off its consumer health unit. How are these shifts filtering down to the Gulf and what are your expectations for the new GSK in your region?

We are following the global vision, bringing the specialty care and oncology franchises on board and trying to get these new medicines into our markets. On top of that, we have a broad general medicine and unmatched vaccine portfolio available in the Gulf, which is a major focus where we can compete and deliver significant impact in several therapeutic areas, and we will continue to maintain pace and grow in those segments. Our aim is to combine the power of general medicines with the rapid rollout of innovative new assets which will enable us to serve more and more patients. This will involve ensuring that our teams have the skill sets to achieve growth in both types of business and we are confident that they do.

Given your background in digital learning and development, how are you working to ensure that GSK teams in the Gulf are ready to act on the company's global vision?

Part of my job is to look ten years ahead, not only delivering results today, but setting up our teams for the future and ensuring that GSK has everything in place for future success in the region. Training can be done both locally via local programs or our regional and global teams can provide us with the relevant tools. In both cases, our teams are committed to the learning and development journey, and I have full confidence that they will be able to make great things happen.

How digitally savvy are stakeholders in the Gulf region, and does it lag behind other geographies?

Globally, in my assessment the pharmaceutical industry lags behind other industries in terms of the pace of digital integration. This is also true for the Gulf region, but no more so than anywhere else. The reasons for this lag are valid; we work in a complex industry that does not sell directly to consumers and that deals with people's health. Pharma has to be mindful of patient data, pharmacovigilance, safety standards, and a host of other concerns, which breeds caution in terms of the uptake of new digital tools.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled all industries – including pharma – to be more digitally savvy. In a situation where the traditional face-to-face interactions between professional medical representatives and physicians were no longer possible, we had to find new ways to manage our business and communicate our value to healthcare providers.

Interestingly, digital interactions with physicians have shown themselves to be of a higher quality than face-to-face interactions, with a specific timeslot creating a more intense dialogue and richer content. However, this high intensity means that these interactions necessarily occur less frequently and must be managed differently.

Nowadays, straightforward digital tools such as webinars and videoconferencing are the norm, but there is still work to be done to integrate more complex digital tools such as artificial intelligence on the customer engagement side of our industry. While pharma R&D has shown itself willing to implement more advanced digital solutions, in the solidly relationship-based world of customer engagement, we have not yet seen a quantum leap forward. The Gulf is no different to anywhere else in the world in that respect.

What will the commercial teams of the future look like, given this new dichotomy?

We believe that the commercial teams of the future will, and already are, utilising complementary digital and face-to-face approaches. At the advent of the pandemic, there was speculation that digital solutions would come to completely replace the traditional in-person model; this has not come to pass, but a hybrid model has instead emerged. Digital solutions are helping our sales teams to do their job more effectively, engage more, and be more reactive to customer needs.

How did GSK respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in your region?

A global pandemic is an extraordinary situation and requires extraordinary responses. As pharma companies, we had to put aside our usual competitiveness and come together as a community to find solutions. For GSK’s part, we were proud to be able to accelerate the introduction of our neutralising monoclonal antibody treatment for severe COVID patients in the UAE. We collaborated closely with the country’s regulatory bodies as they worked rapidly to approve the treatment and enable UAE patients to be some of the first in the world to receive it. The rest of Gulf countries followed pretty quickly, led by Bahrain and Kuwait. Our regulators in the UAE and the Gulf should be seen as a global benchmark for pace and quality reviews, and they rank amongst the best in terms of execution, collaboration, and speed, not only for COVID-related treatments and vaccines.

Additionally, the digital infrastructure that the UAE put in place in terms of mobile applications and patient traceability have allowed GSK to make a major contribution to the fight against COVID. While other companies were able to bring forward vaccines against the disease, we played our part

in protecting patients from having to go into intensive care units (ICUs) and saving lives. Our therapy's impact in terms of reduced hospitalizations, decreased ICU use and a significant decline in fatalities helped enable the UAE and other Gulf governments to open up their economies and revive economic growth.

GSK very recently signed a new local manufacturing agreement in the UAE with Bioventure Healthcare FZE to transfer the secondary packaging of 20 of GSK's products to the country. What is the significance of this deal?

Local manufacturing partnerships have been on our agenda for quite a while and now is the right time to strike such deals; I hope the Bioventure deal will not be the only one. In the long term, we are committed to producing most of our products here. We also have a regional warehouse here showing that logistically, as well as from a manufacturing perspective, GSK is truly committed to the patients and the economy of the UAE and the Gulf region at large.

The UAE is a country with a small local population that must bring in foreign experts to bolster the workforce. What is your take on the UAE as a destination for top talent and what has your approach to bringing in and developing talent been?

At the beginning of my journey, I targeted making the UAE a talent hothouse for GSK. Almost all of our staff here are expatriates and, from a quality of life and opportunities perspective, this country has a lot to offer. Talent coming to the UAE also often oversees cluster markets, giving them broader international exposure, the chance to work with culturally diverse teams, and experience in countries with different regulations. All of this means that the UAE is a great place for people to develop their careers. Additionally, at GSK, we are a young organisation and are heavily investing in learning and development, giving our people, both locals and expats, several different lateral growth opportunities.

What makes GSK stand out from the crowd in the competitive market for top talent in the UAE?

Our culture at GSK is something we all own and as leaders, we invest in the growth and development of our people to make GSK an exciting and inspiring place to work and attract talents.

The scale of GSK also creates opportunities to work across countries and departments, and we have a host of career development programs, mentorships, and global and regional support functions. Additionally, the fact that we are on the cusp of launching so many innovative new medicines here makes it an exciting time for the region!

GSK is one of the few pharma multinationals with a female CEO, does that have a bearing on female representation within the company? What are your thoughts on women in leadership in the Gulf region more broadly?

There is definitely positive momentum in our industry with several female leaders now represented in the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association Gulf (PHRMAG) leadership team. More broadly, regional governments are increasingly promoting women to positions of significant responsibility.

Leadership has no gender, and being a good leader depends on a person's character and competency. However, men and women must be given equal opportunities to take on these leadership roles; something I am seeing much more of in our industry and in the Gulf region.

And actually, it is beyond gender diversity: we want GSK to be a workplace where everyone can feel a sense of belonging and thrive.

What legacy would you like to leave at GSK Gulf?

We want to continue building a growth mindset organisation that continually learns and works in a coherent manner. In ten years' time I would like the majority of our most innovative assets to be present on the market here, helping our community with more of our vaccines and medicines. We want to have a strong presence here, with more partnerships, and become a hothouse for talent, with both top talents coming in and exporting talent developed here to other geographies

Uppermost in our minds is the potential of GSK to touch millions of lives in the Gulf region, to advance human health and contribute to the strength of the healthcare sector and national economies.

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