Faisal Al Tlasi – General Manager, Axantia Saudi Arabia



We are dedicated to building a healthcare system that integrates global best practices to serve our communities better

25.06.2024

Tags: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, GCC, MEA, MENA, Axantia

Faisal Al Tlasi introduces Axantia's strategic goals, the transformation of Saudi Arabia's healthcare system, and the company's role in supporting Vision 2030. He discusses the importance of expanding the company’s product portfolio, entering new markets, and enhancing employee capabilities. Emphasizing partnerships and regulatory advancements, Al Tlasi underscores Axantia's commitment to contributing significantly to the healthcare sector's evolution.

How has your first month as the general manager at Axantia been, and what are some of your initial observations and learnings?

My first month at Axantia has been both challenging and enlightening. Stepping into a new role in a new company requires quick adaptation, as the work pace is relentless. I have focused on understanding the company’s vision and mission, familiarizing myself with the management team, visiting manufacturing sites, and grasping the product portfolio and marketing strategy. These elements are essential to making informed decisions. Now, after a month, I am optimistic about the positive impact I can have on this esteemed organization.

How did you come to join Axantia, and what makes you a good fit for the general manager position given your extensive experience in the pharmaceutical industry?

I began my career in 2001 as a medical representative in a pharmaceutical company and steadily advanced through roles such as supervisor, tender manager, country sales manager, and governmental affairs director. Eventually, I joined Sudair Pharma as a sales and marketing director and was promoted to Chief Commercial Officer. The opportunity at Axantia arose after several discussions with their CEO and board director. What attracted me to Axantia was their comprehensive success tools and the ambitious five-year plan laid out by Al-Faisaliah Group. This exciting challenge motivated me to join Axantia and contribute to their promising future.

My extensive experience in the Saudi market, coupled with the various leadership positions I hve held, including deputy chairman of the National Pharma Committee, has equipped me with valuable insights and expertise. I have been involved in negotiating numerous policies and regulations currently in place. My track record of success and my unique perspective are what I aim to bring to Axantia, ensuring a significant and positive impact on the organization.

For our international audience, can you provide an overview of Axantia, its business, and operating structure?

Axantia is a holding company based in Dubai, owned by Al-Faisaliah Group and Sana Investment Group. We operate two manufacturing sites: Madinat Al-Dawaa in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Pharma International in Jordan. Both facilities specialize in general formulations. Additionally, we have a major hub for cephalosporin manufacturing in Jordan, which produces both oral and injectable forms. Cephalosporins require a dedicated production site, and our extensive facility in Jordan is equipped for this purpose. Anti-infectives, like cephalosporins, are vital for healthcare, as shortages can severely impact healthcare systems. At Pharma International, we focus on producing anti-infectives, while at Madinat Al-Dawaa, we manufacture a range of general formulations, including tablets, capsules, and dermal products.

How does Axantia’s business model incorporate its own manufacturing, acquisitions, licenses, and co-development to ensure a comprehensive approach to the pharmaceutical market?

Axantia employs a multifaceted business model. We have our own R&D department that develops generic products in-house. Additionally, we collaborate with external licensors, acquiring licenses to either manufacture their products at our facilities or handle secondary packaging at Madinat Al-Dawaa or Pharma International.

We are also actively engaged in discussions with various pharmaceutical companies to acquire more specialized products, enhancing patient accessibility in Saudi Arabia. Axantia currently operates in around 19 countries, with offices across the MENA region, and we are looking to expand further. In Madinat Al-Dawaa, we began operations about a year ago. The pharmaceutical industry is highly regulated, so it took some time to register our manufacturing site. However, we have successfully registered in several GCC countries and are submitting registration files in other MENA countries. We expect these products to be registered soon, which will allow us to expand our export market from Madinat Al-Dawaa.

How would you define the size and positioning of Axantia in the competitive pharmaceutical market, and what are your plans for launching more specialized products and expanding capabilities?

Axantia is committed to producing high-quality generic medications to ensure they are accessible to patients. Currently, we manufacture around 35 stock-keeping units (SKUs) at Madinat Al-Dawaa, with 78 SKUs approved by the Saudi FDA.

Looking ahead, we are focusing on more specialized products, particularly in the areas of advanced anti-infectives and treatments for rare diseases. We plan to add advanced injectable anti-infectives and antifungal medications to our portfolio, alongside treatments for rare and difficult-to-treat conditions. This expansion is aimed at completing our portfolio by the end of the year.

Regarding capabilities and investments, our stakeholders, Al-Faisaliah Group and Sana Investment Group, are open to exploring various opportunities to enhance the healthcare industry in Saudi Arabia and the region. We are considering both greenfield investments and partnerships with existing facilities. Utilizing current capabilities in Saudi Arabia might be more efficient, given the smaller patient population and the challenges of maintaining specialized production facilities. By leveraging existing resources, we can ensure a more viable and effective approach to expanding our specialized product offerings.

How do you see the transformation in the Saudi pharma and healthcare ecosystem, and how is Axantia adapting its strategy to align with these trends and regulatory advancements?

The healthcare transformation in Saudi Arabia is deeply rooted in Vision 2030, which aims to create a vibrant society. This transformation focuses on three key pillars: prevention, increased accessibility to the healthcare system, and accident prevention. At Axantia, we have aligned our strategy with these goals.

For prevention, we engage in public awareness campaigns about both non-communicable and communicable diseases, including viruses and vaccinations. These initiatives help educate the public and promote healthier lifestyles.

In terms of accessibility, our primary focus is on ensuring a robust and reliable supply chain to avoid disruptions, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. We strive to build capabilities that guarantee the availability of medications across all the countries where we operate. This includes maintaining sufficient raw material stock to meet the expected demand, ensuring continuous supply and preventing drug shortages.

The Saudi FDA has been making significant progress, working towards level four WHO accreditation. This regulatory body has implemented a highly advanced track and trace system, which allows precise tracking of each medication pack from production to the end user. This system helps reduce counterfeit medications and ensures that all drugs in the market are licensed and safe.

These regulatory advancements have a profound impact. The updated regulations and the track and trace system facilitate faster market access and more efficient distribution, enhancing the overall healthcare system. The Saudi FDA’s continuous development and implementation of new measures ensure that the country remains at the forefront of global healthcare standards.

At Axantia, we are committed to adapting our strategies to these evolving trends. By aligning with Vision 2030 and working closely with regulatory bodies like the Saudi FDA, we aim to contribute significantly to the healthcare ecosystem in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

With your extensive experience in the sector, what are your hopes for the ongoing transformation of the Saudi pharma and healthcare ecosystem?

Let me share a small story to illustrate my hopes. When the medical equipment supplier NUPCO introduced WASFATI, an online refill and prescription order delivery service, which leverages government and private sector resources, I saw first-hand its positive impact. One day, I came home to find my mother, who sadly passed away last year, very happy. She told me how she received a prescription on her mobile from a primary health centre and was able to get the medication for free at a nearby private pharmacy, even in the middle of the night. This programme significantly improved accessibility and convenience for patients, providing them with essential medications anytime from local pharmacies.

Such systems are what I hope to see more of in the ongoing transformation. The goal is for patients to be satisfied and for the healthcare system to operate efficiently and effectively. By making healthcare services more accessible and user-friendly, we can greatly improve patient experiences and outcomes. This transformation, driven by initiatives like WASFATI, aims to create a more responsive and patient-centred healthcare system.

What does Axantia's five-year strategy entail, how do you plan to achieve it, and what role do partnerships play in the process? Additionally, what message would you like to share with international readers about Axantia and the benefits of partnering with your company?

Axantia's five-year strategy is centred on three main pillars. First, we aim to expand our product portfolio by introducing new and specialized medications. Second, we plan to increase our geographical presence by entering new markets in the region. Third, we are focused on enhancing the capabilities of our employees to ensure they provide high-standard services to our customers and stakeholders.

Partnerships are crucial to achieving these goals. We collaborate with universities, government entities like the Saudi FDA and NUPCO, the Ministry of Investment, and local content initiatives. We also work with patient groups and healthcare sector organizations to meet patient needs with our strong network of distributors. These partnerships enable us to enhance healthcare access and meet the evolving market demands.

To your international readers, we emphasize that Axantia is dedicated to manufacturing high-quality products and ensuring they are available at the right time and price. This commitment to reliability and affordability satisfies our customers and partners. While we benefit from substantial government support for local manufacturing, we strive to build a competitive organization that can

thrive in both local and international markets. Our goal is to establish long-term, sustainable partnerships based on mutual trust and reliability, ensuring that Axantia remains a strong player in the global pharmaceutical industry.

How would you like to lead the people at Axantia in terms of culture and vision? What is your management style, and what do you hope to bring to the team going forward?

When joining a large organization like Axantia, it is crucial to understand the culture, values, and company norms. Before I started, I made an effort to familiarize myself with these aspects, as they are foundational to how I will lead. My management style is rooted in situational leadership, which means adapting my approach based on the current circumstances. In today's rapidly changing world and healthcare system, flexibility is essential.

I strive to build strong relationships with my team, colleagues, and management. By fostering a collaborative environment, we can work together effectively to achieve our strategic goals. My aim is to create a supportive and dynamic atmosphere where everyone is aligned with Axantia's vision and motivated to contribute to our shared success.

As the new General Manager of Axantia, do you have any final thoughts or messages?

I firmly believe that Saudi Arabia's healthcare system is on its way to becoming one of the best in the world. By integrating the best practices and innovations from around the globe, Saudi Arabia is creating a pioneering healthcare system. At Axantia, we are dedicated to supporting this vision and collaborating with all stakeholders to achieve the ambitious goals of Vision 2030. Our focus is on contributing significantly to this transformation, ensuring we reach the highest standards for the healthcare sector in Saudi Arabia.

See more interviews