Daniel Weber – Country Head, Boehringer Ingelheim Switzerland



Our purpose and strong pipeline are what truly attract and retain talent at Boehringer Ingelheim

07.10.2024

Tags: Switzerland, Boehringer Ingelheim, Strategy, Access, Clinical Trials, Talent, Digital

Daniel Weber of Boehringer Ingelheim Switzerland explores the company's strategic initiatives and focus on innovation within the Swiss healthcare system. Weber emphasizes Boehringer Ingelheim's long-term vision of transforming lives, its commitment to early diagnosis, and its expanding role in digital health.

Could you briefly walk us through your career journey and explain how you arrived at Boehringer Ingelheim?

I was born in Basel, Switzerland, and studied at the University of St. Gallen. I began my pharmaceutical career at Roche, where I gained experience in market research, brand management, sales and sales leadership in the UK and the US. Later, I joined Novartis as Global Brand Director in Basel, followed by a position as Cardiovascular & Metabolic Franchise Head in Germany, before becoming General Manager in Slovakia.

Eventually, I took on a new challenge at Boehringer Ingelheim, a family-owned company with a rich portfolio. I started by leading the human pharma business in Austria and later moved to Germany as the National Head of Sales. From there, I transitioned to a global role as Head of Marketing for the cardiometabolic therapeutic area. One of the most significant achievements during my time here has been the relaunch of our SGLT2 inhibitor, which has revolutionized the treatment of type

2 diabetes and has now extended its impact to heart failure and chronic kidney disease. Working on such a transformative product has truly embodied Boehringer Ingelheim’s mission—to transform lives of patients through innovation.

How would you describe the cultural differences between Boehringer Ingelheim and the other pharmaceutical companies you’ve worked for, particularly given its family-owned structure?

Boehringer Ingelheim’s culture stands apart due to its rich history and ownership structure. The company was founded in 1885 – and is still today fully owned by descendants of Albert Boehringer, its founder. This independence enables the leadership team to take a thoughtful, long-term approach to decision-making, which is quite different from the quarterly-driven focus seen in publicly traded companies. The absence of quarterly reporting allows Boehringer Ingelheim to concentrate on sustainable objectives and prioritize long-term goals, particularly in transforming patients’ lives through innovation. This long-term perspective is deeply ingrained in the company’s ethos, as they consistently prepare the business for the next generation. This sense of continuity and commitment can be felt across our global operations, and it is one of the many reasons why working here is so rewarding.

Since 2024, you’ve been part of the Interpharma Board. Can you elaborate on your role and the key initiatives you are driving?

My role at Interpharma is centered on ensuring that Switzerland remains a competitive player in the pharmaceutical industry, from research and development to production. As vice chair of the Standort (Ecosystem) Committee, I contribute to shaping policies that promote Switzerland as a leading hub for high-value research and production. This includes maintaining a positive regulatory and legal framework to support innovation. I’m also involved in the Market Committee, which focuses on improving patient access, market approvals, and healthcare policies. These initiatives are critical for maintaining Switzerland’s standing as a global leader in life sciences. As part of this, Boehringer Ingelheim has acquired three biotech companies and a fourth in animal health, all of which operate independently while I oversee their strategic direction as Chairman of the Board.

Could you provide a comprehensive overview of Boehringer Ingelheim's operations in Switzerland and how these initiatives align with the company's broader strategic priorities?

Boehringer Ingelheim Switzerland is primarily in charge of making sure patients in Switzerland – humans and animals alike – get access to our medicines. Beyond this, we've expanded into the biotech sector with the acquisition of three companies specializing in oncology therapies: NBE and T3 in the Basel area, and AMAL in Geneva. Just recently, we acquired Saiba Animal Health AG, a spin-off from the University of Zurich, which brings an innovative pipeline aimed at treating chronic diseases in pets. This acquisition, finalized in August, marks a significant step in our R&D efforts within the animal health sector.

Our approach to these biotech acquisitions is distinct. Rather than fully integrating them, we strive to preserve their innovative and entrepreneurial drive. By minimizing interference, we allow these companies to maintain their agility and "start-up" mindset to progress swiftly, while offering support in areas like Finance and HR to reduce their administrative load. Each of these biotech firms is pioneering advanced oncology treatments, whether through bacteria-based therapies, viral approaches, or Antibody Drug Conjugates (ADCs). The focus is on delivering potent treatments directly to cancer cells, minimizing side effects and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the therapies.

What are the main priorities for the company as you look ahead?

Our key priorities for 2024 and 2025 revolve around advancing our robust pipeline. Having already revolutionized type 2 diabetes treatment, we are now making a substantial impact on chronic kidney disease and heart failure. The cardiorenal metabolic (CRM) area remains a critical focus for us. Additionally, we are deeply committed to the field of interstitial lung diseases (ILD), where one of our products is a lifeline for patients with this rare and severe condition, often with outcomes as dire as many cancers. Our efforts in this area are pivotal as we provide much-needed hope for these patients.

At the same time, we are intensifying our research into breakthrough oncology therapies, particularly through our biotech acquisitions. Furthermore, we are preparing to launch a series of innovative therapies from our pipeline, which includes new compounds for ILD, mental health, oncology, and CRM. This reflects our unwavering commitment to transforming lives through cutting-edge treatments.

What makes Switzerland a strategic location for Boehringer Ingelheim, and what are the main areas of focus for the company's growth in the coming years?

Switzerland offers a unique combination of advantages that make it an ideal location for Boehringer Ingelheim. Its highly advanced healthcare system, combined with world-class academic institutions and a collaborative environment, fosters a strong foundation for research and development. Additionally, the country provides a favorable political and legal landscape that supports innovation, along with access to exceptional talent. These factors make Switzerland an attractive hub for both research and production, aligning perfectly with our long-term goals.

In terms of growth areas, cardiometabolic and renal diseases remain key priorities. We have had a major breakthrough in these fields, and are developing the single-pill combination of our SGLT2 inhibitor with an Aldosterone Synthase Inhibitor (Asi/Empa) to build on that success. Another critical focus is interstitial lung diseases, where we are already market leader. We are also advancing a new therapy which holds the potential to halt disease progression—something that could change the treatment landscape. Furthermore, we are preparing to launch a compound for mental health, targeting cognitive impairment associated with schizophrenia, a compound for obesity and metabolic disfunction associated with steatohepatitis (MASH) as well as several cancer therapies. These developments are expected to drive growth over the next few years, reflecting our continued commitment to transforming patients' lives through innovative therapies.

Boehringer Ingelheim has evolved from being viewed solely as a pharmaceutical company to embracing a broader identity as a healthcare company. How is this shift embodied by the company?

The transition from a pharmaceutical to a healthcare company is about adopting a more holistic view of health. While a pharmaceutical company focuses on the research, development, and commercialization of medicines, a healthcare company looks at maintaining and improving health more broadly. Boehringer Ingelheim fits this model for three main reasons.

Firstly, we operate in both human pharmaceuticals and animal health, offering treatments and vaccines for pets and livestock. Secondly, our research extends beyond traditional medicines, incorporating digital health solutions, particularly in mental health. Lastly, we approach healthcare comprehensively—focusing not only on treatment but also on prevention and disease

management. For instance, in the cardiorenal and metabolic space (CRM), we emphasize early diagnosis and a holistic approach to patient care. Similarly, with rare diseases like interstitial lung disease (ILD), many patients remain undiagnosed or are diagnosed too late, and we are committed to improving early detection and treatment.

In Switzerland, where the healthcare system is complex and fragmented, our focus on prevention, early diagnosis, and comprehensive care positions us as a true healthcare company. This broader view allows us to make a meaningful impact within the Swiss healthcare landscape.

Boehringer Ingelheim is expanding its role beyond traditional pharmaceuticals, offering digital solutions and supporting early diagnosis. How is the company positioning itself as a comprehensive partner for stakeholders across the patient care journey?

Boehringer Ingelheim is increasingly focused on providing holistic solutions that go beyond medications. We aim to support patients throughout their healthcare journey by integrating services like early diagnosis tools and digital health solutions. For instance, we are developing a digital platform in mental health, which will initially launch in the U.S., aimed at enhancing early detection and treatment outcomes. These initiatives reflect our broader commitment to healthcare innovation.

Additionally, we've introduced the Paul Klee Award, a Research Award in interstitial lung diseases (ILD), which encourages both emerging and established researchers to focus on fibrosis and rare diseases. This award not only drives research in areas where patients desperately need solutions but also raises awareness of these diseases. Ultimately, by promoting innovation and supporting early diagnosis, we aim to ensure more patients are diagnosed and treated effectively. Through these efforts, Boehringer Ingelheim is evolving as a comprehensive healthcare partner, working closely with stakeholders to improve patient outcomes across the board.

What are your thoughts on the challenges Switzerland faces today and how should these be addressed?

Switzerland, though small on the global scale, is a complex and costly market, with high operational expenses and the need to manage all things in several languages. To remain competitive in global healthcare, Switzerland must focus on key areas for improvement.

First, the country lags in healthcare digitalization, particularly when compared to regions like the Nordics. Second, the regulatory and reimbursement processes need significant reform. Switzerland faces a strong, one-sided pricing pressure, and securing early product launches is becoming more difficult. Lengthy reimbursement timelines accompanied with unpredictable hurdles put forth by the Federal Office of Public Health (FoPH) and regulatory delays slow product approvals. A modernization of the reimbursement process and aligning Swissmedic more closely with international regulatory bodies like the FDA or EMA would help streamline this process.

Furthermore, it is critical for Switzerland to maintain access to European markets, top talent, and leading research initiatives. Addressing these three priorities—digitalization, streamlined regulatory and reimbursement processes, and access to Europe—will be essential for Switzerland to continue thriving in global healthcare.

Attracting and retaining top talent is a major challenge across the pharmaceutical industry. How does Boehringer Ingelheim set itself apart in this competitive environment?

We differentiate ourselves by our purpose and our commitment to it. Boehringer Ingelheim has always had a long-term vision—transforming lives for generations—and this deeply resonates with those who join us. Unlike companies driven by short-term financial targets, we focus on strategic, lasting impact. This creates a sense of stability and purpose that people value. In addition, our robust pipeline means that there are always new opportunities and challenges, ensuring ongoing engagement and meaningful work. It’s this combination of our culture and our pipeline that truly attracts and retains talent.

As you look ahead to the future, what legacy would you like to leave in your current role at Boehringer Ingelheim?

My aspiration is to leave behind an organization that has fully capitalized on its portfolio and is well-prepared for the successful launch of new compounds. Just as important, I want to foster a culture where people are genuinely passionate about their work and excited to be part of Boehringer Ingelheim. Seeing a team that not only achieves great results but does so with enthusiasm and happiness would be the legacy I hope to leave. It’s about ensuring a healthy, thriving company where employees are motivated, fulfilled, and proud of their contributions—simple goals, but essential ones.

See more interviews