Interview: Elif Aral – Country Manager, Pfizer – Turkey



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Pfizer Turkey has taken a strong supporting role in Turkey's current strategic development plan by localizing the production of their Prix Galien winning Prevnar vaccine. Country Manager Elif Aral discusses this facility's role as a role model in the industry, and how the country can improve investment incentives to better fit the pharmaceutical industry.

How would you assess the current investment environment, and how can it be improved?

For all investors, especially international players, sustainability and predictability is the most important thing for investment decisions. Intellectual property rights are also very important. Without adequate intellectual property protection, companies cannot justify bringing knowledge-based activities like R&D and manufacturing to a market where the products can be easily copied.

With respect to the needs of potential investors, we definitely have some problems in Turkey; however, there are solutions to these problems and we hope they are on the way. First step in addressing these issues was the government's recognition of the pharmaceutical industry as a strategic industry for Turkey's development; some existing policies are still contradictory to this vision, but moving forward the government has made it clear that they will support the industry, and not continue to treat it as a cost that must be contained. On the pricing front, the Social Security Institution (SGK) has invited the industry to develop proposals for alternative payment systems, and while there are no concrete examples yet, discussions are moving forward. For the

other areas that need to be addressed, there is a very clear understanding of what steps need to be taken to better attract investment, with the major points outlined in reports from AIFD and the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV).

With respect to investment incentives, the government has introduced several general measures. These incentives are not fully aligned with the needs of potential pharmaceutical investors, and therefore have limited impact. Going forward, it will be important for future incentives to be developed and introduced within a well-understood framework of the needs of the investor.

What are some of the most important strategies for working in a market with a strong single payer like the SGK?

It is important to listen to the government and understand the needs of the country. You should try to adapt your business to align with the government's priorities, as doing so will ensure that your business has a degree of government support. There is much to be gained by listening to signals from the government, and adapting your business to best engage and collaborate with them.

Currently, one major factor is government's dedication to transform industry towards high technology and prioritizing pharmaceutical industry. The regulations must be revised or redesigned for a better investment environment.

On the other hand, Turkey is one of the fastest aging populations. Although we are still young with median age 30, we are getting old faster than many European countries. Therefore, pharmaceutical expenditures will tend to increase accordingly. Thus, a new system needs to be in place to support sustainability, including the right evaluation and assessment methods, considering the whole healthcare system and focusing on alternative efficiency areas. SGK is the key to this transformation.

Pfizer developed a vaccine manufacturing plant in Turkey, which began production in 2012; what is the significance of this facility to the Turkish pharmaceutical industry, and Pfizer globally?

Pfizer has had manufacturing activities in Turkey since 1957, and in the last five years we developed a new, much more advanced facility to manufacture Prevnar, a vaccine that won the US Prix Galien prize in 2011.

Prevnar, probably the most complex and sophisticated biopharmaceutical product commercially available throughout the world, has a very delicate and complicated manufacturing process. The manufacturing cycle of one dose of Prevnar takes more than 2.5 years. The new Prevnar

manufacturing facility, developed in partnership with Mefar, a well-known sterile injectable manufacturer with the necessary competency to partner with Pfizer, is only the third manufacturing site for Prevnar in the world after sites in the US and Ireland. With a very intense technology transfer project, which involved more than 800 milestones, took 2 years to finalize with more than 90 qualified people, all the formulation, filling, packaging, quality analysis and release process of the first locally manufactured vaccine of Turkey moved into the new facility. The facility, fitted up with state of art manufacturing and inspection equipment, finished production of the first batches in late 2012, and since then Turkish children have been vaccinated with locally manufactured vaccines.



We are very proud to manufacture such an innovative product here in Turkey, and as a very sophisticated product we feel Prevnar sets an excellent example. The process has demonstrated that we have the necessary human resources, government support, and infrastructure to successfully manufacture such a sophisticated biopharmaceutical product at the highest quality, on time, and with the expected and competitive costs. Given that we now have a biologics facility in Turkey for Prevnar, we hope to be able to use this capability to localize production of other biologics products, and given the success of the project, we have an evidence to use to help attract further investments from Pfizer global. Hopefully, its success will encourage further high tech pharmaceutical investments in Turkey. Given the global reach of Pfizer and other multinational pharmaceutical companies, the localization of production of even one or two products offers the Turkish pharmaceutical industry, and the wider economy, enormous growth potential due to the number of countries that we can potentially export to.

Furthermore, the knowledge transferred from 3 different countries to Turkey as a result of this investment is of great value to the country, as the knowledge and experience can diffuse into other areas of the industry, and even other industries that use biotechnological processes.

What is Pfizer Turkey’s role in Pfizer’s global organization?

Pfizer Turkey has always been a good contributor in terms of revenues and talent, and we want to maintain both of these attributes. In terms of growth, Turkey is still a growing economy and our business should grow in line with the market, so we can be an important avenue for Pfizer’s growth in the region and want to maximize this growth in sales.

In terms of talent, Turkey has always been an important source of talent for Pfizer globally as we have implemented the company’s talent development strategy very successfully, and we have roughly 60 colleagues working for Pfizer internationally at present. These individuals have represented Turkey very well, and Turkish people now have a reputation in Pfizer for being smart, driven, passionate, and creative. We would very much like to maintain our success in this area, developing and investing in people and then exporting our colleagues to the international arena as leaders. Of course, we’d like to see them return to Turkey after getting some exposure and experience with Pfizer internationally.

Having worked with Pfizer Turkey for over 20 years, what is the vision that guides the Turkish affiliate?

Pfizer has been in Turkey since 1957, and the decision to manufacture here was made before entering the country, with actual manufacturing operations beginning in 1957. Today, Pfizer Turkey produces 75 percent of our local sales volume, and exports products to 22 different countries. This role as a multinational with deep roots in Turkey, a strong manufacturing presence, and as a production hub to support Pfizer in other countries was developed long before I took this position, and will continue long after.

Pfizer’s defining mission is “working to fill lives with more years and years with more life” to help people live healthier, happier, and longer lives by providing them innovative pharmaceutical treatments. Bringing all of our innovative products from Pfizer’s global portfolio to Turkey in a timely fashion is a guiding goal for our affiliate, and in the coming years this will be particularly important for Turkey as a country given the aging demographic structure of the Turkish population. We also have a special initiative called ‘Sen Çok Yaşa’, which translates as ‘You live long’ or ‘Get old’; this encompasses several programs and campaigns to encourage healthy lifestyle choices, including diet, exercise, and not smoking, and important preventative healthcare measures such as vaccination programs and diagnostic screenings.

Also, as Pfizer we have always aligned our priorities with the strategic priorities of the country, and for the coming years we are definitely supportive of the government’s current strategy as it relates

to Vision 2023 priorities and the tenth development plan. It is our aim to be a good strategic partner to the Turkish government and people, and as such we will continue to help Turkey make the jump to more complex and sophisticated manufacturing and R&D activities through our investments. While our primary goal remains ensuring that Turkish patients have access to our innovative medicines, our secondary objective is to manufacture them in Turkey if possible.

How broad is the scope of Pfizer's R&D investment in Turkey?

Pfizer does numerous clinical trials in Turkey, and we have conducted more than 140 clinical trials and invested more than USD 40 million in Turkey. As a part of these trial activities, we conduct clinical trial education programs to train physicians to conduct clinical trials, and so far over 3000 physicians have gone through our training programs in Turkey, which will benefit the rest of the Turkish clinical trial industry in addition to Pfizer.

We also began a research partnership with Hacettepe University in 2009 that lasted five years and the main objective was to engage Turkish physicians with Pfizer researchers to try to generate some research ideas in Turkey that we could invest in here. The initiative was successful; it led to about 20 proposals for collaborative research, brought over 200 Turkish researchers into contact with Pfizer's research professionals, and several did internships at our global research centers.

What are some of the factors that make Pfizer so successful at developing talent?

I have been with Pfizer for 20 years, but I am not the only one; it is the people strategy of Pfizer. We try to attract the most talented people straight out of university, and do our very best to retain the top individuals at every stage of their career development. We begin by putting the candidate through a very extensive and deep assessment process, and successful candidates are recruited to the company, not a specific role or functional area. For those that are hired, we rotate them a lot early on so that they can learn the business and industry relatively quickly, and try to put them in internal reporting departments that are in communication with many different departments at once to accelerate this process. We also ensure that recruits spend some time in the field so that they have a good understanding of how the business works on the ground, and the pattern of interactions between physicians, companies and other stakeholders. As they progress in their careers, they become product managers, and we continue to rotate them through different positions but at a slower pace; once at the managerial level it is important to stick with a role for at least two years to learn how to push a project or initiative forward after you finish making the first round of changes based on your initial assessment.

Most importantly, our employees are given truly equal opportunities; anyone can volunteer for any role, and we have a rigorous assessment and interview period to ensure that the best person is chosen from among the candidates on a basis of merit. However, this can mean that we don’t always have a place for everyone, and this is one of the reasons why we see so many successful managers in other companies that started with Pfizer. We are very proud to see that the talent we develop can succeed across the industry, not just within Pfizer.

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