

Interview: Johan Vooren - VP & General Manager, South East Asia, Philips Healthcare, Singapore



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Philips general manager of Health Systems, South East Asia, Johan Vooren highlights the company's renewed commitment to Singapore with the recent opening of their APAC Center, while detailing the qualities that make the country as such an ideal testing ground for Philips' new telehealth program. He further elaborates on the value of employing new healthcare models in tackling the region's confluence of healthcare challenges and exclaims how such innovative solutions can take on multiple forms to impact markets of all shapes and sizes.

As an introduction for our readers, can you provide some insight into the scope of your role within Philips Healthcare, while also highlighting what priorities are currently sitting at the top of your agenda?

My position today is looking after ASEAN, which serves as a tremendous growth opportunity for Philips. Those markets range anywhere from countries where we have complete immaturity and are in the process of opening shop like Myanmar to countries where we're exploring the newest technologies not available anywhere yet, such as Singapore.

The level of diversity creates a distinct spectrum of how a health technology company like Philips can contribute, spanning from helping local governments develop their primary care systems to exploring telehealth as a alternative model for elderly care outside the hospitals.

To this end, I see an abundance of opportunities across the geographic scope of South East Asia. But these are not without their own set of challenges, particularly on the clinical side, in the likes of non-communicable diseases, rapidly aging populations, and rising healthcare costs, as well as the capacity and capabilities side—both inside and outside Philips—which encompasses people, training, and education.

Philips recently unveiled a new APAC Center in Singapore, designed to house the company's APAC HQ and innovation activities. Compared to some other candidates in the region, why was Singapore chosen as the most suitable destination for this center?

We've been present in Singapore for 65 years now. Singapore has been very important to us, and we've been very important to Singapore.

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We had a direct hand in building up the country during its early industrialization age, having started off manufacturing low-tech electronics. Those activities have since been outsourced to other regional sites such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and China, but we always kept a close relationship with the Singapore government.

We recently decided to elevate that commitment with the establishment of our new APAC Center to serve as a center of excellence for our regional sales and marketing activities.

Additionally, we find that Singapore is a fantastic location to pilot new innovations and patient-care models. For instance, the telehealth center (first of its kind worldwide) that sits inside our regional HQ was also established in conjunction with the Singapore government because it involves an issue that directly aligns with their priorities.

Furthermore, in terms of geography, Singapore sits right in the heart of APAC, making regional travel quite fluid and efficient. As well, the country's education system and corresponding pool of talent is top notch, which only serve to fuel out growth and development in this region.

According to a recent report compiled by Bloomberg, Singapore's healthcare system—occupying only 4 percent of the nation's GDP—is ranked among the most efficient in the world in terms of per capita spending and corresponding patient outcomes. How does this translate into the opportunities that Philip sees in Singapore, as both a market and “laboratory” for testing new care models?

One of the reasons why Singapore's spending is relatively low compared to other OECD countries is its small population of 5.5 million citizens. That is a very dense market which consequently also makes it easy to pilot new technologies, particularly in a developed environment like Singapore. The market here is so small and focused that people know exactly what they want and how they want to invest—consistently maintaining a long-term outlook and always following through with execution.

As a part of our "Hospital to Home" initiative, we have started the telehealth pilot with Changi Hospital, Eastern Health Alliance, EDB, and the Singaporean government to monitor cardiac patients at home following a surgical procedure, which seamlessly aligns with our strategy to invest in home healthcare. We believe patients will recover better when they're at home, in their own domains and comfort zones, in turn, relieving significant cost pressures from healthcare systems.

We've now monitored 150 patients over the course of a year. We provided them with very simple and basic tools including wireless blood pressure monitors, scales, pill dispensers, and a tablet to log key health metrics daily. We provide our customers with the tools and infrastructure; from our remote telehealth center, the customers' nurse practitioners can see how a patient is progressing and anticipate any need for physician intervention.

The results were very promising, and we're now running our first commercial project with an insurance company called NTUC Income. The fact that we're now moving from pilot to commercial in such a short timespan gives testament to Singapore's value as a "living lab."

How does this initiative ultimately align with Philip's overarching strategies in the healthcare technology space?

To provide some context, the future of Philips Healthcare is steeped in five critical pillars.

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The first is healthy living, where we have merged our medical unit with consumer to create Philips Healthtech. More and more hospitals in this region are placing a greater emphasis on educating patients on maintaining healthier lifestyles to prevent hospitalization in the first place—a move that actually ends up saving costs for our customers.

The second pillar is prevention. Increasingly, populations around the world are taking responsibility for their own health by means of self-enrichment through the Internet or wearable monitoring technologies as a form of preventive action. And we certainly hope to capitalize on that trend

through initiatives such as Hospital to Home and even the development of our own consumer wear, specifically with the recent launch of the only FDA-approved health watch in the world.

The third pillar, diagnosis, is where we have traditionally displayed our competencies by offering an extensive portfolio of high-value monitoring and imaging equipment.

The fourth pillar is treatment. This is an area where we're currently investing a lot in via patient monitoring, but also through the recent acquisition of a company called Volcano. Additionally, we're starting to go into the development of treatment devices to aid in surgical procedures.

And of course, the last is home healthcare, where the telehealth pilot with Changi Hospital falls under. This segment is particularly important because it allows us to look at the entire continuum of health, not just one isolated spectrum. In this complex environment where the rising costs of health and burden of disease are increasingly pervasive, companies like Philips need to play a more proactive role within the healthcare community to improve processes and elevate standards of care; else health systems in this region will not be able to sustainably support the 1.2 billion people that are projected to be over 60 years old by 2050.

People are getting older, and with the advances in healthcare technology, are subsequently living longer. Meanwhile chronic diseases are showing no signs of abatement, and this puts added burdens on already-strained healthcare systems worldwide. It's clear that we have to do something different—and home healthcare is an area where we can make a difference.

In the context of South East Asia, Singapore is however somewhat of a microcosm, exhibiting significantly greater levels of wealth and infrastructure development. What approach has Philips taken to ensure that its innovative solutions are accessible across the entire spectrum of wealth, and not just the ones that can afford it?

It depends on the needs of each country.

Singapore is at a stage right now where a telehealth program can greatly alleviate costs from the healthcare system and improve elderly care—one of the country's foremost drivers of healthcare costs at the moment. That being said, not every country is ready to embrace a telehealth program, particularly those that lack the infrastructure to adequately meet basic medical needs.

For example, in a place like Indonesia, our telehealth program has taken a slightly different incarnation through a program called Mobile Obstetrics Monitoring (MOM), which aims to reduce the alarmingly high mortality rates among pregnant women during pregnancy, especially in more remote villages. In the same vein as our collaborations in Singapore, we've partnered with

Indonesia's Ministry of Health to equip midwives with basic monitoring equipment and mobile solutions to track simple KPIs and detect any complications in the first or second trimesters that would require medical attention. Given the success of this program, we're now rolling it out to other parts of the country, with the ultimate goal of nation-wide implementation.

From the creation of highly sophisticated telehealth platforms to filling very basic primary care gaps with technology, innovation can take multiple forms across all types of health systems. What matters the most in this region is developing solutions in Asia, for Asia. The localized approach should never be underestimated.

How much more commercial potential does ASEAN hold in your opinion?

With China's growth starting to stabilize, many companies have started to place a special emphasis on South East Asia. And rightly so, the GDP growth in South East Asia is fantastic, with some countries even exhibiting upwards of 10 percent growth. On average, the entire region is still projected to grow at moderately high single digits, which is very healthy. Our goal then, as a company, is to outperform those metrics and expand market share.

Of course there's a degree of instability inherent in emerging markets, but the influx of opportunities for healthcare technology companies like Philips serve to counterbalance those risks.

As the general manager of Philips Healthcare in South East Asia, what will your priorities center on in the next three to five years?

I'm extremely proud of what we have achieved and the initiatives that we're currently doing.

Overall, my efforts will continue focusing on building up the company's footprint in this region, while enabling widespread opportunities for our local people to grow within the global organization.

On the commercial side, my ambitions center on having Philips play a direct role in frontier markets such as Myanmar—building up their health systems by providing education, training, and turnkey solutions.

Furthermore, I hope to roll out telehealth and other alternative care models to more markets in South East Asia. But in the long run, my primary objective is making sure that our innovations become finely integrated within regions health infrastructure—and those ambitions extend to countries across the entire spectrum of maturity, from villages and townships in Indonesia to the metropolitan cosmos of Singapore.

Having been in Asia for the last 10 years, what aspect of working in Asia has left the most lasting impression?

The people—they are enormously resilient in this region.

Western societies might sometimes consider traffic jams as a damper in their days. But if you see what people in Asia, especially in rural regions, need to face on a day-to-day basis and realize how quickly that can recover from a given incident—whether that's regarding political turmoil or natural disasters—then you really start develop a sense of respect, and even admiration for them.

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