Interview: Ana Claudia Alvarez – Country Manager, GE Healthcare Colombia



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Ana Claudia Alvarez, the recently appointed Country Manager for GE Healthcare Colombia, discusses the company's transition from hardware-based activities to advisory services, the relationship between medical equipment presence and cost reductions in the system, and the advantages of using powerful information systems in hospitals. She reveals her priority of implementing the company's strong corporate footprint in the Colombian Market.

Can you please give us an overview of GE Healthcare's operations in Colombia?

In Colombia, GE provides specific solutions to its customers in terms of both technology and advising services. One of the main challenges we are currently confronted with is the lack of funds in many healthcare facilities. This means customers delay their purchasing decisions. GE has started addressing these needs and aims to adapt their financial capacities, but the quality of service in the system is at risk if the hospitals do not do the right upgrades.

How significant is Colombia in the region?

Colombia is the fourth largest economy in Latin America. GE thinks the healthcare sector is very promising compared to other countries in Latin America. Therefore, GE has high performance expectations for the country and believes there is still a lot of room to grow. With regards to last year's double-digit growth, which was above the GDP index, the management trusts our operations and has maintained its expectations. I believe we'll continue to have high targets in the years to

come.

Since your recent appointment, what are your first impressions on the key strengths and weaknesses of GE, and where do you see room for improvement?

What impressed me was the talent and experience of people working here at GE Healthcare. The fact that we retained Gemedco's teams has truly facilitated the transition. For example, our sales representatives have a longstanding relationship with the clients, our back-office team has over 10 years in the sector, and the engineers have over 18 years of experience in the medical technology sector. It is of paramount importance that we manage to combine the deep expertise of our teams to offer the new services the market needs.

What's GE's position in the Colombian market? Which of these categories are represented in Colombia and where do you see main growth drivers?

GE Healthcare in Colombia is leading the market with state of the art technology. More specifically we are present in MRI, X-ray imaging, mammography and tomography devices. Additionally, GE is doing very well in the life care solutions in operating rooms. We are expecting to maintain our leadership in these categories. To continue progressing, we need to keep in mind that our customers are facing financial challenges and therefore demand cost effective solutions. Lately, digital transformation has been crucial for GE. The management expects us to grow in this sector and it is aligned with the needs of our clients. From now on, we'll be concentrating our efforts on providing the tools to collect data. Indeed, we've found that our customers can improve their processes and diagnoses by collecting and interpreting data on the patients. In the long run, these tools will help decrease costs and increase early diagnostic rates. This is even more important with regards to the fact the government will now be rewarding healthcare facilities on the outcomes of operations rather than on volume. Eventually, we'll be launching two other projects which have been very successful at an internationally and expect to partner with more hospitals and institutions in the near future.

Could you share some of the initiatives you're engaging in?

We engage in tailor-made education programs with the medical community. Depending on hospital departments we deal with, the devices they use are different and so are their needs. Usually, GE arranges for international experts to train radiologists and biomedical engineers. In some cases, we draw upon the local expertise of GE Healthcare employees. Additionally, we engage in partnerships with universities and their biomedical students. The objective of such initiatives is to ensure all the students are familiar with the new technologies and can perform quality service when they

graduate. In return, we expect this initiative to have a positive effect on the healthcare system in Colombia and if possible, GE's operations in the country.

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What challenges do you perceive in the Colombian healthcare system and how do you intend to improve the situation?

We believe there still is room for improvement. Indeed, 50 percent of the Colombians contribute to the healthcare system, which covers 96 percent of the population. However, covering more of the population requires specialized personnel capable of diagnosing and treating patients. Additionally, the service can be improved in terms of access. Indeed, waiting lists can affect the patient's treatment and remission. In the coming years, GE wants to decrease waiting time by improving the efficiency of operations, and reduce the time patients spend in hospital by improving diagnostics. Faster diagnostics means the patient's treatment starts earlier and likelier to succeed. In turn, this will improve the patient's quality of life and is aligned with the government's reward on outcome system. Furthermore, it is important GE improves the accessibility of care and diagnostic tools in Colombia.

With regards to the financial difficulties in the healthcare system, what is your action plan to deliver affordable technology and ensure access?

In simple terms, GE Healthcare is working to have more equipment installed in Colombia, to continue its journey of technical improvements, and educate more doctors. By doing so we'll increase early diagnostic rates, access to care and reduce running costs is the system. For instance, 15 years ago, larger MRI and similar equipment's were only available in large cities. Anybody from the countryside seeking medical assistance would have to travel. With the increased availability of our products, even in smaller cities, more people have access to the specialised equipment needed for certain diagnostics at an affordable price. Indeed, they do not need to travel as much as before. Accessibility is also related to having all the solutions at one site. We do not want our patients to have to travel between phases of diagnostics. This would increase the time spent in hospitals and reduce efficiency. For example, a person who wants a breast cancer diagnostic should not have to travel between the biopsy, the mammography and prescription. At GE we do our best so this type of patient can benefit from the fastest diagnostic possible in one stop, doctors can have more assertive decisions and digital data can support all of it. Moreover, this increases our chances of early diagnostic and the patient's likelihood of remission, and the healthcare institutions can be benefited by improving operational and financial management.

What are some of GE Healthcare’s strategic objectives you would like to attain in the next three years?

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They are related to the situation in Colombia. GE Healthcare is working on going beyond medical devices provision and entering consultancy area for healthcare facilities. Certain companies are confortable with leading their market. On the contrary, we feel that its important to stay committed to our customers needs within the country. We’ve already stepped in this direction by providing advice as to which medical devices should be used and what maintenance scheme to put into place but we’d like to continue going further. From now on, we would like to help medical facilities collect and interpret data on their patients. By collecting information on the patient’s clinical history and helping doctors interpret these, diagnostic and treatments efficiency will improve. Eventually, patient information will be available at all facilities regardless of where the patient is treated and he can continue receiving appropriate treatment in the future.

Additionally, we want to continue improving the technology. Worldwide, GE healthcare is at the forefront of technology and providing state of the art devices to hospitals in first world countries. This is also the case in Colombia, however the financial situation in the country is such that GE Healthcare needs to continue working on the affordability of its technologies. Last, GE healthcare’s new global CEO has set appoint in increasing our internal efficiency. In other words, we need to continue delivering best solutions for our customer while being resource efficient.

You have experiences as a manager in the pharmaceutical and medical device sectors, which are similarities and differences between both?

In both sectors, patient focus is a key driver of activities and our growth depends on the healthcare sector’s performance as a whole. I see three main differences between the sectors, technology regulations and relationship with customers. Indeed, regulatory hurdles are more present in pharmaceutical sector than in medical device. I also think the technologies used in the medical device segment are more developed than in pharmaceutical industry. Last, the purchasing decision of medical devices is more centralised than in the pharmaceutical sector.

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