Interview: Rocío Mendez – Country Manager, bioMérieux Colombia



"As a pioneer in diagnostics, bioMérieux's mission consists in improving public health worldwide."

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Rocío Mendez, country manager at bioMérieux Colombia, speaks about the many talents that make up the Colombian affiliate and explains how the company brings life-saving and innovative solutions to a thriving Colombian healthcare sector.

This is your first time as a country manager. Why did the global management board think of you, with your extensive experience in HR, to head up the Colombian affiliate?

bioMérieux promotes career changes and employee growth. We believe in people, in their capacity to learn and in the possibility of switching departments and being successful in different fields. I was given the opportunity to work for bioMérieux in France, later in North Carolina (USA) and now, for the last year, in Colombia.

When I first arrived, I was very impressed by the talent pool available here. Joining as a new country manager and having such a talented team around you is very encouraging and reassuring. My priority was first to be out on the field and get a first-hand perspective in order to see what are our customers' needs and how bioMérieux can help them. We are living in an interesting and challenging times for the Colombian healthcare system and I am confident that by all playing our part, we will be able to achieve the accessibility and sustainability principles that guide it.

Additionally, peace is a big opportunity for the government to focus on the country's development. It is an exciting moment to be in Colombia – I was glad to be here when the Nobel Prize was

awarded [to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos for his role in negotiating a peace treaty with the FARC guerillas e.d.].

bioMérieux is organized in 3 regions. The Americas region drives 42 percent of the global Group's revenues. How strategically important is the Colombian affiliate?

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We have been here for over 20 years. Colombia is a key market for bioMérieux because of the quality of the Colombian healthcare, the skills of its professionals and the many excellent hospitals. When it comes to innovation and health in the Latin American landscape, Colombia is at the avantgarde and being here helps us having the pulse of Latin America.

Although we represent a small part of bioMérieux, we benefit from the advantages of a big company – we are in constant contact with bioMérieux Inc. in the US, the rest of LATAM and the French Headquarters and we always receive support whenever we need it.

bioMérieux Colombia is celebrating its 20th birthday this year. Can you tell us about your capabilities on the ground, as bioMérieux focuses on several areas?

In Colombia, we commercialize bioMérieux's entire portfolio of *in vitro* diagnostic solutions – we have a clinical division, and an industry division. Our teams are supporting both and we have everything we would have elsewhere. However, depending on regulatory approvals, we launch products at different times. Colombian hospitals and labs would have the exact same services that you would get in France, Switzerland or the US. In the clinical applications, we are the leaders in microbiology, we develop reagents, equipment and services and we also work with laboratories in the workflow management, which is something that helps us provide truly integrated solutions. It has also been very interesting for me to see how welcomed our BioFire FilmArray® is. We are working very closely with the labs and the physicians, as well as with medical associations. It is fascinating to bring a solution to the market saving peoples' lives. On the industrial side, we are working with service labs, pharmaceutical and food companies to provide them with automated solutions for the industrial microbiological control of their processes and products.

In terms of your business line, what are the most used ones?

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We have a leadership position in microbiology, with a large product offering. All our product ranges are contributing to our growth but the fastest progression we are having is with molecular biology,

more specifically with BioFire FilmArray®, a multiplex system introduced in 2015. We currently commercialize its panels of tests for the rapid identification of infectious diseases, which are being used very well. It is fascinating to go to a hospital or a lab and receive compliments about the high medical value that FilmArray® brings. At the end of the day, it is all about improvement of technology, progress and healing.

Before that, we launched an innovative tool in mass spectrometry, VITEK® MS, for rapid identification of microorganisms, which was very beneficial for the country because we could offer rapid microbiology solutions besides being able to shorten the time required to identify pathogens. There were obviously other famous and equally welcomed bioMérieux products such as VITEK® in microbiology, for automated pathogen identification and antibiotic susceptibility testing, and VIDAS® in immunoassays, to name a few.

Furthermore, we are also currently working on and about to launch BacT/ALERT® VIRTUO™ for automated blood culture. On the industry side, we have GENE-UP® which is bringing quick results in molecular biology and which is very promising for the food industry.

What is your level of collaboration with the Colombian government on issues such as AMR, and how responsive is the government in acknowledging that this is a public health threat?

We work closely with the regulator, the INVIMA (Instituto Nacional de Vigilancia de Medicamentos y Alimentos), the INS (Instituto Nacional de Salud) and with the government through ANDI (Asociación Nacional de Empresarios de Colombia). With regards to sepsis, a lot has been done, but a lot of work still remains. Hospitals are at different stages in the fight against antibiotic resistance (AMR) which is a global healthcare challenge. As a leader in microbiology, bioMérieux has long been committed to fight AMR and part of our work is to share knowledge and demonstrate how diagnostic tests can help curb AMR. The government is working on that. We are trying as much as we can to cooperate with hospitals to raise awareness about the major threat that resistance represents.

bioMérieux all over the world is at the forefront for rethinking new forms of healthcare, taking for example your collaboration on biomarkers, personalized health or even leveraging data or analytics to better track disease behavior. How do you partner with the state in creating a more sustainable healthcare system?

I believe that Colombia’s continuous growth is in the interest of everybody. We are in the healthcare business because bioMérieux has been committed to serve health for more than 50

years. We have been in Colombia for many years, so it is important to bring efficient diagnostic solutions to help improve patient outcome and reduce healthcare spending – and this is exactly what we are doing. We analyze and meet local needs, contributing to better health in Colombia.

How effective have you been in those dialogues?

We have been effective and are committed to continuous improvements. The investments made in automatized technology give quick results to the clinicians. It contributes to give an adapted treatment to the patient at the right time for improved patient outcomes, shortens hospital stays and reduces healthcare spending. This is the medical and economic added value that we provide with our diagnostic solutions.

Where do you see your competition coming from and what do you need to do to bring bioMérieux to the next level in Colombia?

As a pioneer in diagnostics, bioMérieux's mission consists in improving public health worldwide. It is very important and meaningful for all of us to be committed to this mission, through the scientific and medical value our diagnostic tools bring to healthcare professionals and to the patient. We differentiate ourselves through bioMérieux's investments in innovation, we have more than 1,500 people working in our R&D departments worldwide. Our vision in innovation enables us to bring to our customers rapid, reliable and cutting-hedge diagnostic solutions. Finally, the key for our success is our people, their skills and engagement. I am proud to work with people who have been in the Colombian subsidiary since its beginning 20 years ago.

On a more personal note, how have your previous experiences in HR help you successfully lead bioMérieux Colombia?

My first boss was fantastic. He told me one has to have three careers in one's life. I started as a lawyer, I focused mainly in labour law and that led me naturally to Human Resources and now I am a General Manager. To change careers, first you really need to want it. Secondly, your company needs to allow and enable you to do it and be patient with your lack of experience in that specific domain at first. bioMérieux invests on its people and believes in internal mobility. I combat my deficiencies by reading, studying and mainly learning through listening to people. As a leader, the most important thing is to have the right people at the right place, and my background in HR is a plus, I believe, to help me with this.

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