Interview: Olga Insua – General Manager, Novo Nordisk, Portugal



"Above all, this is the ultimate goal: nothing else matters more than bringing innovation to patients. When we have the privilege of being able to provide access to excellent innovative products, it is our responsibility to deliver innovation to patients; this has always been the Novo Nordisk objective."

07.06.2018

Tags: Portugal, Novo Nordisk, Pharma, Diabetes, Strategy

Olga Insua, the new American general manager for Novo Nordisk Portugal, fresh off the plane from Spain, provides an exclusive insight into her impressive career at the company, the blending of business practices from Europe and New Jersey, and why patients should always be at the center of every process. While promoting an international career and the merits of observing cultural differences, Olga sheds light on the Novo Nordisk Way, and how a pharmaceutical company can do more than prescribing pills.

Can you introduce yourself and your role at Novo Nordisk to our international readers?

I have been in the industry for over 20 years as I began my pharmaceutical career as a rep at Novartis. I explored various marketing and sales roles before moving in 2008 to Novo Nordisk—both based in New Jersey. I still have a soft spot for Novartis, but at the time, Novo Nordisk offered a different set of opportunities that I wanted to explore. At Novo Nordisk, I developed skills in market access and brand leadership, before entering global marketing in 2012 in headquarters in Bagsværd, Denmark. In this role I had the opportunity to work in Asian markets, the Gulf countries, and later Europe and the US—which was advantageous to me given my background.

I moved to Spain as marketing director in 2015, where I learnt that elevating the significance of marketing, in what had traditionally been a sales operation, would become a clear objective. The

challenge was fun and fulfilling in equal measure, and I took pride in engaging stakeholders in the role of marketing within the industry. Following a restructuring, I became General Manager, which made my vision of the company even broader. was able to expand my impact, partnering with medical and patient associations, and government stakeholders.

What Novo Nordisk has done well is to understand that although we have had incredibly strong growth for decades, we must ensure that our infrastructure and competencies keep up with the pace to guarantee future sustainability. This meant that my task in Spain was to bring the entirety of our innovation to patients, and bring more assertive discussions to stakeholders and employees alike to ensure the continuous evolution of the company. Particularly in Southern Europe, where culturally the work style is dissimilar to American work practices, I have taken great satisfaction in observing and partaking in a sea change of bringing productive and direct discussions to the workplace—because ultimately that leads to greater efficiency.

[Featured_in]

Given your extensive European experience and hailing from New Jersey, what do you note as the business practices that marry well in Europe?

Broadly speaking, I notice that the motivations behind each culture are a little different. The stereotype in the US does hold a modicum of truth: people are motivated by success and the idea of a better lifestyle—this is also the way that I grew up. Consequently, we spend less time in business exchanging pleasantries and engaging in chit-chat vs Europe. The upshot of this that we are quicker in making decisions, and there is a sense of autonomy in being part of a decision by each individual team member.

In Europe, there is more give and take, more discussion on leading to decisions—which implies a level of ownership to the overall idea—which is in many ways rewarding. Projects have a more personal touch and a level of personal involvement that is different than is the case across the pond. Nonetheless, that does not necessarily mean that I do not miss American working life!

Both business practices have their pros and cons and I like to take what I like from each culture and make my own unique blend which I hope to employ in Portugal. Indeed, I highly recommend an international career path as it provides a unique level of professional enrichment that is hard to find otherwise.

What experience can you leverage from your time leading the Spanish affiliate in combatting one of the most pressing challenges in Portugal: slow market access?

Issues such as streamlining bureaucracy, leaving politics outside of the meeting room and ensuring you have a solid network of productive relationships at your disposal are areas in which I gained a lot of experience. I am also at an advantage given my learnings of cultural specificities particular to Southern Europe, such as deadlines being more routed around dialogue than indicating the end of a discussion, and the importance of maintaining long-lasting relationships with stakeholders across the industry and medical community.

Secondly, our business objectives in Spain and Portugal align closely. Bringing innovation is the key priority across the Iberian Peninsula; we have excellent medicines already available to patients, products in the pipeline which we will drive to market, and I intend to continue the work of improving market access, similar to how it was in Spain.

Above all, this is the ultimate goal: nothing else matters more than bringing innovation to patients. When we have the privilege of being able to provide access to excellent innovative products, it is our responsibility to deliver innovation to patients; this has always been the Novo Nordisk objective. For 95 years, our philosophy, our mission, is changing diabetes, and from decreasing the risk of hypoglycemia when prescribing insulin, to addressing complications, for example cardiovascular disease, we will always make patients' health our priority. What's more, improving patient outcomes has the added benefit of alleviating the burden on the healthcare system, something I intend to drive forward in Portugal.

How do you intend to communicate this message regarding alleviating the healthcare burden on the system to authorities?

Put simply, bringing innovation to patients reduces the risk of complications, and when we reduce complications, we reduce the cost on the national health system. In Portugal, a country we know to be under financed, diabetes is a public health problem and the government does not have the means to solve this public health epidemic without partnering across the medical community, including industry, to invest and work towards prevention: a key issue.

Nationwide, earlier diagnosis leads to better prevention, which means less complications, better patient outcomes and a lighter burden for the healthcare system. We need to work towards shifting resources away from acute, potentially life threatening complications—such as a hypoglycemic episode—which costs the state a significant amount in terms of resources (the overall average cost of one hypoglycaemic event is 1493 euros), and redirect that money to focus on preventing those episodes. Ultimately, the government wants fewer people to have diabetes as it means healthier, more productive people, once again, with a positive impact on the healthcare system.

A secondary initiative is in combatting obesity; a key risk factor for diabetes. Our new product in obesity where we intend to extend an arm of partnership toward the government will further leverage Novo Nordisk's objectives. I take it very personally when I say that we do more than simply sell products. We do our jobs for the patients and to improve their quality of life. Therefore, the more we can do to educate patients about healthy lifestyles, about engaging in physical activity, the more we contribute to a better society. In short, less focus on the short-term solutions and more emphasis on the long-term aim of prevention of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, etc. will benefit the system and I intend to put that message across to authorities.

[related_story]

To what extent can a company change the mindset of the general public at risk of developing diabetes?

A company such as Novo Nordisk to support and educate the public. Therefore focusing the investment in the right areas is critical. Sadly, the public is less informed about diabetes than cancer. For example, people with type 2 diabetes often have high levels of blood lipids and cholesterol, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, which accounts for over 80% of deaths in people with type 2 diabetes. The general public simply do not consider diabetes to be a life threatening illness; they consider it more as a disease that leads to blindness or amputation—when unfortunately, it is far more severe! As a company and a strategicpartner in the industry, have a responsibility to communicate the importance of strong public health education. We cannot do this alone, which is why we look to partner with the government as well as medical and patient associations. Personally, giving people with type 2 diabetes a voice, and making it my responsibility to be an advocate for them, will factor into this goal.

A Novo Nordisk differentiating feature is our ability to empowering patients to encourage others in the community, by raising awareness and creating advocates for the improvement of diabetes in Portugal. The stronger the movement we create, the more we can activate change across stakeholders up to the authorities in the industry. I intend to bring our walking initiatives from Spain to Portugal, walking the Camino de Portugal—similar to how we did the Camino de Santiago de Compostela—for example. Novo Nordisk, with our 95 years in working in improving the conditions for diabetes patients, is the flagbearer for the cause of 'changing diabetes', and our credibility in this field will be the driving force for change.

What is the importance of the 'Novo Nordisk Way'?

One of the reasons I take great satisfaction in working at Novo Nordisk is the fact that we put the patient at the center of all that we do. I cannot stress enough how vital it is to a pharmaceutical company to ensure this is the primary goal. Secondary facets to the Novo Nordisk Way are the desire to strive for simplicity in a highly regulated environment, and our intention to be market leaders in the field. The more streamlined we can make our business, the quicker we can get access to innovative medicines to the patients. Personally, the Novo Nordisk way aligns closely with my own values; in that if you put the patient at the center of all actions, then you cannot go wrong.

Consequently, in almost a decade of working with Novo Nordisk, I have come to observe that staff at Novo come to work with a real sense of purpose. Seeing the impact of the improvement we bring to patients, and knowing that our objectives are long-term and life changing is motivating and inspiring. Additionally, many employees work at Novo Nordisk due to their personal connection to someone affected by the disease which creates an intense and passionate atmosphere, when patient and patient outcomes come first.

See more interviews