Cem Kolak – Founder and Managing Director, BL Turkey



Our success rate for on time and on site delivery shall never dive under 99 percent

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Cem Kolak, founder and managing director of BL Turkey, the only Turkish Third Party Logistics (3PL) firm 100 percent dedicated to the biopharmaceutical and life sciences sectors, leverages his pioneering experience to provide insights into the development of this niche in Turkey, while sharing with us his ambitions for BL Turkey moving forward and the personal reasons behind his remarkable commitment to make a difference in the patients' lives.

Could you introduce yourself and provide insights into the reasons that led you to set up your own 3PL company specialized in the healthcare and life sciences sector?

Overall, I have been working in the life sciences logistics industry for more than a decade. Prior to setting up BL Turkey, I actually spearheaded the development of a life sciences courier division on behalf of a domestic logistics company, after the latter had forged a partnership with a global life sciences courier company. This experience provided me with great insights into the stringent requirements and processes of clinical trials and life sciences logistics, a niche that was completely new to Turkey at that time, while I eventually represented Marken in Turkey for almost ten years. Setting up this life sciences division moreover emerged as a true entrepreneurial endeavor, and I was personally fulfilling, supervising, and monitoring our operations in the early days of that life sciences division. For example, I would accompany our drivers and deliver in person our packages to hospitals, supervise the packaging and labelling of samples at our warehouse or take care of the custom clearance procedures by myself.

Despite our lack of experience at the time, one thing was very clear to me from our very beginnings: the packages we deliver are absolutely crucial to both the patients and investigators awaiting them, while our success rate for on time and on site delivery shall never dive under 99 percent. In our niche, the slightest deviation from the Standard Operating Procedures for Clinical Trials (SOPs) renders a precious sample unusable, which implies data are definitely lost. There is truly no room for mistakes.

Looking back, we were truly pioneers in this nascent sector in Turkey, and we had very little competition. The volume of goods handled by our division nonetheless quintupled within only three years, and we rapidly became the most profitable division of my former employer. However, in life sciences logistics, flexibility holds an even greater importance than in any other subsectors: if a given customer expects samples to be collected at the patients' homes and all over the country, one cannot turn down the request for profitability concerns and just wait for a more convenient offer to pop up – quite the contrary! You must design and implement the solution that will enable the collection of all samples – wherever they are located in the country – while strictly complying with the SOPs, and there is no way around that.

Nevertheless, being integrated within a multiple-industry logistics company was somewhat hindering our flexibility. Furthermore, my former company's board would at time be loath to make investments that our customers required, especially as life sciences logistics typically offer a slightly different visibility on return on investment (ROI) than in more 'conventional' niches. In the grand scheme of things, I moreover believed that a life sciences courier company' focus should not be on its profit margin or ROI, but on the difference we can make in patients' lives.

For all these reasons, I decided to leverage my expertise and set up a specialized 3PL company in 2016, so I could ensure our healthcare partners, life sciences customers, and the patients all around Turkey could enjoy the level of flexibility and dedication they deserved. Today, we are the only Turkish company 100 percent focused on life sciences logistics.

How have been these first two years of operations for BL Turkey?

Our first objective was to receive ISO 9001 and 14001 certifications, and GDP compliance which are crucial in life sciences logistics, a sector where regulatory and quality compliance are absolutely paramount. While it eventually took us two months to receive these ISO certifications and GDP compliance we first concentrated our efforts on cold chain domestic distribution of clinical trials medication and focused on servicing global pharmaceuticals and CRO (Clinical Research

Organizations) companies headquartered in Turkey.

Building on these existing relationships, I steadily started engaging with foreign customers I worked with throughout my career and let them know I set up my own company, BL Turkey. Interestingly, many of my former business partners across Europe and North America had also taken the leap of faith to set up their own boutique logistics companies, which swiftly provided me with a strong network of reliable logistics partners outside Turkey.

As CEOs of our own companies, these international partners and I are today able to make decisions within record timelines, while we had to cope with the bureaucracy of large multinational companies when working for our former employers. All in all, this stands as great news for our customers, as they can leverage our long-standing expertise, while benefitting from the utmost flexibility of our boutique firms.

You mentioned that life sciences courier services were somewhat new to Turkey ten years ago. What have been some of the challenges you faced in this context, and are they still relevant today?

A decade ago we were facing tremendous hindrances at the customs level, and it was extremely difficult to convey to customs officials the medical and scientific reasons for which we were sending biological samples abroad. As a result, I had to constantly ask TiTCK's experts to liaise with their counterparts from the customs department so our packages get eventually cleared. It took some time before the coordination between TiTCK and the Turkish customs began to improve, but today it is truly optimal.

As a matter of fact, government stakeholders at large have become extremely supporting toward R&D oriented activities, and particularly clinical trials, as part of the prioritization of the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries as strategic sectors for the Turkish economy in Turkey's 10^{th} Development Plan [2014-2018]. Government and regulatory stakeholders have done a great work to ensure the smooth development of the clinical trials sector, and Turkey's regulatory framework is now well aligned with those of our European counterparts.

You said that life sciences courier companies should focus on the difference they can make in the patients' lives – and not on their profit margin. Given you started your career outside the healthcare field, where does your utmost commitment to patient

centricity come from?

For anybody, contributing to alleviate pain and save lives obviously stands as a noble endeavor, but – above all – it echoes some hardships I had to overcome in my own life. In 2006, I survived a terrible car accident, after which I spent 45 critical days in intensive care and experienced 15 surgeries overall. I was also able to access life-saving medicines which were only available abroad; to put it bluntly, I experienced firsthand the life or death difference that on-time and on site medicines delivery can make for a patient in critical condition. When I was in intensive care, I required specific antibiotics which were not registered in Turkey; a friend of mine living in France purchased them on my behalf, and my father – a retired airlines captain – asked one of his friends to bring them back to Turkey on the next Paris-Istanbul flight. Within less than 30 hours I was able to receive critically needed antibiotics. Actually, we nowadays offer this service to our customers as part of On Board Carriage offering; it was not the case ten years ago but it saved my life.

Once I recovered, I found the great opportunity to represent one of the biggest multinational life sciences logistics company in Turkey. This was an incredible coincidence, and I decided to dedicate my “second life” to make contribution in the process of cure development that saves human life, regardless of the logistics challenges to overcome.

Moving forward, what are the objectives you want to reach within the next five years?

As being the only Turkish boutique specialty logistics company %100 dedicated to the biopharmaceutical and life sciences industries, we want to contribute to the strengthening of Turkey’s positioning as an efficient, reliable, and cost-competitive clinical trials destination. Our country’s R&D ecosystem has been completely overhauled over the past decade and multinational companies’ perception has significantly improved along the way, but some global players are still wary to perform complex trials in Turkey, especially when it comes to world-class, extremely expensive samples and products, for which companies do not want to take slightest risk with regards to their collection, management, and distribution. Regulatory, compliance, and logistics risks might have been real fifteen years ago, but it is no longer the case.

In the meantime, the ever-growing presence and success of multinational couriers, which cannot afford to ruin their global reputation because of their Turkish operations, prove to global trials investigators that they can no longer overlook Turkey as an R&D destination.

BL Turkey is a boutique 3PL company with an unrivaled understanding of the Turkish ecosystem, its regulations and main stakeholders. The industry experience in every key function area of supply chain management, time critical process management and lifesaving shipping organizations I have forged by working for and alongside global players for more than a decade ensures our company operates with the same quality standards as the leading life sciences companies globally.

As a local boutique firm, we cannot content ourselves with coming close to global competitors and merely meeting our customers' expectations – we must exceed them, in order to make a name for ourselves. This is the image I want to continue building and conveying in the coming years.

Any final message for our international readership?

I am grateful to operate in this sector and to be part of the patient's journey towards recovery. I invite all players in this industry to tirelessly strive to meet the highest standards and remain focus on patients' outcomes – more than our profits. In the logistics industry in general, consolidation has become the name of game; however, this should not apply to life sciences courier, because only tailor-made solutions can enable us to fulfill our mission during the lifesaving shipping organizations.

Whatever it takes to reach the patients and meet our SOPs must be done, regardless of the impact on our profit margin. This is how we work at BL Turkey. In other words, we serve with passion for creating a better life.

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