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Marieta Jiménez, president and general manager of Merck Spain, highlights her three top priorities: innovation, science and technology, and women's equality. Furthermore, she gives an overview of the need for better collaboration for long-term sustainably of the Spanish healthcare system and breaks down the role of the ClosingGap cluster to create Spanish equality.

As the general manager of Merck Spain, what are the top of your priorities?

I am a pharmacist by background and began my career in this capacity as a researcher. After a few years I was drawn in by the commercial sector which for me was more exciting, and until this point have worked in nearly every area, from market and sales to business development and business intelligence.

I then joined Merck four years ago and after one year was given the possibility of taking up the general manager role in Sweden. This was not only a different role, but I got to experience a new culture and it was a great opportunity to challenge myself as a leader. Sweden has a more open-minded culture, which was vastly different to the hierarchal system in Spain. This got me to rethink how I perform my operations every day and gave me time to take a step back and look how I want to contribute in my career and what needs to be on top of my agenda.

My first priority was innovation. Sweden is a country that facilitates entrepreneurship and has many start-ups as the people have an innovative mindset. When you look at the world of pharmaceuticals, companies are very innovative in R&D but are quite traditional in their commercial and business model. Therefore, we teamed up with a local company and set-up a Centre of Innovation to help catalyze innovative ideas and companies.

The second focus is on woman and equality. My priority is to bring equality to Spain, by taking all women's talent so we can show how including all woman can bring a breath of fresh air and impact society in a positive manner.

My third, and final, priority was science and technology. Merck is a company with 350 years of tradition, though our CEO, Belen Garijo, had transformed the company to focus in key areas, such as neurology, immunology, and immune-oncology.

Despite my clear objective to implement these three priorities, when I came to Spain, I was now managing 1000 staff with three factories and the three division of Merck; healthcare, life sciences, and performance materials. It is quite a complex structure, so my role was to ensure all departments and employees were working towards the same goals, while in the meantime aligning ourselves with our global targets and structure.

Have you been able to set up the Centre of Innovation in Spain?

We have been able to build this concept in Spain, and we do have greater resources to work with.

Our focus in this regard is based on internal and external pillars. Externally, we are working with two Spanish startups in neurology and fertility. Internally, we have an initiative called "Chase". This gives employees the chance to our forward ideas, and we then implement these concepts in due course. This not only helps create that entrepreneurial mindset the company needs but makes people feel a greater part of the Merck organization.

Do you believe Spain is properly valuing innovation?

This year we have been able to have two innovative drugs launch onto the market. Firstly, in June the market entry for Mavenclad (cladribrina), a tablet treatment for the degenerative neurological disease, multiple sclerosis, and in September, Bavencio (Avelumad), an immune-oncology therapy that treats a form case of cancer.

Despite the successful launches of these products by my team, I believe more must be done looking at long-term outcomes. All key stakeholders in Spain need to sit down around the same table and seriously discuss how we can work together to make innovation accessible in the long-term for all patients. The construction of a sustainable healthcare model will only become more difficult in the future as the population ages. These discussions must result in agreements that stand the test of time and remain in place, despite any changes at a commercial or political level. This collaboration is essential for Spain, and everyone involved should be taking up the challenge and responsibility sooner rather than later.

A way of bringing innovation to the country is through clinical research. How is Merck bringing this R&D to Spain?

In the last two years, we have signed agreements with two leading research institutes and two leading universities. We are conducting some 55 clinical studies and we must now work hard to convince HQ to invest even more into Spain's clinical operations, specifically phase-1 and phase-2 studies. This ability to lure investments will be supported by Merck Spain's ability to establish strong connections with even more research centres, universities, key opinion leaders and medical personnel etc, which will help us in the long-term lay the foundations for the company's long-term success in the market.

How important is Spain for Merck?

Spain's pharmaceutical market is one of the largest in Europe, and in terms of sales sits in the 4th position and is one of the fastest growing affiliates across the globe. Therefore, from a commercial standpoint, we have grown well over the last few years, though we still understand there is a lot of work to be done. Nevertheless, this all will be backed by the transformation to have employees feel more and more part of Merck, so we can all work towards the same targets.

You are very much involved inequality in the workplace. Could you elaborate on the ClosingGap initiative?

This is a cluster of 8 leading companies– Merck, BMW Group, Repsol, Vodafone, MAPFRE, Mahou San Miguel Solán de Cabras, Meliá Hotels International and L'Oréal – all working to transform the

situation for women in Spain. If we can demonstrate that there is a gap in the different sectors and can prove the contribution of woman can create positive economic growth, this will be the best way to help equality in the workplace.

Therefore, each company conducted a study in their respective areas, such as Merck for healthcare, Vodafone for digital etc. These are gaps that most people do not understand exist, as most people look at the blanket rule of comparing salaries. With 500 thousand Spanish employees within the 8 companies, we have the ability to put in place our own initiatives, but most importantly, we must use our data to discuss at the governmental level what changes should be made for greater woman's equality.

What is your objective for this cluster in the long term?

To close the gap between men and woman so society can benefit as a whole. Last November, we published the healthcare report indicating the implications of how equality within health would benefit the nation, and every two months the cluster will be publishing a new report on each business sector being studied. Nevertheless, this is all just data, and now we must work together to find solutions like this, in the end, will bring about the change required

Attracting investments from HQ is a competitive process. How do you ensure Spain lures their attention, so it remains a key market?

We must put in place the correct strategy, and we are discussing this with HQ. It has been a great year for Merck Spain and we must continue to build HQ's confidence in us to attract the investments we desire, such as what has been allocated already to our Tres Cantos production site. Building relationships with research institutes and universities, like has been done in the last year, will only ensure Spain remains a key to the company's international radar.

What are your long-term aspirations?

We want to be able to talk about how important Merck is within the arena of Spain and how we are key members of the change in the country, backed by the aforementioned pillars of innovation, science and technology, and women's equality.

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