

Jorge Ruiz Benecke - General Manager, AbbVie Romania



AbbVie is a remarkable organization, not only for its products but also for its focus on professional development, as well as its inclusive and diverse organizational culture

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Jorge Ruiz Benecke of AbbVie Romania outlines how the affiliate attained its leading position in the Romanian pharma market, the importance of agility in the decision-making process, and how he has fostered a culture of diversity, transparency, and inclusivity.

He also reveals how AbbVie is actively collaborating with national associations to create a more favourable environment for innovation adoption and raise the standard of care for Romanian patients.

Can you introduce yourself and give an overview of the roles and activities of AbbVie in Romania?

Originally from Guatemala, I have been GM of AbbVie SRL in Romania since November 2018 and have been with AbbVie since its inception in 2013. During these past seven years, I held various positions including global brand-team director and general manager in Finland.

AbbVie is a highly focused research-driven biopharmaceutical company. We are a company that takes on the toughest health challenges, and we proudly believe that we do more than treat diseases—we aim to make a remarkable impact on people's lives.

The vision of the company is research, education, and innovation in four main fields: virology, immunology, oncology and neuroscience. Within those areas, AbbVie drives education on improving the understanding and standard of care for patients living with highly debilitating,

chronic and sometimes, life-threatening diseases. The organization is constantly working to create solutions that go beyond treating the illness to have a positive impact on patients' lives, on societies—and on science itself. We are all patients at some point and so we strive for a healthier tomorrow for the benefit of all.

What have been your objectives moving from Finland and how have you progressed so far?

I started my international career with Abbott and was part of the spin-off that created AbbVie. When this happened in January of 2013, I was in global marketing, as the General Manager for the dermatology immunology franchise, and then relocated to Finland, as the GM of the Finnish affiliate in 2016.

Since November of 2018, I had the opportunity to move to Romania as General Manager of AbbVie SRL. Since then I have worked passionately together with the management team in elevating the affiliate capabilities and ensuring its continuous success. In major part, this means fostering open dialogues with key healthcare stakeholders to create value and build a solid foundation that helps elevate the healthcare standards for all Romanians.

Among some of the challenges that I faced while relocating to Romania was the highly dynamic market environment combined with its lack of business predictability.

How do you go about navigating such an unpredictable environment to ensure the patient receives the latest innovations?

In AbbVie we are committed to working towards a sustainable model that ensures timely access to innovation for the benefit of patients. We do this in many forms; one of the most important is to remain active and maintain an open dialogue with authorities and other stakeholders. These efforts help to better understand current challenges and improving timely access to innovation. As a proud member of the board of the Romanian Association of Innovation Medicines Manufacturers (ARPIM) and vice president of the Local American Working Group (LAWG), alongside other members, we aim to improve the environment and raise Romanian healthcare standards for all citizens to EU level. Despite the unpredictability of the environment, I found that there are good intentions and opportunities to collaborate. I'm a firm believer that through a collective effort, significant changes can be achieved in Romania. Hence, AbbVie is actively engaged in discussions to find solutions to

improve timely access to innovation for Romanian patients.

In what therapeutic areas is AbbVie present in Romania?

AbbVie is a strong player in immunology, advanced Parkinson's disease, virology, and oncology (Haematology). Oncology is a very competitive field in which the company has a strong footprint worldwide, and the same can be said in Romania. Additionally, we expect most of the growth to come from innovation in immunology.

AbbVie has also been an active partner in the national HCV program. It collaborated with authorities during these past 5 years towards the vision of eliminating this disease. At present we can comment that together with the scientific societies, the authorities and other key healthcare stakeholders we have cured more than 20,000 people in Romania. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), elimination entails curing 75 percent of the population, and this threshold is on track to be achieved by 2030.

Are there any innovations that you are planning to launch this year?

Last year, EMA approved an IL23 psoriasis product that has proven to be superior to some of the current treatments in the market. This is due to its efficacy and long-lasting effects. Within the next three years, we are planning to launch other products in immunology. In the pipeline, other areas will benefit from innovation, but the approval process is a factor to take into consideration.

What constitutes a good product launch for AbbVie in Romania?

For AbbVie, broad and timely access of patients to innovation constitutes a good launch, which frequently also results in a remarkable impact on a patients' life. This requires a careful balance between marketing efforts, resources and good coordination with the authorities. Although the procedures to obtain a cost-effective price and HTA approval processes are clearly defined, the timelines of these procedures are regularly not respected.

We strongly believe that a healthier society contributes to economic growth. By focusing on the diagnosis, prevention and early access to treatment we may not only mitigate the chance of developing a serious chronic disease, but also reduce the economic burden of them.

How do you explain Romania's seven-year life expectancy gap with the European average?

A myriad of factors may contribute to this gap, of which limited general preventive and health education, local dietary and exercise customs and limited or delayed access to innovation could play a significant role. Additionally, Romania's healthcare system is underfunded when compared to the rest of its European counterparts. While Romania's health expenditure is between 4 to 5 percent of GDP, in Europe it is closer to 10 percent. Adequate allocation of budget, prioritizing early detection may maximize the chances of providing the best therapy to patients and ensure that they are healthier longer.

Also, the lengthy approval process for innovation needs to be considered, as new products take an additional 2.4 years on average to reach Romanian patients after it has been approved by EMA.

What are some of the solutions that have been put forward by innovators to improve early access in the country?

In the trade association, we are collaborating with the authorities in finding alternative sources of funding and proposing a change in the pricing methodology. The international reference pricing is set to the lowest of 12 European countries and is one of the causes why medicines are removed from the market. This is detrimental to patients, as some of them do not have an alternative. Furthermore, the capping of the health budget triggers huge efforts for companies to maintain the balance, as a higher consumption translates into a higher clawback tax.

How does AbbVie differentiate itself as the partner of choice in such a difficult environment?

We are launching a company reputational study to analyse the different areas in which AbbVie stands out and where it can improve itself. The authorities are open to having a dialogue and there are open channels of communication with the company individually as well as through the associations. There is a willingness to create value and to elevate the healthcare model of Romania to EU standards.

What magic dust did you bring to the organisation that saw the affiliate recognized as “The Best Place to Work” in Romania?

Due to its history, Romania still follows hierarchical structures and mentality, which I challenged through my leadership style, focusing on inclusiveness and transparency. These are strong attributes in the Finnish culture, and I used them here to augment velocity. From the first day, I explained to all AbbVie employees that the management team was here to serve them, to facilitate and reinforce their work effectiveness and to create value. By injecting a sense of empowerment and trust into the middle management, the organisation started taking faster decisions. This had also a positive effect on the spirit of employees and boosted their confidence. I try to serve by example, go into the field, and meet with stakeholders.

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Do you see any room for growth for AbbVie in the market?

AbbVie is increasing its investment in Romania as the aim is to stay in the long run. It has launched a new entity to establish a wholesaler position in Romania and commercialise its medicines through the local distributors.

To what factors do you attribute the success of AbbVie, as the leading company in the market for 2019?

A significant part of this success is related to the passionate and talented employees that work in AbbVie. Together we built a culture that was recognized across all industries in Romania, when AbbVie was awarded “Best Place To Work in 2019”. This was possible by reinforcing the AbbVie culture in the affiliate. The management team cemented the company’s purpose, enhanced transparency, and focused on the development of employees.

We also reinforced our passion to work with our patients’ interests in mind, striving to offer them hope, by either providing a cure for their diseases or a chance to live a more normal life.

As the GM, I have the responsibility to foster an environment for the employees to express freely “speak out”, feel safe, experience new challenges and develop. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the business, and in this case, take care of the patients.

How are you planning on remaining one of the top pharmaceutical companies in Romania in 2020?

We will continue to reinforce the culture and inject agility by empowering our people at all levels, so they can make the best decisions timely. AbbVie has a strong pipeline and is very active in clinical trials in Romania. We believe that this will result in a bright future for the AbbVie Romania affiliate.

What are your objectives for 2020?

I want to dive deeper into the Romania culture as there is still so much to discover. The Romanian people are very warm and welcoming with me and my family and I look forward to becoming more closely acquainted with this country. It is safe, progressive, growing and has the potential of being a leading society in the future.

What would your advice be to a fresh GM coming to Romania for the first time?

Be prepared to learn a lot about the “roller coaster” type of environment, the culture and trust your people as they are there to guide you and help you be agile. It is a market with a stronger entrepreneurial mindset than most of the developed European countries, which is a testament to the potential and opportunities that the country has to offer.

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