

Karel Van De Sompel - Country Manager, Pfizer Belgium & Luxembourg



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Karel Van De Sompel, country manager of Pfizer in Belgium and Luxembourg and chairman of Pharma.be, highlights the key changes he sees in today's pharma market which revolve around the increasing trend of personalized medicine, digitalization, big healthcare data, and stakeholder partnerships. Additionally, Van De Sompel also elaborates on Pfizer's strategic positioning within the country's healthcare ecosystem and the significance that Belgium holds for the company's global operations.

Please introduce the scope of your role as the country head of Pfizer and chairman of Pharma.be.

As the general manager of Belgium and Luxembourg, I represent Pfizer to the outside world. I also make sure that all our different departments (which we call "Business Units") are aligned with the general strategy of the company. I am myself directly managing one of them: the Internal Medicine Unit. From a company perspective, our local headquarters are driving the industry debate at the local country level. In my case specifically, I am also creating this dialogue from the association angle as chair of the board of Pharma.be. This means I have to represent the voice of both of these organizations at large when communicating with local stakeholders.

The way that the country manager position has evolved is representative of how the pharma industry is changing. As an industry it has become clear that we must lead the conversation with authorities because if we want to help shape healthcare policy in collaboration with stakeholders it cannot be done from an ivory tower.

What key trends would you highlight as shaping Belgium's pharma market today?

Belgium is a unique country where we are currently facing an unstable political environment. From an industry perspective, our number one demand would be to have a stable government. This is a common denominator that would give predictability not only to pharma, but all industries, citizens, and other stakeholders in the country.

Furthermore, we would also like to see a government that is ambitious in regard to embracing innovation and ensuring that breakthrough therapies can reach patients faster. On the other hand, we also need ambition from the government to capitalize on one of the biggest assets that Belgium has - healthcare data. If we are able to mine this data, we would be able to make the healthcare system more efficient and more patient-focused. As an industry, one of our priorities with the government of today and tomorrow should be to ensure we can unlock the value of big HC data. Belgium is currently perceived as a pharma hub, but we should also be seen in the future as a leader in digital healthcare data.

What opportunities exist for the industry to be a partner to the health authorities in ensuring access to innovation without having costs get out of hand?

In my role as chairman of Pharma.be and together with its board of directors, we are trying to drive policies that facilitate access to data and connect all the databases which we have in Belgium. The latter may be a bit out of our control but it is too crucial of a success factor not to address. There is no lack of data but the key to success will be making the data pools speak to each other. The value that data has will be important for society but even greater from an industrial perspective as the breakthroughs which will be introduced in the future will be very different from what has been in the past.

We are moving from population-based medicine to more personalized health solutions. Medicine as we know it is evolving from symptomatic treatments to potential cures for certain diseases. This innovation will come at a cost; therefore, we need real-world evidence in order to prove the value

we are bringing. This will be much more difficult to do than in the past. If we cannot do this, it will be very difficult to find the right pricing and reimbursement structures. From a patient perspective, this will be a very exciting time with groundbreaking developments as we can already see with the rise of immunotherapies.

In the past, the industry might have had the mindset that it “owns” innovation. However, today we can see the trend towards open innovation. This means companies seeking collaborations with academic institutions and research centres to quicken the development of innovation. Creating this value is crucial for the industry, authorities, researchers, the medical community, and ultimately the patients.

Transparency is a key issue for the authorities as well as we see with the rise of horizon scanning programs. To what extent can the industry be a partner to the new Belgian government in this sense?

Horizon scanning is absolutely key as we both need to be prepared for the future. For the authorities, having this predictability will be important for making healthier forecasts for their budgets and priorities. Once the future is made clear, it will be easier to discuss together the framework in which we can operate.

As we can see with Minister De Block’s Pact for the Future, this has been incredibly helpful in creating predictability – though with a tight budgetary framework – and implementing policy measures to ease the access to innovation for our patients by facilitating reimbursement procedures. In addition, it took important steps in transparency and ethicality from the authority perspective. With a new government, we are as an industry committed to creating a new agreement to continue this relationship which was centred around a common focus on patient access.

Belgium as a country is already well equipped to embrace the evolving nature of the innovation which will come. Now we must create a culture of consultation and compromise in the sense of a win-win agreement between two partners who have respect for each other.

On a company note, please introduce the scope & scale of Pfizer’s footprint in BeLux.

We are proud of the fact that 68 years ago Pfizer decided to set up its first affiliate outside of the US here in Belgium. Since then, our footprint has increased dramatically. We employ about 3400 people, a number which is growing and represents about 20 percent of our European talent pool. This is across four operational sites in Belgium.

In Puurs, we have a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility specialized in producing and packaging a vast majority of Pfizer's sterile hospital injectables and vaccines. As part of Pfizer's partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, we supply our vaccines to 49 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and parts of Europe at an affordable price to improve access to quality health care.

Next, roughly two-thirds of Pfizer's global supply chain passes through our logistics centre in Zaventem. Belgium is, in fact, a global hub for Pfizer's pharma business and we utilize air, land, and sea to deliver our products to 172 countries worldwide.

Coming closer to patients, Belgium is home to one of Pfizer's two Phase I clinical trial units. This is where we test for the first time in humans our most promising medicines under development. We are very proud of this asset as there are very few companies that have Phase I units in connection with academic institutions in Belgium.

Last but not least, our health hub in Ixelles focuses on regulatory, reimbursement, and marketing frameworks. Overall, Pfizer has an enormous footprint in Belgium and generates EUR 2.6 billion in added value to the local economy.

Why is Belgium such an ideal location to have such a significant contribution of added value investments?

Belgium offers many assets that influence the final decision of a company to invest in our country. While labour costs are not a competitive point, the value that Belgium brings balances out this factor. Furthermore, the central, "heart of Europe", location of Belgium is another factor that plays into the country's competitiveness. In Puurs for example, Pfizer has invested over EUR 400 million in the site over the past five years.

Belgium also has a significant position in attracting clinical trials, also beyond Phase I, thanks to our many top-notch academic centres and hospitals. Moreover, there is a willingness to operate in an open innovation environment which is very characteristic of the country. As a patient, this is very exciting because it means they often have first access to the newest innovation.

This competitive environment creates a responsibility from both the industry and authorities to maintain this position. Belgium is second in terms of clinical trials per capita in Europe which is excellent, but we must keep it so. From an industrial investment perspective, it is also crucial that the new government protects this ecosystem.

As we spoke about, acting as a partner to a country goes beyond just selling drugs. In what ways is Pfizer investing and playing an active role in Belgium's life science ecosystem development through partnerships with organizations like Imec.istart?

Imec.istart is an ideal platform for Pfizer to partner with. Together we are trying to identify the startups which are developing concepts that would be beneficial to the patient problems we face. Pfizer gives its expertise to these companies to understand the problem-setting from a pharmaceutical industry or patient perspective in order to accelerate the implementation of concrete solutions. Also, in the same vein, we recently organized the first patient hackathon: we asked patients not only to share their experience but also to contribute actively to creating solutions for the problems they are facing every day. Together with many health care professionals and patients associations we gladly shared our expertise and our network to try improve patients' lives. Here again, partnerships are key.

On a more personal note, what key learnings have you gained throughout your career to be a successful country manager?

This has all been a learning experience and I am very lucky to have been able to work in both smaller and larger countries across European and international settings. I have worked in operations, strategy, marketing, and am now leading an organisation at a country level. I also believe the way I have approached my roles has also adapted to the changing paradigm of healthcare. 15 years ago, the industry was very internally focused, working to develop products and push them into the hands of patients. Since then we have moved into an era where we look at our medicines as solutions for patients with potential added services built around them. For example, embracing the digital wave and using data as an enabler to drive this change.

The biggest insight I have gained from my career is the need to interact with stakeholders, whether they be physicians, pharmacists, and now as a country manager, the government and other stakeholders as well. In order to shape policies that matter we need to understand patients'

problems and work together to resolve them. If we want to stay relevant in the future, we need to reach out, collaborate, and be a partner – something that cannot be done just sitting in the office.

With a long-term vision, what will you expect the Pfizer of the future to look like?

Pfizer will continue to be a leading company bringing breakthroughs that change patient lives. While the way we carry out this mission may change, it is what we do now and what we will do in the future as well. We believe in the core of what we do and will focus on being innovative, collaborative, and responsible. Innovation and sustainability go hand in hand – we cannot have one without the other.

Karel, you have been with Pfizer since you entered the pharma industry over 30 years ago. What has kept you so loyal to the company?

The culture of Pfizer has inspired me since the beginning of my career. At the time that I was moving to Canada with Pfizer, I also had the opportunity to start working for another Pharma company in Switzerland. The reason I chose to stay with Pfizer is that I have continuously been fulfilled by the culture of the company in all the countries it took me to: Canada, Germany, the UK, and Belgium.

The biggest asset we have in the company along with our health solutions is our employees. Our team is one of the most passionate in the industry, driving the company, and we put a high priority on taking care of all of them.

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