Sabine Bruckner – Country Manager, Pfizer Switzerland



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Pfizer Switzerland's Sabine Bruckner discusses Switzerland's historic and continuing importance to Pfizer, vaccine development and uptake, and the significant benefits of building a diverse leadership team.

How did you come into the role of country manager at Pfizer Switzerland at the beginning of 2020?

I am an Austrian national with a background in economics and have always worked in the healthcare sector. I am truly passionate about the pharmaceutical industry and the mission to improve patients' lives. Having started my career in Pfizer Switzerland's finance department more than 11 years ago, I have since taken on growing responsibilities both as a leader, and also beyond Switzerland.

This includes leading the Eastern Europe Finance cluster, where I was able to work with around 100 talents from different markets. This was an amazing time and allowed me to build and create diverse teams and gain additional leadership experience.

I then took on the role of Finance Partner at Pfizer's Inflammation & Immunology Unit, covering Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Working in a regional team, being involved in strategic projects gave me insights into the different healthcare systems, not only in Switzerland, but across Europe, and allowed me to learn about and from different cultures.

During this time, I had the privilege to work closely with some of our company's most inspiring leaders over the past years, whose mentoring and advice I benefited from a lot.

With this experience I felt well equipped to lead the Swiss organisation as a country manager when the opportunity came up at the beginning of 2020.

What is different now and very exciting is the responsibility of being an external ambassador for Pfizer and participating more fully in leading external conversations. I aim to speak on behalf of our patients and our industry to ensure a common understanding of what is needed to bring innovative therapies to the market.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted Pfizer Switzerland and your recent entry into the affiliate as Europe went into confinement?

COVID-19 has had a major impact, particularly on the implementation of my very well prepared 90 days plan! My priorities shifted from day one. The responsibility of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of my colleagues weighed heavily on my mind and that very quickly became priority number one. It was so important to remain fully operational all the time delivering our products – fulfilling our purpose of serving patients.

Our teams did an amazing job of ensuring the continuity of the business while our offices shut down at the same time. The burden on healthcare workers was more intense than ever, so some colleagues with medical backgrounds volunteered to step in to take on frontline medical work, with others supporting by covering their tasks in the organisation.

I am privileged to be surrounded by supportive colleagues, many of whom put forward completely new and innovative ideas on how to work together, not just within our organization but also with customers. It was great to see how successfully we were using digital tools to stay connected.

We learnt a lot during the pandemic situation, and I did my best to facilitate new ways of working that fit with every colleague's individual situation. Our global leadership team has been very responsive to feedback from the markets on what was working well and mindful of country specifics.

There are challenges and opportunities in every situation and, while there is no doubt that COVID-19 is challenging for all of us, it also creates a lot of learning opportunities. For example, in August we held a fully virtual conference, involving all our 200+ Swiss employees, which worked really

well.

How important can Switzerland, as a mid-sized European country with a population of only 8.5 million, really be to Pfizer?

Historically, Pfizer's successes have always been linked to Switzerland. The company was founded in 1849 by two Swabian citizens – Charles Pfizer and his cousin Charles Erhart – and today, Switzerland's strong focus on R&D is of crucial importance to our overall goal of developing innovative medicines. Switzerland is the top-ranking country on this year's World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)'s Global Innovation Index (GII) and, as a successful research nation with a lot of high-ranking universities, we have great opportunities here to collaborate with the public sector in developing innovative medicines and carrying out clinical research.

Due to its high engagement in R&D, Switzerland is also an important place for biotechnology companies which we can collaborate with. In 2015, Pfizer acquired Redvax, a spin-off from privately held Swiss biopharmaceutical company Redbiotec AG, and in 2019 we struck a deal for Basel-based biotech Therachon.

Vaccines are part of Pfizer's portfolio and clinical trials for a COVID-19 vaccine are currently underway. How widely accepted are vaccines in Switzerland and how do you anticipate a possible uptake for a COVID-19 vaccine?

Switzerland's rates of vaccination are not as good as they could be, and more needs to be done about prevention. Switzerland spends just two percent of its healthcare budget on prevention, and vaccines account for an even smaller percentage of this amount. This may be one reason for the generally lower uptake of vaccines compared to other countries, even though most recommended vaccines are covered by statutory health insurance. If or how this vaccine hesitancy will affect a possible uptake for a COVID-19 vaccine is written in the stars. We are sure that science, after all, will win. But the decision for or against a vaccination is very personal.

Switzerland is not doing as well as other developed nations in relation to the periods of time between drug approval and reimbursement of medicines for patients. What is Pfizer doing to ensure patients are able to access medicines quickly?

We have started good dialogues with stakeholders on ensuring patients have access to innovative medicines from day zero. Today, vaccines take more than two years to reach patients after being approved by Swiss regulators, because the current process is complex and takes time. We need to work together with the regulators to find a way to make this process faster.

For vaccines, as one of the world's leading vaccine development companies, we are working with regulatory agencies to ensure that once a vaccine is approved it can enter the market quickly. We are not only looking at this from a COVID-19 perspective. We need to look beyond the crisis because, after clean water, vaccinations have saved more lives than any other public health intervention.

How important is diversity to Pfizer Switzerland and what is the impact of a diverse team on your operations?

Diversity is a key element of the Pfizer culture and crucial for any business. Leading and working within diverse teams over many years now I am fully convinced that diverse teams are more successful in balancing between being overly cautious and blindly risk-seeking and look at things from different angles. Learning from each other in the end they make better decisions.

A recent DOIT-smart / Gender Diversity Consulting survey placed Pfizer Switzerland as the second-best company in the entire country in terms of the representation of women in leadership. 57 percent of our executive board are women, which gives a strong signal as to how important equity is to Pfizer. I am confident that in this environment, we will attract diverse, high performing talent with the skillset and mindset needed to serve our patients in the best way possible.

What leadership impact would you like to see within Pfizer Switzerland as you move forward into your role?

I believe that leadership can only be as good as the whole team. The biggest impact I can wish for is that I enable my team to thrive for our purpose every single day: to create breakthroughs that change patients' lives.

We want to be more innovative but also more patient-focused – even more so than we were in the past. To achieve this, our four core values – COURAGE, EXCELLENCE, EQUITY and JOY – determine how we interact with each other across teams and across countries.

In a recent internal survey, 100 percent of our colleagues in Switzerland said that they feel that those four core values are the right values going forward. As a country manager, this is the strongest support I can get. Seeing the whole team committed to the same values makes me believe that we will successfully shape the future together.

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