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The capabilities that we have built for UPS healthcare as a result of the pandemic and the lessons learned will allow us to build a stronger and more sustainable future, creating long term value for the forthcoming delivery of new drugs and biologics

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UPS APAC's Bee Lim describes how the logistics giant responded to the unprecedented challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic, the trends that the pandemic has accelerated in the region, and the talent profiles that UPS is looking for to ensure future success.

How have UPS Healthcare APAC's operations been affected since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The pandemic has impacted every facet of life and the effects have noticeably rippled throughout the logistics industry. At the time and up until now, half the capacity in air cargo disappeared. It took the industry by surprise, but thanks to the capabilities that UPS has been building, we have been prepared to adapt and respond rapidly. For the UPS team globally, we've had a front-row seat as things developed and unfolded.

In the early days of the pandemic, UPS participated in the humanitarian relief effort in China, bringing PPE, protective gear and more than two million masks to the country. As China stabilised, the business shifted focus to supply people in other markets such as Singapore with the equipment necessary to start working from home and ensure the economy was able to continue.

Furthermore, UPS supported the movement globally of all supplies necessary in the fight against the virus, including COVID test kits, ventilators, and PPE. At present, the focus is on the movement of vaccines, most recently involving UPS's delivery of South Korea's first Pfizer-BioNTech's ultra-cold vaccines. We continue to move these, and we're ready to move even more. Additionally, in response to the COVID-19 surge in India, [the UPS Foundation has recently announced a USD one million commitment](#) for emergency funding, in-kind transportation movements, and technical expertise.

This response, despite the significant challenges that we faced, demonstrates the level of flexibility and resilience of the UPS global network and team. We have built strong capabilities in UPS Healthcare with unmatched cold-chain and logistics expertise and are able to support across the healthcare continuum, from clinical development to commercial product.

What were the areas of the business that needed to be scaled up in the past year?

UPS has extended its healthcare capabilities primarily through investments in cold-chain and pharmaceuticals. The most important step was expanding for the enormous capacity required for mRNA vaccines, particularly being able to stock, safely store, and manage the global supply chain of vaccines that need to be kept at ultra-cold temperatures. Building on our healthcare platform globally and in Asia Pacific, we invested in a freezer farm in our Singapore distribution centre to support their regional and global distribution.

The distribution centre is integrated into our global networks for transportation, allowing UPS to connect all points within its network, allowing us to drive through same level of quality and consistency to support global transportation, supplies and capabilities on a day-to-day basis. Building this vaccine distribution, including the establishment of pharmaceutical and vaccine communities, will enable us to move more vaccines and biologics in the future.

What challenges does UPS face with cold chain distribution in APAC?

The vaccines, as with other drug substances, are extremely fragile and temperature-sensitive. If there is a temperature deviation, the whole batch must be destroyed. Extensive quality and regulatory requirements are needed, therefore full documentation, security and chain of custody must be presented for our clients. A foolproof contingency plan must also be put in place because a batch can cost millions of dollars and if anything goes wrong, the entire batch and days of

production are wasted.

The key is ensuring the supply chain, and the solutions that support it, are robust and appropriate for the end destination. It is challenging to coordinate various parties to ensure that at no point in the distribution is the integrity of the product compromised. It all needs to come together as a total solution. For example, the transport of vaccines starts with setting up our freezer farm before moving to find the right transport solutions that would not fail. The doses then need to be well protected in transit to the dosing site with the most appropriate temperature protection systems, including the shippers that will be needed to support the safety and viability of these vaccines.

What trends has the pandemic accelerated in the supply chain and logistics industry?

We have seen unprecedented collaboration as private and public partnerships came together with a recognition of the widespread participation required to solve this global problem. The capabilities that we have built for UPS healthcare as a result of the pandemic and the lessons learned will allow us to build a stronger and more sustainable future, creating long term value for the forthcoming delivery of new drugs and biologics.

From a UPS standpoint, we have set up a global vaccine command centre to support the distribution of vaccines. This command centre gives us full visibility of all the vaccine shipments that we have in the network. It is highly interactive and allows us to coordinate these shipments and mitigate any risks allowing us to intervene immediately. This capability is needed not only for the shipment of vaccines but will be useful in the future for biologics and critical medical supplies that are needed on an urgent basis for lifesaving purposes.

Is UPS planning to adopt a more direct B2C approach in its customer interactions?

From our perspective, the pandemic has propelled certain trends in some areas of healthcare. One example, which is moving at a faster pace than expected, is home healthcare and telemedicine, with some clinical trials occurring in the home. On the other end are large manufacturing and supplies which will continue to be worked at a B2B level. A balance between the methods is required for our customers to reach their patients both in traditional healthcare settings such as the hospital or waiting at home for medication. Therefore, the aim is to make sure we connect end-to-end to support B2B while simultaneously enabling B2C.

Why choose Singapore as a hub for APAC?

Singapore is truly a biopolis and a vital transit location for healthcare products, intermediates, and finished goods. At the same time, Singapore is a base of R&D and has also been focused on diseases important to the Asia region. Singapore also houses many sophisticated manufacturers crucial to the entire global supply chain.

To this end, Singapore acts as a key location for UPS in supporting our customers. This extends beyond simply transportation to include the management of regional distribution centres, support for the global supply chain for manufacturing, as well as enabling our customers to innovate and optimize.

UPS is part of the ecosystem here in Singapore and there is healthy collaboration such as the Pharma@Changi initiative. Through the pandemic, we got together to form the Changi Ready Task Force to be as ready as possible by removing as many barriers as possible to support the expected rush of vaccines.

In terms of finished goods, the distribution of medical devices for our clients such as kits that go directly into critical care or operating theatres for patients needing urgent surgery is a top priority. Consequently, the regional distribution centre must have the capacity to ship these products to their destination within Asia as seamlessly as possible.

What will UPS's collaboration model look like in the future?

At UPS, we're looking to be better, not bigger. UPS Healthcare will continue to focus on ensuring that we drive quality and deliver on the needs of our patients. In terms of collaborating with our customers in the future, we are focused on working together to deliver the required end-to-end solutions. Specifically, this means building a robust cold-chain capability globally, regardless of whether it is in the front end manufacturing, or right at the end of the distribution of a final product.

What are the talent profiles you look for to perform the company's vital services?

We are looking for people who have a deep understanding of the healthcare industry, knowing what it means to manage biologics, pharmaceuticals, and highly complex medical devices, as well as having a robust understanding of logistics.

While finding this unique profile can be a challenge, UPS has a culture of promoting from within, continuously training our team. Whenever we see an opportunity for developing talent, we will create the opportunity to allow that growth and establish the training elements needed to upskill our team. One recent example is training some of our UPS veterans to both handle the ultra-cold vaccines and be able to train other team members as the distribution and demand increased.

What have you learned over both the past year and your 10 years of experience with UPS?

One aspect that has been central to my learning at UPS is that the customer comes first. Being quality-focused and patient-driven motivates both myself and the team, and we are guided by UPS's tenets of innovation, agility, and flexibility. Furthermore, I have realized the benefit of taking on challenges as they come and having the humility to be open to learning more.

Over the past year, we have been forced to make decisions quickly, while continuing to pursue our stakeholder needs of quality and service. We have optimized and compressed the deployment of resources. Notably, the deployment of manpower in respect to social distancing, while maintaining service and moderating the availability of critical customer supplies. This was achieved through introducing split shifts and revising our workflows without compromising the expected output for our customers, patients, and business.

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