

# László Svinger - VP & MD, 3M Middle East & Africa

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*3M, an American multinational conglomerate, has been in the limelight since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic primarily as one of the leading manufacturers of personal protective equipment. Its Vice-President and Managing Director for Middle East and Africa [MEA], László Svinger showcases the company's surprisingly diverse offering as a healthcare solutions provider in the MEA region. The interview also highlights how 70 years of presence in the region has helped in establishing 3M as a partner of choice for the healthcare industry. Svinger also shares his insights on the future of the Saudi economy including 3M's health information systems that are already helping doctors with artificial intelligence solutions.*

**Can you begin by briefly introducing your career, multiple years of experience in healthcare, and your main responsibilities as VP and managing director for 3M in the Middle East and Africa?**

I joined 3M Industrial Business Group 14 years ago in Hungary. A year later, I was appointed to lead 3M Hungary's Healthcare Business Group. In 2012, After three successful years, I was offered a new position in Russia to lead what was at the time the largest healthcare business for 3M in the Central and Eastern Europe region. In four years leading the business, we successfully learned, adapted to and navigated a quite dynamic environment.

My next assignment took me, along with my family to the Middle East, based in Dubai, to be responsible for 3M's healthcare business operations across Central and Eastern Europe, Middle East, and Africa.

I had the responsibility of leading every detail of the operations on the ground. For 3M, the MEA region spans from Pakistan to South Africa; it is a large and diverse region that reinforced my ability to manage challenging regions.

This June, I had the privilege of being appointed Vice-President and Managing Director for the Middle East and Africa Region.

**When consumers think about 3M, they might link it to your industrial products but how important is healthcare to the group? What is your footprint in the sector?**

3M Healthcare is critically important for 3M, especially in the Middle East and Africa. It is present in six major sectors. The largest is our Medical Solutions division through which we offer groundbreaking medical products focussed around Patient Preparation, Patient Management as well as Specialised Wound healing products. We combine these solutions and expertise to improve patient outcomes, reduce the risk of complications and the cost of care. It also includes Health Information Systems Division, which is particularly important in this region as it offers software and services that deliver accurate health information and payment systems that enable better clinical outcomes.

Another very important division within healthcare is the Oral Care Division which is centred around innovative dental and orthodontic solutions that help simplify procedures. 3M Healthcare, through our Food Safety Division, also offers testing solutions that protect consumers in a sustainable way; Our Medical Device Components produces films and membranes that enable breakthrough innovations; and our Separation and Purification Division helps companies speed up the manufacturing process, lowering costs of pharmaceutical products.

As you can see, even within Healthcare we have a very diverse offering for healthcare companies and consumers.

In the industry, we are also present through our Worker Health & Safety Protective Equipment Products including respirators and medical masks. Most recently, 3M has been helping the world respond to COVID-19 by providing N95 respirators and medical masks to health care and frontline workers. We are also present through our Consumer personal healthcare, which offers stems from

Braces & Support, First aid & Graduated compression legwear and respirators and face masks.

**How many people work in the 3M MEA organization?**

We have a well-established organization across the Middle East and Africa, currently employing around 600 people. 250 in South Africa and the rest in the Middle East with major hubs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

**How well established is 3M in the Middle East, what momentum do you have in healthcare, and what are the objectives outlined to you by the global organization?**

Our presence here dates back almost seven decades after our first office opened in South Africa in 1953; we will be celebrating 70 years in 2023. The company's first offices in the Middle East were opened in the early 1970s, starting with a representative office in Lebanon and a full-fledged office in the UAE.

The next major milestone was in 1984 when 3M products reached the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Prior, 3M Gulf used to oversee Saudi Operations. Today, in Saudi, we provide products and services to our customers and the Saudi market across diverse industry sectors through our subsidiary, 3M Arabia, which includes Customer Experience Centers and a Manufacturing plant.

We also have two manufacturing plants located in Pakistan and South Africa, which gives us quite a unique footprint in the markets we operate in.

We aim to thrive in all markets across the region, given the current context but healthcare in Saudi is clearly one of our main priorities. Beyond being very aligned to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, 3M is well-placed to help healthcare providers get closer to their patients.

**One of the major components of Saudi's Vision 2030 is a localization strategy. Such strategies are nothing new for American and European companies operating in different geographies but nonetheless have an impact on your investments. What is your view on localization, given the fact that 3M already has a manufacturing plant in Saudi?**

We strive to bring relevance and value to every geography through our local presence; the same approach applies to the Kingdom. In Saudi Arabia, the localization framework is about developing a

solid educational base for all citizens, instilling values from an early age to prepare its citizens for the future of the local and global labor market. This is great because Vision 2030 is also focused on: upskilling citizens by providing lifelong learning opportunities, supporting innovation and instilling an entrepreneurial culture that can help Saudi be competitive in the long run.

Another way 3M is aligning with Vision 2030 is by investing in state-of-the-art equipment for its customer innovation centres and customer experience centres. For example, we have 30 dental chairs and an operating room in the place where we host educational healthcare forums and seminars.

The company has conducted over 110 customer events with an average of 450 doctors each since 2013 and helped another 2,500 at external training sessions. We are not only working to localize manufacturing but also actively driving knowledge transfer for local professionals; the goal is to help them comply with the global standards, requirements, and up-to-date techniques to treat patients.

We are definitely keen on finding and attracting the Kingdom's best local talents. The largest investment from this perspective went into our Health Information System division where we hired a significant amount of Saudi talent, providing them with the necessary digitalization and artificial intelligence know-how.

**As a product and service provider for hospitals and healthcare professionals, how did the pandemic change 3M's priorities for that segment?**

The pandemic has been a stress test for the entire healthcare industry. As I mentioned earlier, the main objective of 3M is to help healthcare providers, do what they do best, caring for patients and improving lives.

At the time, access, quality & efficiency of health services via Health Information was truly critical. A major technological shift was necessary to completely change the patient-physician interaction. We observed that 3M's health information systems, where digital data is put to efficient use via artificial intelligence through what we call the 3M M\*Modal, improves clinical workflows since healthcare professionals spend nearly half of their time doing administrative tasks as their AI-based virtual assistant takes over. These types of solution can dramatically improve the efficiency of the healthcare system, creating better outcomes.

AI is not the only segment that has received attention. At 3M we started implementing different technologies in multiple clients across the middle east region, aiming to improve the workflow for the healthcare workers and play a vital role in the healthcare digital transformation in the region.

**What has been the response from Saudi doctors and healthcare practitioners to your AI-powered solution?**

It has been a global launch, but Saudi has been one of the early adopters. The receptiveness to innovation in Saudi is remarkable. We want to be the Kingdom's partner for breakthrough technologies.

One question that remains is how the systems will evolve but, for the time being, we are focused on executing a good launch so that the Kingdom can take advantage of our solutions.

**Besides complex and high-tech products such as 3M M\*Modal, the company also produces the basic yet important personal protective equipment (PPE) that at moments was scarce in many countries. How was your supply chain affected?**

COVID-19 presented multiple challenges, 3M's role extended way beyond PPE provision; our health information systems allowed us to help with the so-called clinical risk groups, providing proactive identification of high-risk patients.

For instance, when the PPE demand exceeded supply all around the world, we continued to increase our manufacturing capacity to be able to meet demands for frontline workers and the general public.

The pandemic has revealed the consequences on supply chains when healthcare systems are stretched to the limit.

**The pandemic forced the industry to collaborate with each other, with governments, and with other institutions. How did 3M tackle that collaborative approach?**

The future of healthcare depends on collaboration. 3M has been the partner for innovative solutions during the pandemic. Early in the outbreak leaders realized that the fight against COVID-19 required collaboration with other companies and organizations.

Taking respirators as an example, we provided expertise in personal safety equipment, technology, and regulatory requirements to help the Ford Motor Company rapidly design its PAPR respirators. We also partnered with engine manufacturers to increase the production of high-efficiency particle filters.

In the Middle East, we are collaborating with King's College in the United Arab Emirates and Nissha Medical Technologies to develop face shields with antifog capabilities.

In Saudi Arabia, there is the possibility of greater contributions as well as identifying potential future areas of collaboration with the different stakeholders.

**As an agile company, what sort of people are you looking to attract in the MEA region?**

3M is very well established and regarded as a top employer in this region. In my VP and MD capacity, I am focusing on positioning 3M MEA as one of the most diverse, inclusive, and innovative enterprises in the region.

The high competition for talent is helping us improve as an organization. The opening of new affiliates and manufacturing plants by pharma companies in Saudi does present a battle for the best talent, but it also opens opportunities to collaborate and provide them with our solutions such as biofiltration which enables them to run tests and product development.

**How do you foresee the future of the markets in the region and business opportunities in countries like Saudi?**

The Saudi economy has created a great opportunity for international players. The size of the economy and clear vision for the future makes it a very exciting market going forward.

The way 3M sees it, there are a couple of factors that will play a major role. The first one is sustainability, which will exert a strong influence on 3M's product development. The second one is finding diverse talent and leveraging that diversity to become the most innovative organization in MEA.

When we analyze the future of Saudi Arabia, we can appreciate that Vision 2030 is aiming to lessen the country's dependency on oil to become a diverse economy. By accomplishing that objective, the Saudi economy will offer companies a more predictable and stable market to do business in.

### **Do you have a final message?**

I want to emphasize the importance of diversity, inclusion, and innovation as the growth engines for 3M. I am confident that top talent will appreciate an enterprise where diversity is not only welcomed but perceived as an advantage.

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