Basel Al-Qahtani – General Manager, Boston Scientific Saudi Arabia



Vision 2030 is a big opportunity, a north star that challenges each one of us to bring our best and contribute to Saudi Arabia's future

14.12.2021

Tags: Saudi Arabia, Boston Scientific, Medtech, Strategy, MENA

Boston Scientific's general manager for Saudi Arabia, Basel Al-Qahtani, highlights the company's bet on the country – including the move to a direct presence and the signing of a memorandum of understanding to establish regional headquarters in Riyadh. In addition, he explains the public-private sector dynamics as it relates to investment opportunities, and why Boston Scientific's portfolio is a good match for Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation.

Can you outline your extensive experience in Saudi Arabia's medtech market and the country's public sector and how you draw on it in your current role?

As a biomedical engineer who graduated from King Saud University in 2011, I was quite fortunate to begin my professional career at GE Healthcare, a world-class pioneer multinational organization that allows people to unleash their maximum potential and push boundaries thinking of different possibilities to address clinical challenges; in this field, we all contribute to patient safety.

After a brief period working in a technical function, I moved to the commercial entity; dealing with devices is great but did not provide me with the necessary human & people interactions. I spent a year in GE Healthcare's clinical consumables, which gave me the basic sales skills, and then moved to patient physiological monitoring where I spent almost two years. After changes to the company's go-to-market model/strategy, where they wanted to implement a hybrid model of direct and

indirect sales, I was chosen to lead two functions. Jumping from managing territory and products to having full P&L responsibilities was an enriching experience.

One of the accomplishments that I am most proud of throughout this journey is the establishment of the first tele-ICU and command centre with our partner, Habib Medical Group. This project obtained the world record for largest tele-ICU and remains a great example of what fresh ideas, together with an energetic private sector and creative service providers can achieve. Today, the command centre oversees more than 800 ICU beds, providing the global industry with a demonstration of the possibilities opened by the digital revolution, especially for rural areas.

After spending nine years with GE, solidifying & sharpening my skills, I realized that while working for the corporate world is outstanding, it did not give me the full market picture. In order to see more clearly, it was necessary to understand the whole economy and the role that healthcare plays in the ecosystem, and so the idea of moving to the public sector arose. The Ministry of Investment was the most interesting to me because it had a private sector flavour and I spoke their language and because investment was leading the way for Saudi Arabia’s transformation; it gave me the chance to contribute to the development of my country.

I joined the Ministry as director for medical devices just as the pandemic hit, so my first challenge was addressing the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE).

We had to bring different stakeholders together, including the Saudi FDA, Ministry of Health (MoH) and others, but also connect the downstream with the upstream, establishing a well-functioning supply chain. In less than a month, we managed to make Saudi Arabia self-sufficient for most PPE by securing raw material and expanding factories. The experience opened our eyes, demonstrating that the country could achieve great things with its existing capabilities, an idea that was useful when it came to vaccines. The topic of national health security took on a new meaning, signalling that we needed to localize some technologies and enhance the value chain of our industry by partnering with the private sector.

We believe that Saudi Arabia can be a future innovation leader if enablers & capabilities continue to be built and human capital is developed, together with a meticulous plan to transfer know-how and provide incentives to the industry to localize high-tech products.

The country’s disease profile also plays an important role because, for example, 45 percent of the population suffer from cardiovascular diseases, not to mention the genetic composition of over 30 million inhabitants.

Moreover, there is a huge project underway to create a national hospital information system connecting all of the country's hospitals and storing clinical data that will enable a different model of care; citizens will not suffer a financial impact but will receive better quality.

How can you leverage your public sector experience to help Boston Scientific be part of Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation?

Since Saudi Arabia is looking to privatize parts of the healthcare system, it has two options: keep trying to align multinationals with its strategy or go there and bridge the gap between industry and government. Being back in the private sector with a deep understanding of the government's objectives, I believe that I can play a role in bringing together Boston Scientific's corporate leadership with the country's senior officials to discuss a better strategic investment approach. The country aspires to both achieve healthcare security and become a regional hub, all of which requires strong public-private partnership.

Boston Scientific was a unique opportunity for me as they had just established a direct presence in Saudi Arabia after operating through indirect channel partners. The company is embracing the country's vision, aspiring to invest and partner with decision-makers to address key clinical problems that are unique to the country. Having a direct presence will help us bring our innovative products to market faster and create more jobs for Saudi nationals.

Companies have a social responsibility to contribute to the development of local talent in the countries where they operate. Historically, most companies have focused on sales and marketing in Saudi Arabia but now, with the Saudization requirements, they will have to go beyond. The competition for talent will also increase because people, especially younger people, want more than financial incentives; they want to explore, gain knowledge and acquire different sets of skills.

How do you describe your current assignment as general manager for Boston Scientific? What are your current priorities?

My number one priority is setting up the company because our products have been historically managed by different distributors. We are gradually moving our product lines in-house, looking to strengthen our foundation step by step to avoid disrupting the supply to doctors and patients.

At the same time, we are setting up the legal entity, strengthening our core, solidifying our operational excellence and, together with healthcare leaders, understanding how Boston Scientific can provide its global know-how and best practices here.

Since this is the first time that Boston Scientific has operated directly in the MENA region, we are aligning local requirements with our capabilities.

Boston Scientific regional leadership did a great job in communicating the potential of the Saudi market to Boston Scientific's senior leadership; opting for a direct presence in the country was the right choice because the company is in a great position to explore new market strategies.

As a Saudi citizen, what does Vision 2030 mean to you and how has it impacted the way you think about the country's future?

Vision 2030 is a big opportunity, a north star that challenges each one of us to bring our best and contribute to the country's future. Having an overarching, comprehensive vision that tackles all different streams is what people in Saudi Arabia wanted the most in this important period. Changing the stereotype, moving away from oil, and diversifying the economy was a wake-up call; having a dynamic economy has also made the population more dynamic.

When Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that the greatest asset of the country is "its youth" we took it as a vote of confidence; having the trust of the top leadership gives us energy and a sense of purpose.

How is Boston Scientific approaching the question of diversity and inclusion within the organization?

Boston Scientific is a diverse organization in terms of gender and nationality. In Saudi Arabia, we support women in leadership positions and do not want it to be just symbolic, we want it to be meaningful. Everybody speaks about diversity, but the challenge is setting an example, and that is one of my personal goals.

Today, the Saudi market is growing, and adopting innovation in terms of medicines and medical technologies. Do you foresee that trend continuing over the next decade or will

price pressures put a cap on the growing adoption of cutting edge innovation?

The country is looking for an open discussion with the private sector; long-term partnerships rather than just commercial transactions. Companies are looking to profit from their investment and Saudi Arabia can help them do that in different ways. Besides creating a profitable market, the government is offering multinationals a platform for their regional operations as evidenced in the National Investment Strategy announced by the Ministry of Investment. The strategy is signalling to the world that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is open to investment and willing to share the risk.

Boston Scientific, for example, was one of the first companies to show interest in Saudi Arabia's RHQ Program, an economic initiative that provides incentives for foreign companies to establish their regional headquarters in the country. Boston Scientific signed an MoU with the country and wants to set an example for other multinational companies.

Do you have a final message for our international audience?

I believe the best is yet to come. Within healthcare, we can make a significant contribution to regional health security and reduce the burden of diseases that cannot be addressed by neighbouring countries. Boston Scientific, as a healthcare leader, is on a mission to support Saudi Arabia, the region, and the world.

See more interviews