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Especially in the current volatile marketplace, technology brings visibility to help all parties make decisions earlier on in the supply chain

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Cindy Engelbart, director of mid-sized logistics player Agility's life science operations in APAC, highlights some of the key trends in global logistics that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, how digital and data-driven solutions are being utilised in Asia, and the ways in which Agility differentiates itself in a crowded logistics field.

Could you start by introducing your role and career track record up to joining Agility?

I started my career in pharma with DHL in the supply chain world, mainly focused on contract logistics and developing solutions for healthcare clients in the Nijmegen Healthcare hub in the Netherlands. I moved through the ranks at DHL and became a key account manager for some of the major healthcare accounts. Thereafter, I brought that experience to the Middle East, where I worked for about seven years with Hellman Worldwide Logistics as part of a separate joint venture specializing in life science and healthcare customers. Eventually, as the general manager, I supported the establishment of the Middle East solutions hub for many big healthcare companies and built up GDP cold chain contract logistics solutions, freight, and GMP operations.

Following that, in late 2018, I moved to Asia to take charge of Agility's life science vertical in Asia Pacific. This followed the appointment of Eric ten Kate (Agility Global VP Life Science) to head up Agility's dedicated life science vertical. In what is a very diverse market (APAC), a tailored

strategy is key, so a lot of initial attention was directed at creating strategy and focus. Today, my role has a dual direction; product development, developing specialized life science solutions across the freight modalities and contract logistics, as well as business development, working on new business opportunities with both existing and new customers.

How extensive are Agility's operations in APAC and what is the company's footprint in this region?

Agility is different from most global logistics providers in that it got its start in an emerging market, Kuwait. It is a company that is accustomed to operating in challenging markets, whether you are talking infrastructure, regulation, climate, availability of skilled labor or other factors. So the company leverages this background. Its culture is one of resilience, flexibility, and adaptability. We are currently present on all continents, with large presence in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In Asia, we operate in 23 countries and have 160 offices with a large contract logistics footprint, both temperature-controlled and general warehouses that are mostly operated by Agility (Agility Global Integrated Logistics).

In APAC, life science has seen consistent year-over-year double-digit topline growth. COVID-19 accelerated our growth because of the demand for life science and healthcare products. At the same time, we also saw governments in APAC and elsewhere prioritizing pharmaceutical manufacturing, an area that was already high on their agendas pre-COVID-19. The Asian life science market is heterogeneous and very dynamic, with different maturity levels, frequent regulatory changes and sometimes challenging infrastructures and geographies. Our focus is supporting our customers in this environment with tailored and compliant solutions, and helping them create flexibility to deal with their challenges.

The evolution of the life science industry and its product pipeline has a significant impact on the development of our operations as a service provider. For example, biopharmaceuticals are extremely temperature sensitive and often expensive, are subject to tight regulations, and require a very high level of control. These factors demand high quality solutions from service providers. Also in Asia, we see that regulatory compliance and quality focus are key criteria in the complete ecosystem of the life science and healthcare industry. We pay constant attention to making sure that our quality and compliance standards are consistently met and are validated by relevant certifications across our network in APAC and globally.

We have developed an internal quality system founded on the WHO GDP guidelines, and we are fully externally certified in Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore. Additionally, we are currently working with our operations in China, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam to bring them on board as well.

Additionally, data, visibility and technology are increasing in importance for our customers, especially in today's volatile market. We work with the best-in-class solution providers in the field to provide customers with real-time visibility and monitoring, which are critical to temperature-sensitive pharmaceuticals and medical products.

Moreover, customers are moving away from looking at freight forwarders in the traditional sense. They are now looking for us to offer them the full set of Supply Chain Solutions. In life science, as well as in other vertical markets, this means we have to continuously be knowledgeable about the newest developments and incorporate these into our solution offering.

How does Agility differentiate itself from other logistics companies which are also investing heavily in healthcare?

Some of the bigger players are developing tailored solutions for COVID-19 vaccine transport and storage. Agility similarly has strategically invested in cold chain infrastructure to meet the needs of our global clients. Being a mid-size player is actually an advantage in some respects because it allows us to be flexible, make decisions quickly, and customize solutions around our clients. We put the customer at the center of the solution build, rather than fitting them into a standard model.

The other part would be our emerging market presence, stemming largely from our company DNA. We are operationally strong in challenging regions, notably in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, which means we can bring to market flexible solutions around vaccines in remote areas. We are part of the Emergency Logistics Task Force and in that capacity hold insights and information to provide those much needed tailored solutions

COVID-19 has been both a challenge as well as an accelerator for the logistics industry. What has been your experience of the pandemic in Asia?

The pandemic brought out the best in us. Despite the challenges, there was a true sense of collaboration and agility, leading to growth, both in business, as well as in team spirit. On the life science side, it has accelerated developments and progress. The company has shown immense resilience in terms of keeping our customers' cargo moving, through communication and collaboration, utilizing our IT expertise to provide online platforms, showing insights and data on what the global situation from a supply chain disruption perspective. We have been praised by several industry leaders on this.

With regards to life science, on top of moving the regular critical medicine and equipment, all of a sudden, everyone's focus was to bring the vaccine to the patient as quickly as possible. As soon as a COVID-19 vaccine became reality, our board put in place a global vaccine logistics strategy, managed by a global vaccine competence center (VCC) in Basel, as well as other regional centers such as Singapore, which I spearheaded. The VCCs were put in place to guide our global network around solutions, technology, quality and risk management and just general support on shipping COVID-19 vaccines. We also provided, and still do, 24/7 monitoring and emergency support for vaccine shipments.

It has been extremely challenging to keep our customers' cargo moving, and these challenges are certainly not over. The most significant learning from this pandemic is the importance of partnerships and collaboration. There is a growing realization that logistics service providers are a critical piece of the supply chain puzzle and the pandemic has definitely levelled the playing field between shippers and providers. Collaboration, data and information sharing are the key to success, which should extend beyond COVID-19.

Asia is often seen as a frontrunner in digitalization; how is Agility deploying new digital solutions in your managed markets?

In life science particularly, but this rings true for all industries, especially in the current volatile marketplace, technology brings visibility to help all parties make decisions earlier on in the supply chain. We are putting increased significance on real-time visibility solutions, which incorporate predictive analysis to diagnose failure next to features such as monitoring temperature and security.

Data and effective use of data has gained significance over physical logistics. We have a large shared service center in Chennai, where teams are constantly working on developing new technologies (in the area of IOT, AI etc.) that can be integrated in our business and solutions, supporting improving our work and services to our customers.

In relation to vaccine deliveries, both from a physical and technology perspective, I believe the challenge in some Asian countries will be geography and the availability of infrastructure in remote areas. Delivering vaccines in a mountainous village would not be easy, but thankfully, there are exciting developments such as drone deliveries to support that.

As a leader that managing across diverse markets, cultures, and people, what is your talent retention and training strategy?

My priority has always been people-focus. Despite the wealth of technology at our fingertips today, we still require good and smart people to run physical operations. We try to foster a culture of openness, transparency and honesty and find that our people take pride in managing life science customers. It gives them a sense of satisfaction of being able to add value and know that there is a patient at the end of the chain for whom they are working. They feel empowered taking part in our tailored GDP and life science training programs. Empowering people and acknowledging and valuing their relevance in the overall company goals and results, is key for people retention.

In the life science supply chain, no matter how small your task seems, every activity and step in the process matters to its successful outcome, whether you are a warehouse person or the CEO. Delivering consistent quality is an absolute must, which is made possible only by employing people that care and continue to develop them. They are our principle asset and having them walk away feeling cared for and with a sense of pride in what they do, is rewarding and helps us keep them on board.

Three to five years from now, where do you see yourself and what are your priorities?

Our priorities have remained unchanged since we started developing the strategy for Agility Life Science. Our key focus is developing high quality, tailored solutions for our customers. We accelerated our pace through the COVID-19 pandemic. GDP compliance, capability build up, product and solution offerings, developing infrastructure solutions, and staff training are the strategic levers to that strategy. Currently, we have 37 WHO GDP certified stations globally.

Closer to where I am, Singapore is a true life science hub. We have a strong contract logistics set up here, as well as a strong air freight presence and temperature-controlled facilities. Apart from that, we have WHO GDP compliant and certified operations in Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand and multiple certified operations in India. China and Vietnam are next on the list. Our 2025 Asia strategy is to have life science competence centers across key locations in Asia, providing compliant infrastructure so they can cater to temperature-controlled life science and healthcare products. We will provide all kinds of solutions from packaging and technology, to active and passive solutions and, of course, dedicated teams in place that manage and monitor.

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