

Helena Freitas – Country Lead, Sanofi Portugal



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A staunch advocate for diversity and inclusion, Helena Freitas today leads the Portuguese affiliate of Sanofi, consistently ranked among the leading pharmaceutical firms in the country. With a focus on growth in the hospital setting as well as addressing the high incidence of diabetes in Portugal, Freitas is confident of continued success. More broadly, despite the current political impasse that the nation is experiencing, she is optimistic that 2024 and beyond will see improved healthcare outcomes driven by more data-driven decision making, increased clinical trial numbers, and greater European collaboration.

How did your early experiences shape your career trajectory? What have been the most transformational moments?

My journey in Mozambique played a pivotal role in shaping my career trajectory. Upon completing my studies in economics, I ventured abroad at the age of 25, working as a consultant for Ernst and Young in Africa. This experience marked the beginning of my commitment to diversity and inclusion, as I became the first woman from Portugal to engage in a project in Angola. The exposure to different cultures and challenges during those three years fueled my desire to do things differently.

Upon returning to Portugal, I found myself at a crossroads. In 2004, during the financial crisis, I unexpectedly transitioned from my specialization in internal controls to the pharmaceutical industry.

Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS) sought someone with expertise in internal controls to navigate the complexities of finance auditing. Although my initial plan was to pursue a career in financial control, fate had other plans.

Initially joining BMS for what I thought would be a brief three-month project, an unexpected proposal altered my course. Despite my intention to seek my dream job elsewhere, the company extended an offer that prompted me to stay. This marked the beginning of my journey in the pharmaceutical sector, where I started in internal control, transitioned to finance controlling, moved into marketing and sales, and eventually assumed the role of the head of market access and public affairs at Sanofi Portugal.

My career has been a dynamic journey shaped by a commitment to making a meaningful impact on others. The shift from finance to commercial roles was driven by my passion for people and the desire to interact with them. The pivotal moment came when I was challenged to transition to public affairs and market access. Initially hesitant due to not having a pharmaceutical or political background, I realized the importance of trusting in the potential seen by others, particularly my manager's assessment.

Reflecting on my career challenges, there were periods of empowerment and engagement. In 2016, a compelling opportunity emerged to lead the entire organization. The transition to a leadership role, still within the market access and public affairs area, was a testament to the recognition of the work I had accomplished in that domain. This move brought a fresh perspective, allowing me to experience a new organizational culture, and it has been a rewarding journey since then leading Sanofi Portugal.

How did you adapt to the Sanofi culture and transition to the new leadership role?

Upon joining Sanofi, my mindset had to adapt to the dynamic landscape of a company undergoing changes, particularly with the introduction of the Forward project. This initiative aimed at streamlining operations by splitting into different business units or Global Business Units (GBUs). Despite the challenges, this approach provided a focused business model, crucial in our diverse portfolio spanning vaccines, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and specialty care. In the realm of access, our primary objective is to ensure the successful launch of our vaccines and medicines, a responsibility I undertook three years ago as the GM of vaccines, particularly during the challenging times of the pandemic's onset in 2020.

In the context of my personal journey, last year, while on maternity leave, I was promoted to Country Lead, demonstrating Sanofi's commitment to diversity by choosing a Portuguese woman for the role, even during her maternity leave. This experience has reinforced my belief in the value of embracing diverse talents and backgrounds, and fostering an inclusive environment where everyone has equitable opportunities to contribute to our shared success. Sanofi's dedication to diversity extends beyond gender balance to encompass a broader range of perspectives, including race, culture, and sexual orientation. It is not about meeting a predetermined balance but acknowledging the unique strengths that each individual brings to the organisation. I firmly believe that true diversity leads to quality outcomes, benefiting projects and initiatives across the organization.

What challenges have you encountered in trying to foster a productive work environment while also accommodating flexibility in remote work?

The shift to remote work has indeed been transformative, and it's essential to recognize both the benefits and challenges it brings. While there is a common perception that remote work is an ideal scenario, the reality is nuanced. In practical terms, we've implemented a balanced approach, mandating half-time home and half-time office work.

This mandatory split allows for flexibility depending on the nature of the work. For tasks that require collaboration, brainstorming, or in-person meetings, employees are encouraged to work from the office. On the other hand, for individual tasks like reading reports or reflective work, staying at home is a suitable option. We trust our employees to make informed decisions about where they can be most productive.

Addressing the need for protecting productivity, we've observed gains resulting from the flexibility of remote work. The ability to tailor one's work environment to the nature of the tasks at hand has contributed to increased efficiency. We acknowledge that not every day needs to be spent in the office, and employees can choose the days that align with their workflow.

Regarding corporate culture, we recognize the importance of trust in this new work structure. We encourage a culture where employees have the autonomy to choose when they come to the office, with Mondays and Fridays designated as optional remote workdays. This flexibility is rooted in the belief that trust in the workforce leads to better results.

However, we are cognizant that this shift brings challenges, including the necessity of effective communication and maintaining a sense of connection among team members. Striking the right balance between remote and in-office work is an ongoing process, and we remain committed to evolving our approach based on the feedback and experiences of our employees.

CEO Paul Hudson recently announced new investments in R&D, accompanied by significant expenses cuts. How might this impact Portugal as a relatively small market and how do you plan to position Portugal as an attractive destination for the group?

Sanofi's strategic decisions, such as the "Play to Win" approach and the doubling of R&D investments, are part of a broader organizational shift. These decisions aim to prioritize launching products that are either first in class or best in class, reflecting a commitment to innovation and superior patient care.

In a smaller market like Portugal, these changes bring both opportunities and challenges. The focus on innovation aligns well with the country's strengths, including a high level of education, multilingual proficiency, and a pool of highly skilled researchers and scientists. Portugal's favorable regulatory environment and tax benefits for R&D investments further enhance its appeal as a destination for pharmaceutical investments.

However, the challenges lie in effectively translating these global strategies into local impact. The market dynamics in Portugal, with its smaller size, require a tailored approach to ensure that the affiliate can leverage the advantages of the global strategy while addressing local nuances.

As Country Lead, my role involves advocating for Portugal as a viable and attractive destination for pharmaceutical investments. The country's unique benefits, including tax incentives for R&D investments, can be emphasized to encourage companies to view Portugal as a testing ground for innovative projects and pilots. The ability to test initiatives in a market with educated professionals and a conducive regulatory environment presents a valuable opportunity.

While Portugal may be a smaller market in terms of size, it can serve as a strategic and innovative hub within the broader pharmaceutical landscape. By highlighting these advantages and aligning local strategies with global goals, we aim to position Portugal as an appealing destination for pharmaceutical companies seeking to invest in research and development.

How is Sanofi Portugal planning to leverage some of the recent developments in European pharma legislation, especially the centralized database for clinical trials?

The recent changes in the European Union, particularly the establishment of a centralized database for clinical trials, present significant opportunities for Sanofi Portugal. We see this as a positive development that can streamline and expedite the clinical trial process, making it more efficient and accessible.

Sanofi Portugal is actively advocating for an increased focus on clinical trials in the country. Currently, we are already engaged in 22 clinical trials, spanning areas such as oncology and immunology. Looking ahead, our ambitious goal is to scale up our clinical trials to reach a total of 78 by 2026. We believe that the new legislative framework will facilitate faster trial initiation and patient recruitment in Portugal.

It's crucial to highlight that our investment in clinical trials in Portugal is not solely about public hospitals; it extends to collaborations with private labs. The growing presence of private labs in Portugal offers additional avenues for conducting trials, and Sanofi is actively collaborating with them.

Moreover, our involvement in basic and molecular research is a key aspect of our strategy. Precision medicine is becoming increasingly important, and to achieve this, we need to invest in molecular research and understand the fundamental aspects of drug development. Portugal, and specifically Sanofi Portugal, has been contributing significantly to this field.

Our partnership with a iBET a Portuguese research and development organization that offers services in biotechnology and life sciences for biopharma and food & health industries in liaison with Sanofi in Boston has been instrumental in advancing our basic research efforts. This collaboration, which has been ongoing for four to five years, underscores our commitment to cutting-edge research and development. The focus is not only on clinical trials with patients but also on basic investigations and molecular research, ensuring that our medicines and antibodies are produced with the highest standards of safety, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness.

As part of the broader Sanofi strategy, Portugal plays a pivotal role in contributing to the top-line growth of the company. The partnerships and collaborations in basic and molecular research underscore our commitment to advancing scientific knowledge and delivering innovative healthcare solutions.

Sanofi holds a significant position in the Portuguese market. Could you provide insights into your market strategy and areas of focus? How does Sanofi navigate the competitive landscape?

Sanofi, has a legacy of 50 years in Portugal and has established a notable position in the market, frequently ranking between the fifth and seventh positions. Our success is attributed to a strategic focus on key therapeutic areas and a commitment to deliver innovation, transform the practice of

medicine through breakthrough science and make a positive impact on our people and the communities we serve. One of our significant areas of growth is in the hospital setting, particularly within the field of immunology. We aim to become a leading company in immunology and create a positive impact in millions of patients suffering from dermatological, respiratory, gastroenterological, and other immune-mediated diseases.

In the diabetes space, Portugal faces a high incidence of diabetes, and Sanofi is actively engaged in addressing this healthcare challenge. We are making strategic choices, particularly in diabetes, where we concentrate a part of our innovation. Our efforts are directed towards identifying diabetes type one.â€• This innovative approach aims at preventive measures and delaying the onset of the disease, offering a unique solution to potentially save years of treatment and improve patient outcomes.

In the field of vaccines, Sanofi Portugal has been proactive in introducing new products to the market. While the recent approval of RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus) immunization has been a notable achievement, we are also exploring further opportunities. The introduction of new vaccines and innovative approaches aligns with our commitment to public health and preventive medicine.

Could you elaborate on the position of Portugal regarding both children and adult vaccination, which varies a lot across the EUâ€™s members?

Portugal has a robust national immunization plan that is considered one of the best in Europe. While the plan primarily focuses on pediatric vaccinations, covering approximately 95% of children, it also includes provisions for adult vaccinations. Currently, adult vaccinations covered under the national immunization plan include *influenza* (flu) and vaccinations for diphtheria and tetanus.

The coverage rates for adult vaccinations, especially flu and booster shots, are notably high in Portugal. The governmentâ€™s commitment to vaccination is evident in achieving an 88% coverage rate for flu vaccinations among those aged 65 and older last year. This high coverage rate is a testament to the countryâ€™s belief in the importance of vaccines.

Portugalâ€™s approach to adult vaccination is unique in that the government has facilitated a pharmacy-based immunization model. All vaccinations covered by the national plan are available in pharmacies across the country. With approximately 3,000 pharmacies, this approach enhances accessibility and convenience for individuals seeking vaccinations.

Importantly, for adult flu vaccinations included in the national immunization plan, individuals do not need a prescription from a healthcare professional. Instead, they only need to show their ID to receive the recommended vaccines. This simplicity encourages voluntary vaccination, making the process more accessible and straightforward for individuals who wish to protect themselves against preventable diseases.

While there may be some vaccine fatigue due to various vaccination campaigns, the governmentâ€™s commitment to accessibility and the high coverage rates indicates a positive attitude toward adult vaccination in Portugal. The countryâ€™s ability to adapt and implement measures, such as pharmacy-based immunization, demonstrates its commitment to public health and the well-being of its citizens.

Complaints about market access in Portugal are numerous among the representatives of multinational pharma companies; how can the situation be improved?

In my view, enhancing market access for pharmaceuticals in Portugal and other countries grappling with similar challenges necessitates a comprehensive strategy that integrates data-driven decision-making, a focus on preventive measures, and collaborative efforts between governments and pharmaceutical companies.

Governments should allocate resources towards robust prevention initiatives, including an expansion of national immunization plans and the implementation of comprehensive programs. By investing in prevention, particularly in disease areas with a high burden, healthcare systems can significantly reduce the overall strain, preventing disease and diminishing the need for emergency room visits.

Accurate data on the prevalence and impact of various diseases is crucial. Governments should invest in data infrastructure to facilitate the assessment of disease burdens, enabling decision-makers to prioritize healthcare interventions and allocate resources effectively. Digitalization, including the adoption of electronic health records and artificial intelligence (AI), plays a pivotal role in enhancing healthcare efficiency and decision-making. The focus should not only be on implementing digital solutions but also on utilizing these technologies to collect meaningful data for informed decision-making. AI can be employed for forecasting, analytics, and optimizing pharmaceutical market access, offering more precise and fine-tuned predictions when combined with human insights.

Effective collaboration between governments and pharmaceutical companies is vital. Open and constructive dialogues allow pharmaceutical companies to share insights into the benefits and cost-effectiveness of their products, especially in areas with unmet medical needs. Governments, in turn, can explore innovative funding models, such as redirecting claw back funds to build data infrastructure for informed decision-making. Streamlining regulatory processes can further expedite access to innovative medicines.

Acknowledging budget constraints, governments should make strategic choices based on data to ensure optimal utilization of available funds. Establishing clear criteria for selecting medicines, and prioritizing those with a higher impact on patient outcomes and public health becomes an integral part of the decision-making process.

In summary, a holistic approach that combines effective prevention strategies, data-driven decision-making, and responsible digital technology use can contribute to a more sustainable, equitable and efficient healthcare system, addressing market access challenges effectively.

Looking ahead to 2024, what are your expectations for healthcare provision in Portugal considering the current political situation and the country's role within Europe?

Despite the political instability and caretaker government, my expectations for 2024 in Portugal are positive. I see an opportunity for the country to leverage the investments from Europe's funding to drive healthcare decisions based on data. I expect political changes may lead to reforms and improvements. I anticipate that with the right people and sufficient investment, Portugal can become bolder and faster in decision-making, especially in areas such as prevention, health care decisions, and research. Access to healthcare and sustainability efforts will play crucial roles, and I believe Portugal has the potential to position itself as a strong player in the European healthcare ecosystem. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of compliance with obligations, including debt payment, to strengthen Portugal's standing in Europe. Overall, I am optimistic about Portugal's potential to

achieve average or above-average levels in Europe regarding access and research.

Furthermore, focusing on sustainability, I believe that addressing environmental concerns is vital. Sanofi is actively contributing to sustainability initiatives, such as reducing plastic waste (100% vaccines blisters free of plastic till 2027) and promoting neutral carbon incentives. Portugal's commitment to going green and its cultural inclination towards good behavior can contribute positively to achieving sustainability goals. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, community engagement, and playing an active role in the ecosystem are essential for building a sustainable and responsible pharmaceutical industry in Portugal. Overall, the pharmaceutical industry's success in Portugal will hinge on embracing preventive measures, leveraging research opportunities, and aligning with global sustainability objectives.

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