

Interview: Marta Ferreira, General Manager, Inovapotek, Portugal

Since many in the research field spend years investigating something that becomes nothing, our focus was to exploit our knowledge to focus on the market needs.

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Portugal has incredible researchers and R&D for life sciences. Society in Portugal is starting to realize that there needs to be more emphasis on the market and more attention paid to industry, but there are still many boundaries,â?• states Marta Ferreira, General Manager at Inovapotek, about continuing challenges within the pharma industry in Portugal.

What was the motivation behind creating Inovapotek?

Inovapotek is a spin-off of the Faculty of Pharmacy at the University of Porto, where my partner and I were previously researchers. During my time there, I worked on a project that combined industry and academia, and I realized that much of the knowledge developed at the University was not being properly implemented. The challenge at that time was to use the experience we had attained to service the pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries. Since then, the company was established with a mission and vision to promote the development of innovative products that comply with regulatory specificities and consumer demand. Many academic projects are not focused on the market and do not take existing regulatory restrictions into account.

What is your vision of the research environment and its challenges?

Portugal has incredible researchers and R&D for life sciences. Society in Portugal is starting to realize that there needs to be more emphasis on the market and more attention paid to industry, but there are still many boundaries. A generation of young and well-qualified researchers without boundaries is now on the market given their international experience. This generation wants to do things but many times fails because they coexist with another more close-minded and uncooperative generation. These boundaries can no longer continue. When I started on this bridge between academia and industry ten years ago, it was very hard because it lacked structure. Now the situation has improved and will continue to do so, although there is still much work to do. Universities have been dedicating time to this, as seen with science parks, innovation centers, supported infrastructure, and the incentives provided.

Still, many people have difficulties in orienting research properly because of that lack of regulatory awareness or focus on the market.

Inovapotek has been working on many projects specifically regarding this. We act as a bridge between academia and industry, helping all parties to understand each other because they often speak different languages. The company helps with R&D management, project monitoring and regulatory compliance. Once you work with open-minded people that understand the roles and interests of each part, it becomes more interesting.

What do you think needs to be improved in terms of regulatory affairs?

We should have more harmonization among the European Union. Life science involves different regulations depending on the type of products. Medicines, food supplements, medical devices and cosmetics all have different regulations. Even though European regulations intend to harmonize legislation across the different member states, there are often many grey areas that are not interpreted and applied equally by the national authorities of each different member state. This creates barriers and sometimes makes Portuguese companies experience more difficulties in placing products on the market than in other member states, and this should not happen. The origin of the problem is the lack of harmonization and clarification of grey areas on the regulation.

How do you reach out to your customers?

Inovapotek has always maintained an international spirit since its inception. We do have potential in Portugal, but today we cannot think solely in terms of domestic markets. This is a global company that can work for any country worldwide. As such, we designed our first international plan in 2009, and participated in our first international exhibition in Paris in 2010. That was the first year that Inovapotek began to promote itself abroad. Since then, we have attended one or two international exhibitions per year. Today, Inovapotek is established in 13 markets, primarily in the US and Europe but also in other countries like South Africa and South Korea. Sixty percent of sales come from abroad now. We have grown a lot as a result of our work and scientific approach; we have a very high percentage of fidelization of clients. In the next five years we will also focus on Middle East, South America, and Asia.

What are the similarities and differences between personal and pharmaceutical products?

In personal care, we work in all stages of product development, including formulation development, quality control, stability studies, efficacy and safety studies, and then regulatory affairs, preparing all documents for the product to be ready to market. We cover the entire chain and we uphold consulting activities in this area. In the pharmaceutical area, we primarily work in formulation; either with classic formulations or improvements of classical formulations. As regulatory restrictions become severe, many products have to be reformulated in order to accomplish these stricter rules. We have spent much of our effort on these kinds of projects. On the other side, we also develop new drug delivery systems, which is one of our specialties as it is related to our work before Inovapotek. This is an interesting area because laboratories are now using proteins and gene therapy as new therapeutic agents, and they need new drug delivery systems in order to be administered. We also cover quality control for pharmaceuticals.

What is your perception of the conflict between branded and generic drugs in Portugal today?

This has been a difficult discussion over the last year.

I think generics need to be, and have been in recent years, more incentivized by the government, and must play a greater role in doctors's decisions.

Now we have prescription by INN, so generics should grow more. I do not know why it is not happening, but this is ultimately more of a political issue. From the technical side, there is no explanation for why it does not grow more, as there are strict rules that generics must accomplish to guarantee its equal bioequivalence.

What is the potential of the manufacturing sector and how can it contribute to Portugal's growth?

Manufacturing can contribute to growth, but this must come from knowledge-based growth. It needs to have a very well-designed strategy focused on niche markets because the Portuguese environment has many highly-qualified people and is very attractive for foreign investment and employment. All the research organizations and knowledge that exist in this region are interesting as well. My opinion is that manufacturing must employ a very well-designed strategy that looks at other players and other countries, finding specific niches to develop.

What are the main growth drivers for Inovapotek, and how do you see the company developing?

Inovapotek is still in the expansion stage so we will surely continue to grow quickly in the next five years. In previous years we worked more in personal care for international business, but now we will focus more effort to expand the pharmaceutical and food supplements areas. I also believe that in personal care, we will accomplish our goal of becoming a completely global company, with presence in the Middle East, South America and Asia. In five years, we will have more local agents in global regions working in personal care and in pharmaceuticals and food supplements; we will start the internationalization process in Europe and then the US.

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