

Interview: Natascha Schill – Managing Director, Biogen Switzerland

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MD Natascha Schill discusses the growing importance and commitment that Biogen has to Switzerland, including a USD one billion investment in new facilities and the creation of 400 jobs in the upcoming years; investing in the local workforce to support the company's growth.

The headline-making news at the moment is Biogen's very recent decision to invest USD 1 billion in a next-generation manufacturing facility in Luterbach near Solothurn, which promises to triple the company's biologics production capacity. What made Switzerland, and more specifically the Canton of Solothurn, the obvious choice for such a sizeable investment?

Biogen's mid-to-late stage pipeline right now holds a great deal of promise so the global management board quite naturally considered it worthwhile and prudent to set about bolstering our worldwide manufacturing capacity. Investing in a brand new, high-tech facility was thus enshrined as a core feature of the company's five-year manufacturing plan and the forthcoming Luterbach development will be the fulfillment of that objective.

The choice of location was also pretty significant. Biogen has traditionally maintained a strong manufacturing presence in the United States with facilities in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, but the Solothurn investment differs in that it will constitute only our second plant in Europe after Hillerød in Denmark. The decision to situate the new capabilities outside of North America therefore reflects an eagerness to attain a greater level of diversity across our production platforms.

In conducting a review of potential host countries around the globe, it quickly became apparent that Switzerland was the most alluring choice and represented the right sort of enabling ecosystem to match our needs. We're talking about a politically stable, business friendly and predictable country with a long tradition in pharmaceuticals development and strong track record on fostering innovation. It is also the sort of place that offers easy and speedy access to top talent, which was especially important. In short, with Switzerland, the right fundamentals are all in place.

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In terms of sourcing talent, what makes Switzerland so strong?

It's important to remember that as a biopharma outfit, we operate in a very specialized and technologically complex field that requires ready access to a highly skilled workforce. Switzerland with its dual education system and multilingual, multiethnic talent pool most definitely possesses this human resource asset at a moment when we are going to need to be recruiting up to 400 personnel. With its lengthy tradition in pharmaceuticals, this country offers a wealth of talent not just in skilled academics and scientific researchers, but also in the categories of experienced craftsmen and lab operators that we will be seeking.

In what other ways does Switzerland provide the right sort of enabling environment in spite of the comparatively higher costs of operating?

Well the infrastructure, itself, is second to none. Geographically we are positioned right in the heart of Europe with great connectivity by train and air to many of the most valuable and significant European pharma markets. Ready access to clean water and reliable electricity is also assured at all times: we know that our power is highly unlikely to go down if there is a storm. All of this is important to factor in when you are developing and handling complex medicines such as biologics that are sensitive to changes in temperature and pressure.

The sort of access to clean energy that Switzerland can provide is also greatly important to us as a firm that takes its environmental footprint very seriously. Last year we managed to attain "zero carbon footprint" status, which makes us very proud. It was a long and arduous process to get there and we are steadfast in our commitment to maintain it. Operating in advanced ecosystems such as Switzerland permits this.

You mentioned that an estimated 400 new jobs would be created in Luterbach. Just how supportive and collaborative have been the local and federal authorities when you are going to be contributing so much economically and socially to the Solothurn region?

We are very appreciative of their ongoing support and collaboration. They fully understand the value that we will be bringing to both the country and locality. Initially, when we identified Switzerland as our prime target country for basing the new plant, we solicited support from Switzerland Global Enterprise. They were extremely helpful in opening the doors to various stakeholders and in assisting us in figuring out which Canton and site would best fit our needs. The support from the local government of Solothurn and community of Luterbach has also been impeccable, right from the very beginning. We have been pleasantly surprised by their speed of responsiveness and willingness to assist. The Federal Government has also thrown its weight behind our endeavors. Swiss President Johann Schneider-Ammann was himself present for the groundbreaking ceremony that marked the start of construction.

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Which specific biologics do you intend to manufacture in the new facility?

Biogen's production capabilities incorporate an in-built structural versatility and flexibility. The principle is actually to be able to manufacture any of our biologic drug substances in any of our facilities around the world. The plants themselves that are designed in modular fashion are pretty much interchangeable and fit seamlessly into a manufacturing network. This enhances the security of our production systems and allows us to rapidly adjust to fluctuations in market demand or country risk. The only difference with the Solothurn plant is it will be kitted out with the next-generation

technology.

Biogen already bases its European headquarters out of Switzerland and the addition of in-country manufacturing will only serve to raise the profile of your activities here, but how important strategically is the Swiss market to the company?

It's important to remember, though, that the Biogen story was actually started here in Switzerland by a group of biologists in Geneva. We therefore have a special connection here that looms large in our hearts and is intrinsic to our corporate identity. In 2004, the decision was taken to relocate our European/International headquarters from Paris to Zug. Given the multicultural nature of society here and concentration of a broad array of talent within Switzerland it made a lot of sense to be running the European businesses from here. The Swiss market itself may be relatively small in terms of volume, but performs well in terms of value. A well thought out market access landscape tends to ensure that technologically advanced medicine and the latest therapeutic innovations are available to patients.

What then would you say have been your main priorities and areas of focus for the local market?

Since my appointment as managing director of the Swiss affiliate, we have already introduced two new drugs to market and I have been busy working to reaffirm our partnership with the multiple sclerosis (MS) community. We've been here since the beginning and I am proud to say that MS patients today enjoy much better health outcomes than was previously the case. Two decades ago anyone receiving that diagnosis did not have much choice in terms of treatment, but nowadays we are able to deliver a wide portfolio of therapies. It's thus been a very exciting journey, though we still have a long way to go to identifying a definitive cure for MS.

One priority locally has therefore been very much to emphasize our continued commitment to further advancement in this particular therapeutic area and to partnering with the medical community in educating physicians in terms of best practice for treating this disease.

Another priority relates to growing the right local workforce for the Biogen of the future. In five years time we may well have branched out in a big way into additional disease areas (such as getting innovative Alzheimer's treatments to market) and it is important for us to be proactive in anticipating this so that we can be as successful in those areas as we are today in the MS business. While building up that workforce, I am particularly attentive to maintaining our historic internal corporate identity in which the focus remains very much on the science and on patient-centric scientific advancement.

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We hear about a focus on corporate culture and patient centricity from many of the pharma actors that we interview. How is Biogen tangibly different?

'Patient centricity' has become a bit of a buzzword for the pharma industry. Everyone likes to talk about it, but at the end of the day it involves many different elements and is difficult to measure. That said, I truly believe that Biogen is a very patient-centric company that never loses sight of end outcomes. Our unwavering commitment to identifying treatment pathways for Alzheimer's patients is testament to our readiness to concentrate on those very difficult areas where unmet need is most acute and our ability to actually walk the talk.

Our work in biologics and small-molecule drug discovery has led to the world's most extensive portfolio of multiple sclerosis therapies, but we are not going to stop there. Another company might well have been satisfied with such an achievement, but that is not the Biogen way. There is always more that can be done to improve patient livelihoods. We will continue to invest in research in this area up to the point that we actually identify a cure. It is about making a positive difference and working towards this common goal.

Biogen is also pressing ahead with its development of biosimilars. What are the prospects for biosimilars in the Swiss market?

This year Biogen launched two anti-TNF biosimilar products in Europe and is committed to make them available for Swiss patients too. I believe it is too early to forecast what the impact will be of this locally but there is great potential for biosimilars in Switzerland, though, to help the healthcare system save money and use those savings to fund future innovation. Given our history in biologics and commitment to patients, our work in the biosimilars space emphasizes how Biogen is willing to undertake bold moves in pursuit of better outcomes for patients, and is positioned to make us a leader in this space.

Biogen maintains a large campus in Boston and you yourself actually spent a number of years there earlier in your career with the company. What do you perceive to be the main cultural differences between the two countries' approaches to innovation, scientific progress and risk taking?

Both countries do very well in fostering innovation. Switzerland performs particularly well in terms of scientific rigor and accumulated expertise. Meanwhile, in the United States, we notice a very strongly engrained entrepreneurial spirit and culture of risk-taking. North Americans tend to be more willing to take risks and failure is not necessarily seen in a negative light, but rather as a natural part of the learning process. Switzerland and Europe in general tends to be decisively more cautious in this aspect.

In our business, it is essential to be bold and aim high. 99 percent of the clinical trials for Alzheimer's medicines were not immediately fruitful and yet we regard it as our duty to patients to continue to invest deeply in this area where there is so much unmet need. Taking risks is in our corporate DNA.

In many respects our shared heritage in both the United States and Switzerland and combined presence enables us to fully leverage the positive aspects of both these cultures and to embed them into our operations and research. This is the recipe that has enabled us to grow Biogen into one of the world's leading biotechs for serious neurological, autoimmune and rare diseases and to offer so much hope for patients that would otherwise risk being left behind.

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