

Interview with Yavuz Baykara, General Manager, NNE Pharmaplan Belgium

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One of NNE Pharmaplan's latest exciting news is that last year you established offices to accommodate your existing customers in Belgium. What were the strategic motivations for establishing a presence in Belgium?

Since NNE Pharmaplan concentrates on providing services based on our pharmaceutical and life sciences heritage, which we have built on for more than 80 years, we are quite narrow in finding our customers. We are the largest international engineering and consulting company that is focused on pharma and biotech, so Belgium was an easy decision because of its strong respective industries.

Belgium is one of the countries we are mainly interested in as a service provider and have been thinking of entering for some time. We have been doing projects for several years in Belgium, so the request and strategy behind us establishing was to serve our existing customers, locally. Being local has advantages for both NNE Pharmaplan and our clients. We not only have to support our existing customers and serve on a more regular basis those focus clients in the region, but we are open to attracting new clients. We are looking for new opportunities, to broaden our market and become well known all across Belgium.

What is the strategic importance Belgium holds for NNE Pharmaplan in terms of operations and performance?

We have one global strategy to be where our customers are. Our customers in Belgium are mainly global players who value working with companies they can trust regardless of the region in the world.

In this respect one of our strategies is to serve our customers in Belgium, other European countries, Asia and the U.S. on the same level. The concept behind it is simple if you have a reliable partner such as NNE Pharmaplan, you would like to retain them globally and continue working together on new projects.

In regard to Belgium, we had recently an important project with one of major biotech companies; it was one of the focus projects for the entire organization. Due to the very positive results, we have been awarded another large-scale project with the same customer in Switzerland. As an engineering service provider, we are doing business to generate follow up contracts, so this proves we are doing very well.

In Belgium, have you experienced any trickle down effects from the pharmaceutical industry?

Cost saving in Belgium is certainly a trend that we have experienced. There are initiatives in major pharma companies to reduce spending, so we have felt pressure in this direction.

In addition, Belgium is quite expensive in terms of labor costs, also due to high taxation. All in all it is more expensive for a company to provide jobs in Belgium than in other countries in Europe.

Did you experience many challenges or pleasant surprises whilst setting up the office in Belgium?

Unfortunately, there were no positive surprises. We were told that it was very easy to open a legal entity in Belgium but I had many difficulties in terms of establishing the company here. This might be attributable to slow bureaucratic processes.

As the market leader covering all the segments from biopharmaceuticals, to vaccines to medical devices and helping customers improve their product manufacturing, NNE Pharmaplan is in an ideal position to pinpoint certain industry trends. What trends have you been able to identify in the Belgian market?

In our engineering line of business, trends often depend on the pipeline of the products and go on a company case-by-case basis. Belgium is a producer of liquid sterile instead of OSD (oral solid dosage forms), which is an indicator of being high tech. When it comes to biotech, it is extremely high tech, which requires special knowledge and facilities. Producing tablets is a complicated process but the requests for facilities, clean rooms and investments are not as high as for sterile. Hence, liquid production areas are mainly located in developed markets.

Another trend we see is Automation and IT. Automation is becoming a hot topic in Belgium, due to the trend of paperless production in the country. Broadly speaking, the pharma industry's ability to advance in the global competition has become increasingly dependant on automation and IT. The integration of manufacturing data like electronic batch records MES and PAT is becoming more important in today's regulatory environment. Combining our long track record as a vendor-independent system integrator with our process and GMP expertise, we can help customers develop the best automation strategies. Hence, we are looking to further capitalize on those opportunities and have been working with all the major automation companies that have both hardware and software.

Does NNE Pharmaplan offer its complete, comprehensive portfolio of services in Belgium?

We have more than 30 offices in Europe, North America and Asia.

Our strong combination of global reach and local knowledge enables us to deliver tailored solutions to any customer. So yes, we offer our full portfolio all over the world due to the flexibility of our engineers. This includes helping customers identify optimization potential instead of investments, phasing revamps to reduce impact on production and postpone investment, performing innovative reconfiguration of existing equipment enabling more capacity to be squeezed in, and using less investment-heavy technologies, as well as due diligence of existing facilities and evaluating outsourcing options.

Even in remote areas, we can set up a project team to offer any of those services, but of course, it is more costly. This was also one of the main drivers to be local, in order to be more cost efficient and competitive.

How would you describe Belgium's business and regulatory environment? Throughout your experiences, would you say there is something that makes Belgium unique?

I have worked in Switzerland before and due to the harmonized regulations, I believe it is the same. There might be different local technical issues in Health Safety and Environment (HSE) and construction but that doesn't apply to regulation. We build the facilities with the special GMP and HSE regulations in mind and hand it over to the customer, who is then responsible for keeping it running.

Does NNE Pharmaplan provide after sales support?

Yes, we call it "site support" but it depends on if the customer requests it. For the customer it is good to have people on site in the building that have been involved in the planning and construction phase because they know best what is going on and any issues that arise can be handled quickly. On our side, we do not want to lose contact with the customer, so we view site support as a win-win situation. All along, we want to be a partner, rather than just a supplier. Our high-minded goal is to be a trusted advisor, which is a huge step.

Sustainability has been a hot topic across many industries, but particularly in the pharma world, given the nature of the industry. To what extent is sustainability an integral part of your engineering design and consulting approach?

It is quite usual in our business that we follow our customers. If they intend to build up a green facility, we support them since we have experience in sustainable and eco-friendly engineering. But if for whatever reason the customer decides not to opt for this, it is then our role to help them find the best solutions.

In terms of our internal practices, we have a CO2 footprint that is monitored by our company, the goal of which is to try and reduce our own emission.

How do you align the company in order to guarantee that your employees are speaking the same language as the industry?

Our company structure embodies a foundation of cross-technical teams of engineers, architects, chemists and pharmacists.

We have employees that have been on the other side of the industry that have been our customers before. Our highly skilled specialists are regarded as our gatekeepers of knowledge. They are the ones who are sent out to customers in order to initiate the first steps and to kick start new projects. This is something we value strongly, since starting a project or relationship in the wrong direction will cause many difficulties down the road.

What is your commitment to operation in accordance to the highest levels?

Our cutting edge is the relationships we build, which is driven by people. Our responsiveness, the loyalty and the friendship - this is our culture that we ardently abide by.

Another separating factor from NNE Pharmaplan and other companies is that if any problems surface, we will not turn our backs on our customers. This trust has been recognized by our customers and they have praised us for our unflinching reliability.

One of NNE Pharmaplan's business roles is creating efficiencies. In the respect, have you taken up more projects in streamlining?

NNE Pharmaplan does optimization during the design of facilities and also offers these streamlining services to increase capacity and flexibility with minimal interruptions on ongoing production and to help turn old facilities into future business assets. We are doing some projects in this direction, however not yet in Belgium.

Typically companies do not like to change their production processes once they have established their facilities. Streamlining is easier in side processes, like logistics for example. But when altering the production process, companies have to go through authorities and face many regulatory hurdles. After which, the assurance that this will be accepted is not guaranteed.

How would you like to develop the Belgium affiliate of NNE Pharmaplan in the near future?

NNE Pharmaplan contributes to a healthier world through the services we provide to our customers. When we deliver consultancy or projects, we help bringing products faster to the market, decreasing the overall cost of production and ensuring patient safety. In this respect would like to become the trusted partner to our Belgian customers.

Therefore, our goal is to build up a sustainable business in Belgium. We would like to grow around 50-75% in terms of employment every year, which is quite challenging since we look for interactive employees with a right combination of technical knowledge, personality and customer orientation.

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