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Our country is improving and reshaping the healthcare industry and we as GSK have the ability to participate and have a big role in this change

29.09.2022

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Mohamed Ali Abd El Azim gives several insights into GSK's sizeable production footprint in Egypt, how the organisation's aims dovetail with Egypt's healthcare transformation, and what makes him proud to work in pharma manufacturing.

Tell us about yourself, have you always worked in manufacturing? How has your career developed?

I am a pharmacist by profession, with 20 years of experience in operation and manufacturing. I got into the operational sector back on the day of my graduation at an Egyptian holding company, Vacsera, at which I did manufacturing work and I enjoyed the job, so decided to stick to this field. Since then, I have worked for Bristol Myers Squibb before joining GSK, where I have now worked for the last 14-15 years.

What is it about GSK that has kept you as a loyal employee for such a long time?

GSK helps people grow and develop, much like its previous motto of making people feel better and live longer. With the new CEO appointed in 2017, the goal is to be ahead of diseases worldwide,

which has created some good opportunities to work and keep developing in any corporate function.

No matter its focus or direction, the company will always care about its people and their future. If each person does better, so will the company. In a digitalised world, we often forget about the human component, but not here. As an example, last weekend, the kids of our GSK employees had the opportunity to visit the factories and see what their parents do. Most were really impressed, and the outcome was very positive. At GSK, people and families are at the core of the company's beliefs, so we strive to provide a good work environment and provide the best for our employees, our biggest assets in manufacturing.

With digitalisation and automation being pushed in the last couple of years in the name of innovation and R&D, are manufacturing and its workers at risk of being left behind?

Personally, I see no problem or contradiction. Technology and automation are moving us forward, but also taking care of our staff by making the job safer and easier. This direction we are all heading is about building capability and sustainability for the future. Therefore, people will always be the driving force to create value for us.

What new manufacturing trends do you think will be adopted in Egypt?

I would say that it will not only be applied here in Egypt but globally. GSK guides itself by industry 4.0 (automation, digitalisation, data analysis, robotics). Eventually, all of these will be implemented in Egypt, but we do not yet have a timeframe for that. Currently, we use Power BI [an interactive data visualization software product developed by Microsoft with a primary focus on business intelligence Ed.] to analyse data and use mobile phones to see reports and analyse what is happening every minute. At our lines, there are automatic toolkits to calculate the efficiency of the output per minute and hour.

Going back to your previous question, we cannot escape these changes, so we integrate these necessary technologies into our routines to make life simpler for everybody involved.

Could you share with us how GSK operations are run in and around Cairo?

For starters, there are two sites. One is the Giza site opened in 1978 and began as the first manufacturing site for a multinational company, at the time Squibb, later becoming Bristol Myers Squibb and acquired in 2008 by GSK. In this facility, most of the GSK anti-infective portfolio is produced, being antibiotics, sterile vials, oral suspensions and tablets. The plant has a great capacity for the production of topical corticosteroids, anti-inflammatory tablets or antihypertensives. It is two different facilities in one place. At the moment this site produces only for the Egyptian market, but there are plans for next year to start exporting goods to countries such as Tanzania, Nigeria and South Africa.

The second site has been operating since the 1980s and is where all the clean liquids such as nasal sprays and soft gels, are produced but other tablets are also fabricated here. This facility is twice the size of the Giza one and in both production sites, we have around 700 employees. This year we are estimating Volumes of around 180 Million packs.

The government would like to see Egypt become a medicines export platform for Africa. To achieve this, the regulatory entity – in this case the Egyptian Drug Authority (EDA) – is crucial; what impact could these new regulatory frameworks have on the manufacturing of your products?

At the moment not every detail is clear, but as with any other product traded in Egypt, you have to get all the licenses and papers done in order to get the EDA required approval for export. Then comes the audit process, inspection and approval, we are very experienced with the process because we have done it over the years. In general, the EDA makes the process easy, if your product is not traded in the Egyptian market, you deal directly with an external agency. You get the privilege as a local manufacturer to export without complications.

EDA visits our GSK facilities frequently, for regular activities like materials sealing, batch release, and customs procedures but also every other year we have a GMP audit, which has to do with the structure of the facility and implementation of Quality Standards. Last month we had it and the outcome was very good.

In my opinion, the EDA has improved its method of conducting inspections which have led to us improving as well. EDA is aiming for WHO accreditation, leveraging their way to apply and monitor the standards and through open dialogue, we have managed to set some rules for standardized reporting which has led to better and clearer results. That will help us and other pharmaceutical companies that want to get a better position within the industry.

How often do you review what is being manufactured at the Cairo site?

It is all related to the investment plan, including all short and long-term plans. We see it as an annual plan that looks into the next five years. We focus on when and what new products or product lines to introduce as well as adding more volume on lines that need it and have the capacity to do so.

In addition to EDA's visits and monitoring, The Egyptian Authority for Unified Procurement (UPA) has also pushed us in the right direction. With goals of bettering the Egyptian healthcare system and maximising the country's resources, it organises the panorama a bit and gives us an idea of what is needed, thus helping us plan better for the future.

Given the current panorama of conflict in Ukraine, inflation, and supply chain disruptions, how are GSK's supply chain and manufacturing operations coping?

We need to stay strong, there has been a lot of change. If you have strong teams, tactics and well-thought-out long-term plans, you can keep the momentum going like us. We are proud to say that we have not closed any lines or products this year despite some incredible economic pressure hitting Egypt at the start of the year. Evidently, some rules changed, and regulations did as well, but we kept our production going while monitoring closely our inventory levels and keeping stock at a safe size. Critical and life-saving medical products have to be in the pipeline always, for that reason a good relationship and communication with regulatory entities was needed.

Now that we are heading to the end of the year, I can say that all of these quick changes made up for better results than we even expected. Be under extreme circumstances or regular ones, it is

important to be a strong team and stay connected, aiming to be faster in the future. It is important to look at the market and see with whom we can collaborate and have better results together.

Through events like the ones we are currently living through, we learn that we are not in competition but rather in collaboration and should focus more on local manufacturers that have the ability of operations to help us all.

What keeps you excited about your role at GSK's manufacturing facilities in Egypt?

Very small things make me excited. Bringing the kids into the factory and them being happy and proud of what is being done reassured me that I am doing the right thing. Looking at the bigger picture, our country is improving and reshaping the healthcare industry and we as GSK have the ability to participate and have a big role in this change. Furthermore, it makes me happy when I see volumes growing, because it means we will be able to support more patients.

Another thing to be proud of is how we have taken into account our environment and plan to be more green with our manufacturing. We have very concise and good plans for the next eight years and have already managed how to keep our waste safe (both sites are certified zero to landfill), both sites are, since 2020, free of ozone depletion substance (ODSP), also and we started to include and use renewable energy with solar panels. The company's vision for 2030 is to go net Zero carbon.

We share all of these goals and changes with our employees so that everyone understands and is on board with the changes. I think this will make all our environmental goals attainable, as we will all be on the same page.

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