

RÃ©my Levastre â?? Director of Healthcare Advisory Services, WSP Middle East



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RÃ©my Levastre

leads professional services firm WSPâ??s healthcare advisory services in the Middle East. Drawing on a diverse set of professional experiences, Levastre evaluates the influx and impact of cutting-edge digital tools into healthcare in his region, the opportunities and barriers to creating excellence in Middle East healthcare, and WSPâ??s ambitions to lead and be a trusted partner in the coming years.

We understand that you have an extensive career in some of the leading players in the pharma industry. What are the milestones and lessons you have learned through your experience prior to joining WSP?

My career has taken a different path than most. I started in France working for public hospitals in Assistance Public â?? Hopitaux de Paris (AP-HP). I then quickly got into digital and Information Technology (IT) in the early 2000s and learned the first step of digitalisation by being part of one of the first fully digitalised radiology departments in France. Devising innovative workflows and embracing the latest technologies for better patient diagnostics has always driven me. Working there was very insightful as it was very advanced in digital at that time.

I then progressed into a role with General Electric (GE) Healthcare in 2001, joining the European team in charge of application development and workflow consulting. I moved to Dubai with GE in 2003.

I held several leadership roles with GE. However, it was Project Management, IT professional services and Commercial leadership roles that helped me build a unique understanding of the entire delivery process focusing on client satisfaction and helping them to build innovative solutions to overcome challenges.

After my role leading the African market at GE Healthcare Digital for a few years, my last assignment at GE was based in the Middle East leading the development of solutions such as Tele-ICU (Intensive Care Unit). A key part of this role was working together with colleagues of the command centres and the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH). My clinical background helped me develop a better understanding of the whole process driving through the MOH's KPIs.

When it came time to move on from GE, the digital health knowledge I had learned and my grasp of the regional market's nuances propelled my expertise in an array of clinical solutions and applications. However, I was still curious to learn more about the new care delivery models. This led me to the start-up world, where I was thrilled to be immersed in the innovation-driven SME (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) realm. In the start-up experience, I wore several hats and developed entrepreneurial investor skillsets whilst working in private equity and incubation hubs. At this time I was working on my own advisory boutique, teaching other start-ups and SMEs on go-to-market strategies by offering digital health solutions to enhance the regional healthcare system. During this time I even had a collaboration with Microsoft in the Middle East as a mentor. Finally, I joined WSP in the Middle East in early 2022.

How did the pandemic impact your career?

At the time I was collaborating within the start-up world, and everything was very fast-paced with fairly new healthcare innovations such as telemedicine and wearables being explored and assessed for readiness in the healthcare industry. The pandemic was very eye-opening because until then we were focused on working with regular workflows. There was very little anticipation or sector-specific planning for a global pandemic.

Since joining WSP, my passion for anticipating future trends and challenges has been further boosted by the company's Future Ready mindset. This leading innovation programme is designed to deal with complex challenges facing infrastructure, buildings and cities, thus matching my eagerness to prepare for the unexpected megatrends and issues that could impact key sectors such as the healthcare industry. The best part of this initiative is that we are encouraged to take our clients along on the Future Ready journey in order to help them see the future more clearly and gain insight and advice about what is in store for the hospitals of the future. As the Advisory Director of Healthcare for WSP's Advisory Services business unit, I'm fortunate to be in a role that aims to implement innovative solutions in healthcare by tackling breakthroughs in the sustainability, social impact, and digital spheres. It is amazing to be part of something bigger than you, something to better the world.

What are your priorities as the healthcare head for WSP?

My first priority has been to understand WSP's regional and global healthcare competencies and leverage these in relation to the emerging needs of the Middle East healthcare sector.

The DNA of WSP is technology, innovation, and sustainability. As a professional services firm, WSP is also unique in that we are able to offer strategic advisory with technical backing. The company is focused on growing investment in digitalisation and creating sustainable communities to empower social, economic, and cultural transformation within the region. To achieve this end state, our core goal is to advise and help developers and investors understand the strategic goals of policymakers and public sector decision-makers. In the healthcare sector, we are proud to be empowering client journeys by ensuring their projects are patient-centric, sustainable, and underpinned by digital innovation with the overarching ambition to deliver world-class healthcare infrastructure for the future empowerment of the region and its people.

What are the main challenges that investors and companies face in the region? How do you see the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) evolving?

If you look at the GCC, the UAE is very prospective following Expo 2020 Dubai. By highlighting sustainability and mobility on the world stage, this engaged numerous leaders, innovators, and changemakers to champion new thinking about the future of society. This megaevent inspired a lot of positive change, and the feeling that change is in the air inspired the wider GCC to take a look at future social and economic development opportunities.

In the wake of this, the UAE has been working to position itself as a MedTech hub and a place for innovation. Dubai is fostering knowledge and probably the next step for the UAE will be applied research, new inventions, and the proliferation of more findings. The region has big goals and most of them are focused on the well-being of the people as well as positioning itself as a global hotspot for medical tourism in the near future. The UAE is already buzzing and attracting some of the best doctors from around the world. There are also many collaborations with high-quality American and European providers. The model will be different than in other countries but will lead to an increase in this type of tourism.

At the moment I think the UAE and Saudi Arabia should focus on local production, and laboratory projects should be done locally, consequently gaining autonomy and making the process more sustainable. To do so, future talent should be educated in line with these goals and there has been a push from the higher up to motivate scientists, and offer the best quality of life to attract and motivate the best caregivers in the world.

In Saudi Arabia, I see big opportunities for investors in the large public-private partnerships (PPPs), where there is already an estimated 48 billion riyals of initial capital investment destined to be invested into these projects for the next years in parallel with Saudi Vision 2030 developments. Also, there is an intention to invest massively in digital and artificial intelligence (AI) in regional development with Global collaborations. If we believe on the long-term AI will be more important, it is very important for the region to own their AI development, incorporating regional data warehouses to enrich their algorithms and collaboration between Academics, University hospitals and Technology vendors and innovators to stay on top of global medical trends.

The GCC has partnered with some of the leading hospitals in the world like the Cleveland Clinic, John Hopkins hospital with the Clemenceau Medical Center (CMC) and the King Faisal Specialist Hospital (KFSH). Do you think hospitals are an easy and quick investment option

for shareholders and has this created an over-investment?

At the moment, I spend a lot of my time in Saudi Arabia where there is an opportunity to scale on new healthcare facilities. Currently, there is a shortage of bed capacity, and there is an opportunity for niche specialities to be expanded upon. Most challenges can be solved by the privatization efforts led by NCP, MOH and other Health Clusters.

Modernising primary care is key to offering a better service to the largest cohorts of any population. There is a large need to continue building capacities for tertiary hospitals. There is high demand for modernising the primary care sector. It is necessary to build the infrastructure up, have the best practitioners, and for the patients to trust their community care centres, many of which could offer the best healthcare services served by the latest technologies taking advantage of telemedicine for specialists for example.

Health centres should be abundant and diverse. Any future investment should be made in line with a need to solve current issues, but always be a step ahead to reduce shortfalls in speciality areas such as cardiology, cancer or oncology. This needs to expand to also cover new health ailments like obesity or diabetes for example.

There are many exciting opportunities in the region. What projects is WSP focusing on outside Saudi Arabia?

Our overall focus is on our core geographies including UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait, whilst our healthcare focus is on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. What WSP presents as an added value is the change of landscape for observation; promoting change and improving the healthcare system.

As mentioned above, WSP is committed to being Future Ready, meaning we seek to anticipate the unknown and what is to come whilst remaining adaptable and flexible to external shocks. We want to help build hospitals that are modern and current for at least 45 years and beyond. In order to do this, we need to keep up with trends and be a pioneer of innovation.

The key elements for the hospital of the future are flexibility, resilience and security. To achieve patient-centric, decarbonised visions for healthcare delivery in the region, we first must understand technology conversion and integration within hospitals of the future. A sector underpinned by digital will bring about numerous benefits, but getting to this desired state takes collective innovation, collaboration, and investment.

From your perspective, what does excellence in healthcare mean to the patients?

Defining excellence in healthcare is simple – it's creating a seamless, patient-first, value-based model that is technologically enriched to provide always-on, healthcare everywhere models of care delivery

Although we need to promote more Prevention, Health Education and continue the efforts on telemedicine, we need a better integration to the primary care network to the community.

There is an urgent need to largely increase and upgrade the Primary care clinics (PCC) network in order to allow patients to receive the best care in closer proximity to where they live, work, and play.

Therefore, we need to use the latest knowledge in Clinic design and innovation, examine lessons learned from COVID-19, and establish trust with the population to receive best-in-class care in those centres using Technology and patient experience as a differentiator.

Those PCCs should be a space for the community to connect with their caregivers, learn about prevention, undertake health education, and engage in social events. In light of this, the role of the hospital will be reserved for the most critical and complex cases and vulnerable patients as well as becoming a technology hub for precision diagnostic and acute treatments.

What would be the selling point for stakeholders in the GCC to collaborate with WSP to create the future of healthcare?

We are key enablers as Technical Advisors for Healthcare. Given our expertise in the Public Private Partnership sector, we have the strategic know-how and technical expertise required to lead and advise consortiums and developers delivering the best bids for both Greenfield and brownfield projects in support of healthcare transformation in the GCC.

We have the knowledge about patient engagement, caregiver wellness, and sustainability required to fulfil this vision. Ministries, policymakers and hospitals need to undertake the step-change required to embed NetZero strategies and decarbonisation and be leaders of this change. With advancements in medical tourism, we are also able to help our clients navigate opportunities as this becomes a key area of regional economic diversification within healthcare.

Sustainability cannot progress without wellness, and wellness puts an impact on the people at the front. With COVID-19, healthcare changed from being very fixed and vertical to being more about hospitality and the people; a more horizontal structure.

Where is WSP going in the next couple of years?

We want to lead in different areas, such as sustainable healthcare, decarbonisation, and privatisation. We also want to build the best healthcare infrastructure and help private investors to build the most suitable healthcare solutions in alignment with policy direction. Additionally, we want to lead in the digital space, with smart hospitals, smart infrastructure and harness digital's potential to enhance sustainability. Whether it's the Internet of Things (IOT) reducing energy consumption, or telemedicine to avoid unnecessary hospital visits, we're here as trusted advisors to connect the dots and augment a paradigm shift in healthcare.

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