Sarper Tanli – Founding Partner & CEO, Diginova Health Solutions

The GCC as a region is very dynamic and has transformed very quickly in the last couple of years. As an emerging market, it has a lot to offer and is still very flexible and open to change.

18.08.2022

Tags: Middle East & Africa, MENA, GCC, UAE, Diginova, Digital, Health Tech

Diginova Health Solutions is a platform that incubates and invests in digital health startups and collaborates with governments and regulators to bring digital solutions to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Healthcare management veteran, founding partner & CEO, Sarper Tanli, discusses the opportunities and challenges posed by digitilisation and the "system-wide transformation" underway in the region.

With almost 30 years of experience in the healthcare sector under your belt and involvement in the banking, hospital, and pharma industries, could you tell us about your professional journey?

I have 32 years of experience. I am a physician and practised emergency medicine for two years before deciding to move into the management aspect of healthcare. With this change, I went back to school and got my master's degree in healthcare management and was lucky enough to live in the USA for six years, working at one of the country's largest medical centres, the Houston Methodist Medical Centre in Texas. At the time I was learning how one could manage diseases by working hand-in-hand with the patient. At the beginning of this period, I worked on clinical pathways -which later were implemented everywhere-, I was one of the people who started it (in the early 1990s). For that, I have received accolades and have copyrights too. I set up

management departments, check how we can better patient outcomes and even learned some computing systems and languages to do analytics.

After that my career was linked to start-ups and new projects in healthcare. For example, in Turkey, I opened the first private hospital with joint commission accreditation – a tertiary care hospital, one of the first home healthcare companies, and the first disease management and telemedicine companies…overall the early 2000s were a whirlwind for me. Within seven years I worked on five different start-ups.

I then decided to further my academic goals and finished a PhD in healthcare management, specifically disease management. Harvard Medical School was amazed by the experience, and I was recruited as an international global consultant, working with governments. Immediately I was deployed to Dubai to work in the healthcare sector. I started in Dubai as a planning director where I set the first data exchange platform in the region, which was the predecessor of the more advanced systems we used today.

Following that role, I worked in many other divisions: regulations in healthcare city, the first complementary alternative medicine regulations, and many others. The issue was to regulate what had not been regulated before and provide structure. After I concluded my work with Harvard Medical, I went back to Houston Methodist in Dubai in their global medical consulting practise, where I led as vice president. This role brought me back to work with start-ups again, being with governmental projects or private sector ones, helping from conception to the clinic opening.

I have worked with city hall, King Fahd’s government, and smaller projects with the Minister of Health regarding breast imaging technicians to do better screenings for women. Outside GCC there were many other projects in Europe in Croatia, Austria, Poland, and many other countries. Then I decided to go back to operations, as it was more consulting-based and we were the ones responsible for profits. Around this time, I was appointed group CEO for Manzil -a home health company in UAE- and also became an operating partner of a private equity firm which owns Manzil. I did that for 4 years and helped it establish itself as the first regional format, management, telemedicine company.

What was the motivation behind the creation of Diginova?

When I chose to go into investing in private equity firms, the idea of Diginova was already taking shape. We were already very digitalised, everything was done paperless, training was done from a

distance, patients were being monitored offline and doctors were implementing digital solutions for the practice. Other companies had not even started to digitalise or even do telecommunications, know about these developments it was needed to invest in companies that were open to such solutions and that is how Diginova came to be…it was the company to close the gap. Not only did we as a company modernise others, but for those who were already digitalised, we could offer other digital solutions, certify, and validate practices or help them do better. Diginova gives digital solutions adapted to the region and invest in those companies that could help be better…we are a diverse digital platform that offers real solutions and collaborates with all parties involved.

Diginova is a young company but already has a great portfolio of partners. How do companies generally approach you?

The companies usually find us through our rich network. It is important for us to understand why the companies want to come to the region and what they need to do in order to be successful. There are other companies that are already here, but their plans got stuck and the plan did not move forward. We offer solutions in digital and how to approach the different stakeholders in this market. If the company fits into our overall strategy this is straightforward, but if it does not, we need to be honest and communicate that to them.

What are some of the challenges and opportunities of digitalisation in this region?

There are many opportunities in the UAE because there are already strategies, as well as a mission and vision in place for the country’s healthcare sector. There is also leadership and openness to digitalisation and many other initiatives countrywide. There are big things planned but still a lot to do and anyone should take advantage of these opportunities. Every country has different needs, but there are already documents with the digital blueprint for the future plans in the sector, from disease prevention to long-term care, homecare and other areas, all of which require digital solutions. As an emerging market, possibilities are endless.

As it all is very new, investments are not flowing in like in other markets, but it should happen soon with all the plans for the region. Not everything is here, and we still rely on some solutions from the US or Europe. There are also opportunities in the insurance sector because the patients pay out of pocket -even though we have private and public systems- and insurance companies could offer a benefit for the patients and therefore will need digital solutions as well. We could smooth the

process in this sector so that people have an overall better healthcare experience.

With COVID we saw that the benefits of telecommunicating and teleconsultation are here to stay. By using digital solutions and appreciating them, commercialisation becomes much easier. This applied to the therapeutic area, we see physicians can handle cases much faster while giving a more personalised treatment. There are also patient engagement solutions, to educate patients and remotely monitor them, thus letting them take charge of their lives and adapt their lifestyle to the solutions provided, with the option of connecting back with doctors when needed, connecting with the insurance companies without paper or long lines…we are talking about creating a better cycle or dynamic for the healthcare ecosystem. In spite of our actions and the readiness of the region to plan, people have to be open to digitalisation in order for all of it to work, that is the reason why education is fundamental.

What trends do you foresee in the future of the GCC?

The next big thing happening is “system-wide transformation”, referring to a renovation of the current system that is not working together well. Regulators do their thing, and providers might be doing a great job, but they are not communicating, there is a disconnect. It is necessary to step back and create the foundation of a value-based healthcare system, that requires regulators to support finance; finance should give providers incentives to do better and it all should be interconnected and transparent. This connectivity is key and everything else is complimentary.

Being more tactical, a focus on lifestyle diseases like cancer and heart disease will come up. Also, mental health will be more talked about in the region. Overall, it is to look at how people are living and what burdens them and correct the healthcare system and economy to better attend to these needs. Changes in diagnostics, therapeutic, connectivity and support of patients are the trend.

How will Diginova grow in the next couple of years?

Essentially, we at Diginova would like to create and connect communities in the healthcare sector by bringing digital solutions to the practice, hospitals, or the manager’s desk to be able to reach the region’s goals. We want to at least have one supporting solution working with one of the stakeholders in the market, we have to start small to do it right and consolidate the foundations of the change we want to bring. We consider pharma the biggest stakeholder but also insurance companies, hospitals, clinics medical call centres, etc. We are open to working with any of them.

To conclude, what would you tell stakeholders and our readers about the attractiveness of the GCC as a region and Diginova as a company?

The GCC as a region is very dynamic and has transformed very quickly in the last couple of years. As an emerging market, it has a lot to offer and is still very flexible and open to change. It is great for smaller companies that want to go global. They would need to be aware of the different business practices here but also look into getting all the information needed to be able to be successful. Finally, they need to be patient with how it all works and to prove that what they offer is good and needed.

Diginova promises that our digital team will focus on creating commercial opportunities for your products and be honest about the timing and success of the business. We are flexible, but we also need flexibility from companies that want to work with us. Perseverance is key and we will commercialise it in the best way possible.

In the end, success is to be able and impact -positively- people’s lives and healthcare put us in a position to do so. If you are passionate and are motivated by what you do, then you will strive to be more successful. I am very fortunate and consider myself very successful and plan that others achieve this as well.

See more interviews