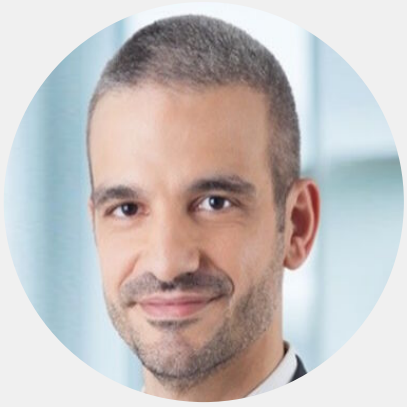
Sérgio Alves – Country President, AstraZeneca Portugal



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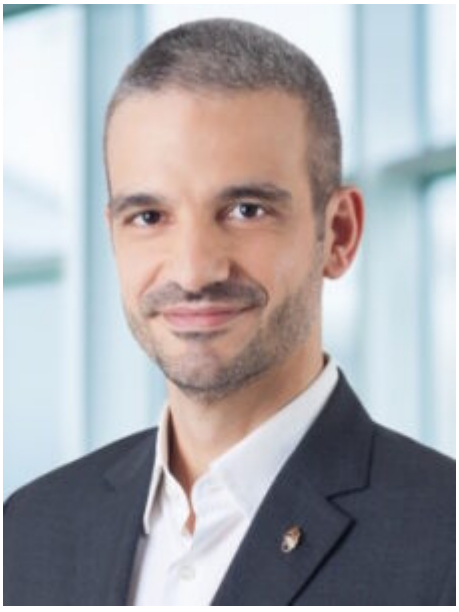
Sérgio Alves describes the personal and professional factors that drove his return to Portugal, where he draws on enriching experiences gained from working in various European markets. He also discusses how AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine served as a jumping-off point for more wide-ranging discussions with governmental stakeholders, and the affiliate's positive trajectory fueled by innovation, a robust product portfolio, and a highly motivated team.



Having worked in various European markets, what prompted your decision to return to Portugal, and what valuable experiences did you bring back with you?

My decision to return to Portugal was driven by a combination of personal and professional factors. Firstly, I have a strong bias that Portugal is the best place to live! Additionally, my international experiences allowed me to explore and gain a better understanding of the world beyond my home country. The stimulation of experiencing different cultures and the support from my family, who were willing to embark on these adventures, played a crucial role. After my first international stint in Paris, I returned to Portugal in 2009 to join Pfizer However, my positive experience in Paris confirmed that living abroad was feasible and enriching. Subsequently, I pursued another international role as Business Unit Lead in Slovakia in 2014, followed by a regional role overseeing the retail portfolio of Europe, while remaining in Bratislava. My last role abroad was as Business Unit Director in Austria in 2017-2018. Eventually, I returned to Portugal in 2019 to lead the hospital business unit of 6 markets at Pfizer. This journey equipped me with diverse experiences and perspectives, reinforcing the value of international exposure in both personal and professional growth.

Transitioning from Pfizer to AstraZeneca, especially as a Country President, must have been a significant decision. What factors influenced your choice to take on this role and what was set as main objective?

The transition from Pfizer to AstraZeneca and assuming the role of Country President was indeed a significant decision. The decision-making process was difficult due to the gratitude I felt towards Pfizer, where I had spent 12 years and had a fantastic experience that contributed significantly to my personal and professional growth. The idea of leading a growing business like AstraZeneca in my home country was highly attractive, and the opportunity to apply and expand my knowledge was compelling. Ultimately, after careful consideration, I decided to embrace the role and have been serving as the Country President of AstraZeneca Portugal since January 2021.

Back in 2021, the company was already on an exciting growth journey with a robust pipeline. The primary goal was to continue this growth trajectory while simultaneously establishing a strong organizational culture. AstraZeneca aimed to create an open and collaborative work environment, fostering a culture of innovation and employee engagement.

Given the challenges in the Portuguese market, particularly around access to innovation, my international experience became a valuable asset. The task involving leveraging my understanding of the local market landscape, addressing access issues, and contributing to the overall growth and success of AstraZeneca in Portugal. The combination of wanting the company to thrive in a

challenging environment and having a leader with both Portuguese and international experience aligned well with the company's goals.

Starting amid the pandemic surely added a layer of complexity…..

My entry into AstraZeneca Portugal coincided with the challenges posed by the pandemic, compelling me to adapt my leadership approach. Acknowledging the unique circumstances, I formulated a comprehensive 90-day plan to swiftly connect with the 200 employees virtually and address immediate concerns arising from the ongoing crisis. Emphasizing the importance of unconventional yet effective involvement, I aimed to create a sense of pride within the organization, particularly given AstraZeneca's pivotal role in developing a COVID-19 vaccine.

The complexities extended beyond internal dynamics to the external spotlight on vaccine development and supply issues. Notably, our involvement in vaccine manufacturing and Portugal's presidency of the Council of Europe heightened media attention. This situation presented an opportunity to engage directly with the government and health authorities, facilitating discussions on overcoming challenges and strengthening partnerships.

Despite the unconventional start, these initial months allowed me to expedite onboarding, establish transparent communication channels, and position myself not just as a representative but as a leader acting on behalf of the employees. The focus remained on fostering a resilient organizational culture and steering AstraZeneca Portugal through a challenging yet transformative period.

How did this unexpected entry point around vaccines serve as a leverage point for broader discussions and engagements with authorities?

The initial emphasis on vaccine development and engagement with public stakeholders amid the pandemic served as a strategic entry point. It not only brought AstraZeneca into the public consciousness but also provided a powerful lever for subsequent discussions with authorities and other stakeholders. This visibility was crucial in laying the groundwork for more in-depth conversations beyond the immediate focus on vaccines.

As the public became acquainted with AstraZeneca through its involvement in vaccine development, it opened doors to discuss the company's broader portfolio and ambitious goals in

the pharmaceutical industry. Once the urgency of the pandemic subsided, we could pivot these connections to showcase AstraZeneca's impressive pipeline, highlight our position as industry leaders – already within the top three – and articulate our commitment to advancing the pharmaceutical landscape. The initial vaccine-centric engagement acted as a catalyst, creating a foundation for more comprehensive dialogues about the company's long-term vision and achievements.

What is the rationale behind the rather high headcount of AstraZeneca Portugal, considering the limited size of the Portuguese market?

The difference in employee count between AstraZeneca Portugal and other affiliates can be attributed to a combination of factors. It doesn't necessarily indicate additional departments but rather reflects strategic investments in specific areas. For instance, as a commercial organization, our sizable sales force aligns with the strength of our primary care-driven portfolio. This portfolio, which includes cardiovascular, renal, metabolic and respiratory disease products, contributes to a larger sales force compared to companies that may lean more toward specialty care only.

Moreover, our diverse business units, spanning cardiovascular, respiratory, immunology, and oncology, play a pivotal role. We are making strides in specialty care, especially in oncology, where we are poised to become number four in Portugal. The integration of vaccines, particularly those addressing COVID-19, further adds to our organizational complexity. It's important to note that the rare disease portfolio, associated with Alexion (acquired by AstraZeneca), operates as a separate business unit. While not part of the AstraZeneca Portugal affiliate structurally, it significantly contributes to our overall organizational expertise.

Could you elaborate on the role of the medical department and its significance within the Portuguese healthcare landscape, and how AstraZeneca is addressing the observed gap in structured data within the country's healthcare system?

The medical department at AstraZeneca Portugal plays a crucial role. This significance is attributed to the expertise and capabilities of our Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs) and medical advisers, fostering unique conversations with healthcare professionals (HCPs). Their ability to engage in complementary discussions, coupled with a robust portfolio in primary and specialty care, enhances the department's importance.

Recognizing the gap in structured data within the Portuguese healthcare landscape, particularly in decision-making, AstraZeneca is actively addressing this issue. The company collaborated with the Portuguese Association of Hospital Administrators, conducting surveys that highlight the deficit in hospital data. To contribute to filling this crucial gap, AstraZeneca engages in workshops, healthcare forums, and partnerships to emphasize the importance of a structured approach to data.

Regarding responsibility for bridging the data gap, AstraZeneca believes it should be a shared effort. This involves initiatives funded by the European budget and private companies like AstraZeneca. The company, through its Evidence Generation team, is committed to playing a proactive role in data generation. A dedicated team within the medical department collaborates with medical societies and hospitals in Portugal, exemplified by initiatives like the ongoing "PORTHOS Study," assessing heart failure prevalence.

How would you rate the current level of trust between the pharmaceutical industry, the government, and society in Portugal?

The question of trust is indeed crucial, and we acknowledge that there is significant work to be done to strengthen trust between pharmaceutical companies, such as AstraZeneca, and both the government and society. Post-pandemic, there has been a positive shift in perception, particularly with a better understanding of the critical role played by the innovative pharmaceutical industry. The rapid development of vaccines enabling a quicker return to normalcy has contributed to this positive shift.

However, it is essential to recognize that there is still much to establish and address in terms of building trust. In direct conversations with the government, there is an acknowledgement of common goals and a shared platform for collaboration. AstraZeneca believes that additional steps need to be taken to further confirm the commitment to societal well-being and healthcare improvement. While there is trust within specialized healthcare stakeholders, the broader society requires ongoing efforts to demonstrate the pharmaceutical industry's dedication to contributing to better health.

Assessing AstraZeneca's performance in Portugal, how would you describe the current trajectory?

AstraZeneca Portugal is currently experiencing a positive trajectory, primarily fueled by both innovation and a robust portfolio of products. The organization is thriving, with a highly motivated team engaged in delivering health solutions to patients in Portugal and globally. The focus on innovation has resulted in a plethora of new products from all our business units: CVRM – Cardiovascular, Renal and Metabolic; Respiratory & Immunology; Oncology; Vaccines & Immune Therapies).

Despite the positive momentum, one of the main challenges facing AstraZeneca in Portugal is ensuring access to these innovative solutions. The sheer volume of offerings and the need for innovative approaches in accessing them pose significant hurdles. Traditionally, methodologies for financing and access have followed a certain pattern, but the evolving landscape of innovation demands a fresh perspective. AstraZeneca is ready to explore alternative avenues and discussions on different access models such as value-sharing agreements..

In navigating these challenges, the organization emphasizes the importance of trust among stakeholders. AstraZeneca acknowledges the need for a shift from traditional approaches and seeks to foster understanding among all stakeholders, encouraging a collaborative effort to find innovative solutions. There is a call for a fresh pair of eyes and a collective commitment to trailblazing new access schemes, recognizing Portugal’s potential as a hub for innovative approaches in the pharmaceutical industry.

What are some of the key initiatives that AstraZeneca Portugal is engaging in today?

AstraZeneca in Portugal is actively engaged in various initiatives and has achieved carbon neutrality for the past few years, implementing environmentally friendly practices. Notable efforts include the installation of 800 solar panels, the move to a car fleet that is 100% made of Electric Vehicles until mid-2024 and anone innovative partnership to donate energy to a nearby hospital. The company is at the forefront of European legislation on community energy and collaborates with hospitals to analyze and reduce their carbon footprint. A recent example is the AstraZeneca Sustainability Summit held in Portugal, showcasing global initiatives and featuring a competition for startups focused on achieving a Net Zero health system. The focus is not only on decarbonization “per se”, but while keeping patients care front and center.

Our commitment to ethics and transparency is demonstrated through its sustainability initiatives. The organization is actively involved in initiatives such as the Sustainable Markets Initiative, chaired by CEO Pascal Soriot, which aims to find sustainable ways of production involving global

pharmaceutical companies.

Looking ahead to 2024, what are the key agenda items for AstraZeneca in Portugal?

In 2024, AstraZeneca in Portugal has a multifaceted agenda. One significant focus is on product launches, where the company is enthusiastic about its innovative portfolio and aims to ensure Portuguese patients have access to cutting-edge treatments. Simultaneously, maintaining AstraZeneca as an excellent workplace is a priority, emphasizing the need for a motivated team working in a conducive environment.

A notable achievement for AstraZeneca in Portugal is being recognized as the Best Place to Work across all industries, a testament to the organization’s commitment to creating a positive and thriving work culture. The leadership team places a strong emphasis on providing the right conditions and psychological safety for employees to excel.

Looking beyond internal achievements, AstraZeneca is keen to collaborate with authorities and other stakeholders in Portugal to contribute to solving healthcare challenges. Recognizing the existing issues and potential conflicts of interest, the company aims to be part of the solution. This involves actively participating in discussions, understanding the country’s unique challenges, and seeking ways to improve access, patient care, and the overall healthcare ecosystem.

AstraZeneca acknowledges the ongoing marathon of healthcare improvement and commits to being a consistent and reliable contributor. Despite potential clashes and challenges, the company remains steadfast in its long-term commitment to Portugal. The emphasis is on building trust, finding common ground, and collectively working towards shared goals for the betterment of healthcare in the country. AstraZeneca seeks to play a pivotal role in improving access, patient care, and fostering a more robust data ecosystem in Portugal, aligning with broader European benchmarks.

As the company looks to the future, it aims to leverage its positive reputation and explore opportunities for collaboration and investments that align with its commitment to elevating subsidiary operations. While acknowledging the complexities of healthcare improvement, AstraZeneca remains dedicated to being a proactive and influential participant in the healthcare landscape of Portugal.

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