Renée C. Amundsen – Global Head of Business Innovation, Merck Healthcare



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Merck Healthcare's newly appointed Global Head of Business innovation, Renée C. Amundsen, highlights the numerous opportunities for change management that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown up, why company-HCP interaction might never be the same again, and shares some pearls of wisdom for other women in pharma.

Could you begin by outlining your career trajectory up to this point?

I started my pharmaceutical industry career in 2001 as a representative for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and followed a relatively traditional path within the company, quickly moving into product management and taking on roles of increasing levels of responsibility in the commercial organization.

I joined Merck in November 2013 as General Manager (GM) and Managing Director (MD) for the Norwegian healthcare business. There was a lot of work to do as I inherited an affiliate that had been through a lot of changes. Moreover, Merck had recently been restructured with a view to establishing a Nordic cluster.

From day one, our fantastic Merck Norway team worked relentlessly to bring our innovative medicines to patients. It has been an amazing journey, and together, over three years, we

managed to quadruple sales, whilst also leading the successful launch of an innovative treatment for multiple sclerosis (MS).

Five years later I took over responsibility for Merck's healthcare business in the Nordics and the Netherlands, whilst continuing to hold my GM and MD responsibilities in Norway; another hat to wear. The Nordics and Netherlands (NorNe) cluster was entirely new and had to be built from the bottom up, but there were a lot of synergies to be leveraged.

The new cluster needed a clear direction. We had to translate the global strategy into something concrete for the cluster, the different countries and perhaps most importantly for each team and each individual, establishing frameworks for cross-functional collaboration and allowing our people to believe that we could make things happen together. We put a lot of emphasis on reforming both the business and the company culture to be able to work as one for patients and to reach our commercial goals.

It is important to remember that all the Nordic countries and the Netherlands are innovation-focused geographies. They are also early launch markets, so timelines for launches are similar and companies like Merck can really benefit from coordinating launch preparations. The Nordics and the Netherlands also have quite similar healthcare systems and are very digital-savvy. We aimed to use the cluster as a way of testing new modes of operating, and new tools and channels.

Renée C. Amundsen – Global Head of Business Innovation, Merck Healthcare from Pharma Boardroom on Vimeo.

In August 2020, you took on the new role of Global Head of Business Innovation, your first as part of a global leadership team. Congratulations! What are the top items on your agenda sheet?

Thank you! It is an exciting opportunity. My previous roles have been profit and loss (P&L) focused and very results-driven, but now I must look at the business and our operations from a different perspective. I see this new role as an enabler; helping regions and countries to achieve their objectives.

Right now, I am very much in the learning and listening mode, getting to know my employees and understand our areas of responsibility and how we can contribute to Merck's and our colleague's success. I see Merck's Global Business Innovation (GBI) unit as the spider in a dense, extensive map of internal stakeholders, so I am also prioritising making connections throughout the company. That's a privilege; I get a lot of energy from working with people all over the world and

from driving innovation. The GBI unit is made up of a group of experienced colleagues with different areas of expertise. It encompasses several different sub-groups, covering operations in multi-channel management (MCM), business operations and processes, capability building, commercial excellence, and insight and analytics. GBI works at the interface between franchise and affiliates, helping them to translate and operationalize their strategies. We are the agents of internal change; nudging to transform the way that we operate.

We manage several of the channels Merck uses to execute its MCM strategy, including virtual congress tools, a customer relationship management (CRM) system with integrated marketing campaigns, webinar solutions, and various other digital interfaces. Our insight and analytics support strategic decision-making for the franchise as well. It is truly global. We work across all units, apart from the US and Canada.

What challenges have you faced in taking on your new role during a global pandemic and what opportunities does this environment present for recalibrating the industry model?

As a people person, I did face some initial difficulties. There are things you miss out on when using only digital format such as informal conversations around the coffee machine and the great ideas that arise from people sitting in the same room together. I am therefore looking forward to travelling to Merck headquarters in Darmstadt and meeting my colleagues in person!

However, now is a good time to rethink our business model. I have been vocal about this topic for years. Perhaps the global pandemic was the push we needed to get to this point. While the ecosystem we operate in is in constant flux, the traditional industry operational model is almost the same as it was 15 years ago and the digital tools that we now use every day were available to us two years ago. Rethinking how we operate is therefore vital.

At Merck, we are now capitalizing on digital investments we made in the past. The pandemic immediately accelerated the adoption of new technologies and lockdowns meant we had no other way of connecting with our stakeholders.

In the Nordics there was initial hesitancy from healthcare professionals (HCPs), who generally prefer face-to-face interactions, but they were quick to adopt new technologies and really saw the benefits. I now strongly believe that we will never go back to where we were, but will eventually arrive at something of a hybrid model between face-to-face and digital.

In what ways is Merck already a frontrunner in terms of the integration of innovative digital tools? How do you hope to build on this legacy?

Merck has always invested heavily in digitalisation, and we have been able to capitalise on these investments during the pandemic. Now, we need to prepare for the next new normal. The recent appointment of Dr Michelangelo Canzoneri as Chief Digital Officer shows the importance that Merck places on digitalisation in its corporate strategy. Dr Canzoneri will further strengthen the value that Merck is able to bring to patients and HCPs by unlocking our company's full digital potential.

Going forward, Merck has room to improve by making greater use of real-world data (RWD), artificial intelligence (AI), and novel technologies. There are vast inequalities between different locations, so we need to bring everyone, across the organization, up to the same standards.

You are Norwegian and have spent the majority of your career in Norway. What role do you think Norway can have in the global life sciences industry?

Norway has a highly sustainable healthcare system built on equality and the principle that regardless of your socio-economic status, you should be given the same treatment. Spending per capita is relatively high, but Norway pays some of the lowest prices for pharmaceuticals amongst all OECD countries. The Norwegian healthcare system is very budget-oriented meaning that there is limited access to innovative drugs, particularly in cancer treatment, where there is high unmet need. Many of the neighbouring countries gain access much earlier. The reimbursement system is currently being evaluated. I believe it will be improved. We need a system that's both sustainable and ensures that patients gain equal access quickly to new methods not just in theory but in practice.However, Norway is the perfect location for clinical trials thanks to its high-quality patient registries, where every patient has a unique identity number. From a data generation perspective, Norway is in the same situation as Denmark and Finland; now, we simply need to make Norway an attractive country in which to run clinical trials. Incentives need to be created at the clinical level and we need to ensure that patients benefit from clinical trials and have access to the innovative treatments that are being tested.

Belén Garijo will become CEO of Merck in April 2021, moving from CEO of the healthcare business and becoming only the second female Big Pharma CEO. How would you

characterise Merck's commitment to diversity and what advice do you have for women starting their careers in the pharmaceutical industry?

Merck takes diversity very seriously. We are currently running several initiatives to support diversity and inclusion across the organization, including initiatives focused on making sure women go into leadership positions.

I personally mentor several women across our organization, and there are a few commonalities. First, us women need to be more courageous. We should dare to take the next step, even if we are not 100 percent comfortable that we fulfil the entire skillset criteria. Often, women want to be on the safe side – that is something I hear repeatedly from my mentees in conversations.

Many women are also concerned about work-life balance and the impact taking on a new role will have on their family. I always say that you have the freedom to choose a different path. In the end, you have the power to change your mind.

Secondly, I would advise women to build their network. Do not sit and wait for someone to come along and tell you that they have the perfect job for you. You must speak up and be vocal about your aspirations and career goals.

Thirdly, be authentic. Don't fall into the trap of emulating men in their leadership style. Stay true to who you are, because in my experience that is the best route to success.

Going forwards, what are you most excited about in your new position?

Right now, I am super excited about the numerous opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has opened. We now have the chance to step back, revisit, and redefine our organization. I wish the pandemic had never happened, but it has been a real nudger for innovation. We must use this momentum and permanently change and adjust the way that we operate and the way that we interact with patients and other stakeholders.

At the moment, we do not really know what sort of situation we will go back to and what the future will bring. That prospect really excites me as I am passionate about managing change.

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