

Working through the Covid-19 impact

A conversation with Vaidheesh Annaswamy, President, OPPI

By Sonny Iqbal, Niveditha Viswanathan with
Pooja Sabharwal, Swati Joshi
March 20, 2020



At first thought, Covid – 19 appears to invoke chaos, unprecedented impact and geometric change in situations every day. However, we have seen versions of this before, specifically around the emergence of the 2003 SARS Crisis, which was a healthcare issue that crippled many communities. Crises of this nature push the boundary on leadership, agility and thoughtfulness; while dealing with ever changing demands of work and life. Egon Zehnder interviewed Vaidheesh Annaswamy, President, OPPI; and invited his advice and insights to leaders navigating the Coronavirus outbreak. Below is a summary of our conversation.

EZ: Given your deep experience in managing unexpected events at leading healthcare organizations, how do you view this crisis?

Vaidheesh: This is not an apocalypse, it is another moment of an infectious disease affecting our society. When we group together as human beings, we will constantly see new bugs. SARS did affect day-to-day living previously, but Coronavirus is far more contagious. In addition, we have to understand that this infectious spread has occurred in a well-connected world of economic activity. Hence, what we are seeing apart from the infectious crisis is a financial crisis, which is affecting the world at a very large scale. Nevertheless, I am hopeful that we will see the health crisis settling down in about three months from now. People across the world are exploring ways to manage this crisis and digitization is playing a big part in this. We have examples of China, Singapore and South Korea that have successfully flattened the curve. In India, people understand that we have to contain the spread at stage 2 and development of this basic understanding is great baseline. I understand there is a scare and uncertainty among populations worldwide, but I would like to highlight one positive point about this virus as compared to the viruses we have witnessed in the past - the mortality rate is not as significant, except the fact that it is highly infectious. Viruses have a self-limiting cycle and this too shall pass in some time. I am very hopeful.

EZ: How do you see healthcare and pharma organizations dealing with this situation?

Vaidheesh: We all understand that the need of the hour is to keep social distance, but at the same time, it is important to keep things moving as well. Strong leadership plays a great part in this. I see most companies making arrangements wherein people are working from home or only a small number are in office at a time.

Leaders are also taking enough care to create comfortable working spaces and having people rotate based on their work needs. Many organizations are making sure that someone from the leadership team is available, for those who are at office as well as to address any concerns.

Some teams are using this time to train and retrain staff on best practices, technology and trends in the industry. This forced situation is a good time for sharing learnings across teams, focusing on internal improvements and process efficiencies; which typically come after quarterly KPIs. Today's digital day and age has made discussions and pilots quick; and that is a good thing for all organizations as they are thinking about ways to adapt.

EZ: How do you think digitization helps pharma (and other) organizations survive this crisis?

Vaidheesh: I think this crisis will see digitization as an upside for all industries along with pharma. We had already started on our digital journey, but this crisis has accelerated the whole process. We are seeing increasing use of applications and tools for team communication, trainings, and insightful analytics. This situation has fueled greater adoption across most organizations, as everybody is adjusting to find ways of efficiency. I truly believe that more efficiency and newer applications will emerge in the near future due to this shift.

EZ: How far are we from a vaccine or a solution?

Vaidheesh: Globally, many companies are working on finding a solution for Covid-19 and we have seen pharma players accelerate their programs. I am hopeful that in 3-4 months' time, we might have something validated; perhaps on drug development, but that could be an expensive drug to start with. Many pharma companies have had focus areas around the Coronavirus already in their pipeline, but since this a new manifestation, the industry is working more aggressively in response. In addition, vaccine development involves trials, development of the conjugate and creating enough supply. So public sector and Government involvement becomes key to determine overall access.

EZ: What are some remnant challenges in the near future?

Vaidheesh: I believe supply chains across industries will have some significant challenges. And across geographies, markets are under stress themselves; and this may in turn create more economic pressure in the coming months. Things will eventually stabilize, but it is all about what happens in the interim.

In addition, in India and perhaps APAC in particular, there are many Small and Medium Enterprises involved in pharma and other industries' supply chain, which might get deeply hurt in the immediate future. However, if Governments can open their war chest and support these suppliers with dedicated focus, then it might help reduce the extent of damage.

EZ: Do you think in the short term, this event changes either ways of business or areas of focus for biopharma companies?

Vaidheesh: I do not think anything fundamentally changes for pharma players in terms of business. New discoveries and focus areas require volume. We develop solutions based on intensity of disease and pharma companies do not come up with drugs on communicable diseases on their own, they move with what they are seeing and predicting. A lot of it also depends on how the Government sees the impact of infectious diseases and their involvement plays a major part.

EZ: How do think India is managing this crisis?

Vaidheesh: Broadly, I think India is containing the situation well, but we are on tenterhooks. People are still gathering in groups, despite awareness campaigns. We are in stage 2 of this crisis and it will all depend on how well we manage ourselves in this stage; because if we move to Stage 3, then it becomes disproportionately difficult. We will have to monitor next steps closely for the next 2 weeks.

Interestingly, a country like India, having a distributed and localized health system (and not an integrated one), makes us better suited for a crisis. We are able to provide response to stimuli at multiple levels locally; and sometimes moving with prior experience with limited data can help abate the situation well.

EZ: Looking forward, where do you think we will land once this is behind us?

Vaidheesh: I think hygiene will become a major focus globally, at least in short to medium term, avoiding many infectious diseases overall. Specifically for the pharma industry, this experience could mean reduced timelines for vaccines, if we are able to retain and implement learnings from current trials. Moreover, across industries and countries, the shift towards digitization will improve our efficiencies and this shift is going to stay in the long run.



Authors

Sonny Iqbal

+91 124 463 8003
Sonny.Iqbal@
egonzehnder.com

Sonny Iqbal helped found Egon Zehnder's offices in New Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai. As a generalist, he is active in Egon Zehnder's Health, Consumer, Board, and Executive Assessment and Development practices. He is also coleader of the global Family Business Advisory Practice and advises businesses on succession, founder transition, governance, and family charter development across multiple continents and markets. He also conducts portfolio, CEO, and board searches for private equity firms. Sonny began his career at Egon Zehnder's London office in 1998.

Niveditha Viswanathan

+91 80 4334 9005
Niveditha.Viswanathan@
egonzehnder.com

Based in Bangalore, Niveditha Viswanathan is active in Egon Zehnder's Digital, Health, and Diversity & Inclusion practices. She draws on her strong management and consulting background to help companies identify and foster the high-quality individuals who will have the greatest impact and lead them to greater success.

About Egon Zehnder

Egon Zehnder is the world's preeminent leadership consulting firm, sharing one goal: to help people and organizations transform. We know what great leaders can do and are passionate about delivering the best solutions for our clients.

Our more than 500 Consultants in 68 offices and 40 countries form one powerful, collaborative team. Our services include: leadership development, individual, team and organizational effectiveness, CEO search and succession, executive search and assessment, Board advisory, and cultural transformation.

For more information visit www.egonzehnder.com and follow us on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram.

EgonZehnder

© 2020 Egon Zehnder International, Inc.
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior permission of Egon Zehnder.