

We are excited to be a part of this life sciences industry

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Merck has opened its first M Lab Collaboration Center in Bangalore which will help biopharmaceutical firms in development and production of molecules at a lab scale. In an interaction with BioSpectrum, Peter Salazar, Head, Process solutions India, Merck, shares his views on the potentiality of such M Lab Centers towards large-scale manufacturing of drugs in the market and much more.



What is the key prospective behind setting up M Lab Collaboration Centers, especially with one coming up in Bangalore?

Merck is a leading science and technology company in healthcare, life science and performance materials. Around 50,000 employees work to further develop technologies that improve and enhance life – from biopharmaceutical therapies to treat cancer or multiple sclerosis, cutting-edge systems for scientific research and production, to liquid crystals for smartphones and LCD televisions. In 2016, Merck generated sales of €15.0 billion in 66 countries. Founded in 1668, Merck is the world's oldest pharmaceutical and chemical company.

Our new M Lab is at our site in Peenya at Bangalore, where we had a small laboratory earlier for customer support. It's now expanded manifolds to bring it in line with the international standards. M Lab is essentially a customer support laboratory where we bring in customers in order to train them on latest technologies in biopharma manufacturing. Our scientists at M Lab have previously worked in these industries and have an understanding of the challenges faced by the industry. The M Lab is an offering of the Life Science business to the industry we support. The training is not charged and our commitment to our customers is a long term association for sustainable growth.

Merck portfolio in Life Science has grown manifold. Originally we were primarily equipment and raw materials supplier. With Sigma Aldrich coming in, the portfolio has got expanded. Today we are the only company in the life science space which offers end to end solutions in pharma manufacturing. The investment in M Lab is an extension of our capabilities – offering the industry a platform to learn about the newest technology and apply it in their manufacturing.

We are offering our expertise to the local scientific talent because we feel that this is something that Merck can do for the industry. This aligns with the 'Make in India' campaign. If a manufacturer does not have the required scientific talent, then they cannot expand manufacturing beyond a certain limit especially in the new evolving biotechnology and biopharmaceuticals space. This is where the M Lab fits in with our offering of a world class training facility in the country. This facility in Bangalore is one of the 8 M Labs that Merck has established worldwide.

What is the basic idea behind the EMPROVE program your team started at Merck?

I am proud to have initiated this seminar series in the country. It is a part of our awareness drive in the industry here. Emprove refers to a set of scientific documentation available on those products specially branded as Emprove. Now with all the regulations being tightened, we thought of adding a program that delivers not only the scientific documentation associated with the products, but also provides regulatory awareness. We started this program in anticipation of the new regulatory challenges coming up.

The seminar series is conducted every year. We invite eminent industry experts and experts from Merck who are frequently dealing with the international regulatory agencies, so that they can share their experiences with the industry. To the industry this is a platform to learn and interact extensively with experienced experts from the industry.

Recently, Millipore Sigma collaborated with LabCentral to promote biotech startups in the US. Are there any similar plans for India?

I am unable to comment on proposed collaborations. As a company we continue to be committed to India and we are keen to work with our customers to further strengthen our service offering with relevant technologies and products.

What are the key strategies behind planning collaborations or acquisitions?

All our strategies have a global impact and must be in sync with our larger global agenda. Hence such strategies are well researched and aimed at benefiting the industry at large. I am sure our strategies will be shared with you on any future announcements.

What new products are coming up at Merck?

New products are constantly coming into the market and probably this is also one of the reasons for the new M Lab center. For the life science organization, one thing that is specific to our area of operation now is the single-use technology. Earlier everything in manufacturing especially in biopharma, biotechnology used to be about huge, stainless steel reactors, and pipes. After every process step is completed, steaming is done again for sterilizing. And large spaces are required to do this manufacturing.

Now with the single-use technology, manufacturing can be done in a small space because we do not need that much of a classified space. The bioreactors can be wheeled in and out. It is a sort of a ball room concept in which the equipment is dancing into the room and then goes out. This has been one of the significant developments in the manufacturing space because it cuts down at least 30 per cent of the manufacturing cost and 80 per cent of the manufacturing down time. When you are talking about the drug manufacturing, a lot of time is required. It is important to compress such things. This new biological way of manufacturing drug is so completely different from what we call the usual chemical synthesis process.

Not only from a revenue perspective, but from the point of assisting the industry, there is so much that we can do with this new offering. And all this again comes down to the M Lab concept. This center here in Bangalore is dedicated to biopharmaceuticals including the upstream technologies such as the purification process and others. We have pro-vantage bio reliance lab to help customers validate the quality of filtration because sterility for injectables is extremely important.

We also have another solid-dose formulation lab in Mumbai which is more dedicated to solid dose manufacturers, more classical pharma. It is becoming so much more scientific to understand the value of an excipient to the final formulation. India is really the only country in the world where we have all these 3 labs.

We feel that the M Lab in Bangalore will have greater thrust towards education, skill upgradation and towards helping people apply these technologies. We are serving as the vital bridge between theory and industrial application.

How much time is taken when a new product is manufactured, right from its research to its marketing?

For a new product to come to market it can take anywhere from months to years. This is subject to the technology being adapted in these processes. So with aspects like internet of Things (IoT), there is a real time benefit to the working of this process. Hence while products are evolving, so are the technologies thereby impacting the time to market of a product.

How important is the customer feedback to you?

Customer feedback is extremely important. When we are developing new products, we take the feedback coming from the technology management side, after they have interacted with the customers. Their whole brief is to get customer feedback to the organization so that we can improve our offerings to the customers.

How is the life science research market in India different from other countries?

With globalization, evolution of life science businesses is more or less the same. Where we see a difference is that the other countries probably get more funding. It will be easier for them to get funding for research. The Indian Government has been initiating various programs to support organizations in this industry and grow the industry at large, thereby improving India's competitiveness globally. We are excited to be a part of this industry.