

Fecc interview with Azelis: Anna Bertona

Chief Executive Officer & President, EMEA

Anna Bertona joined Azelis as Group VP Strategic Planning & Implementation in 2013 and was appointed Chief Strategy & Principal Officer in 2014. In 2016 she was appointed Chief Executive Officer EMEA to steer our market teams in the region and with a particular focus on Azelis principal development activities.

What is the most challenging aspect and your main target as Chief Executive Officer & President, EMEA for Azelis?

When we talk about EMEA, we often forget that it is not one coherent region, but rather a complex and demanding environment that consists of many different cultures, different levels of economic and technological development, different regulatory requirements and so on. Our performance however needs to be consistent across the whole region, we aim for the same levels of good service and same level of dedicated expert support. This means that we must ensure a broad spectrum of expertise, without any loss of attention for specific local requirements. When unstable or difficult economic circumstances come on top of that, the picture becomes even more complex. However, we must never lose sight of what drives our strategy and that is organic growth and the best possible service to our business partners wherever we are. We always aim to be the best local champion, in every country where we operate. It is my task to oversee that all those moving pieces are in their right places at all times in EMEA. It's a tough job, but one that gives a lot of satisfaction and a great sense of achievement.

As an experienced professional and a business woman, what is your vision and in which way is Azelis improving gender equality?

Some of the research shows that women remain underrepresented at the top of corporations globally. Companies who are more diverse however are better able to win top talent and improve their customer orientation, employee satisfaction and decision making, and ultimately perform better financially.



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This is not true only for gender diversity but for any form of diversity – culture, age, sexual orientation, physical impairments, work experience; having a truly diverse workforce is likely to bring additional competitive advantage. Some other studies suggest also that having female senior leaders creates less gender discrimination in recruitment, promotion and retention.

At Azelis, diversity is deeply engraved in our business principles and gender diversity in particular is one of the KPIs of our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program. In EMEA alone 56% of our employees were women at the end of 2018, and in our EMEA leadership team this is 25%. We are clearly on the right path but we can always get better of course. I have taken it upon me to actively promote gender diversity in our company so whenever I can I take women for top positions; good example of it are two recent promotions for the managing directors in EMEA, both very capable and ambitious ladies. I hope that we can all be a source of inspiration for the young women in Azelis and show them that there are no gender boundaries in the modern business world and that the times when women were not considered “suitable” for such high jobs are of the past.

To your mind: how can we bring more diversity and more women into the sector?

In chemical industry, that is often perceived as conservative and still male-dominated, there are more and more cases of women in leading position - take Marjan van Loon of Shell Netherlands, for example. Such examples are an excellent motivation to young women aspiring to high positions in chemical or any other industry. We do have to be mindful though that women in business may have different needs than men in comparable positions and we have to cater for those if we want to attract and keep good female talent.

There are many working mothers, for example, so companies need to provide flexible hours, possibilities to work remotely, perhaps support in childcare, to name only some of the additional incentives. We do see this happening more and more, such flexible work schedules are becoming a mainstream and I am confident this will continue to encourage women.

What is your view on attracting and retaining talent?

The flexible work schedules do not apply to women only; younger generations of both genders appreciate them just as equally, for many reasons. We also see that it is a growing trend that people want to work for companies whose values match their own. They want to be proud of the companies they work for, they want to truly belong to company cultures and to be able to identify with company goals. They are increasingly considered with the state of our planet and want to leave a positive mark through their work, they want to leave a legacy for generations to come, so having a strong CSR policy and a clear contribution to sustainability is going to be one of key criteria in attracting talent. Furthermore, growth and development on the job have always been important, but they have become an imperative and companies who do not provide this will have no license to operate. Learning is key: this is the environment we are working hard to create in Azelis and some of the examples, like our Sales Academy, are proving to be very popular and motivating for our young talent.

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Through such learning opportunities we do not only make sure to stimulate ambition and growth in our younger colleagues, but we are also providing a platform for our more experienced colleagues to share the knowledge and experiences they have built over the years, to pass it on and thus ensure none of that is lost for Azelis. It's a win-win for everybody involved.

Azelis has recently revealed its new brand promise and tagline: 'Innovation through formulation'. Which are Azelis' new targets?

Although the tagline is new as such, there is nothing new in our strategic course; to the contrary. The reason why we decided to change the tagline was to align our brand promise with the way we had been engaging with our business partners for a long time. We were already focusing a lot on innovation while the continued strengthening of our formulation and application support to our customers was a significant part of our added value for them. In recognition of those efforts we won 21 innovation awards since 2015, all given by independent industry bodies. We will continue to break new ground in our technical laboratories by combining ingredients with ideas and creating opportunities through innovation and the new tagline only embodies that.

Azelis has been rewarded by Ecovadis with Gold rating being one of the very few distributors achieving this rating. How is Azelis working to be continuously committed to sustainability?

Needless to say, the EcoVadis Gold rating is something we are very proud of as it embodies our efforts and our believes in sustainable business models. It has to be earned over and over again every year and being awarded Gold once does not mean you are good forever; you have to remain vigilant and you have to continually look for new and other improvements. Receiving Gold last year was nothing but an incentive to start work on several initiatives to further improve our performance.

"Digitalization is our next big undertaking so watch the space for the news coming out in this area."

Good examples are sustainable procurement and environment, where the work is never finished. We have recently launched another new initiative in this area, the progress is ongoing and we are in anticipation of its results later in the year.

What are the key present areas of interest from a global distributor's perspective? (digitalization, innovation, circular economy...)

At Azelis we see three major trends that we will be addressing in the coming years: 1) sustainability, 2) the rise of Asia 3) digitalization.

Sustainability has already been addressed in our CSR program and we are continuing with our intent to contribute to sustainability whenever and wherever we can.

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With regard to Asia, although we have been present there since 2013, our impact in Asia Pacific really started to take hold in 2016, when we created a dedicated organization based in Singapore.

We established our own legal entities and import licenses, whilst building a talented and highly qualified technical sales team, initially starting with four application laboratories across the region. Things accelerated with a few major milestones: acquiring Chemcolour (Australia and New Zealand) in 2017, SammiChem (South Korea) in 2018 and MK Ingredients (India) in 2019. We're now present in twelve countries and we have 25 laboratories across APAC. Our sales have quadrupled over the past three years and our team in APAC is now 300-strong.

Digitalization is our next big undertaking so watch the space for the news coming out in this area.

In which way is innovation a key aspect in the chemical distribution sector?

We are faced nowadays with situations like limited resources and climate changes, where innovation is sometimes the only solution for the progress. It is not the question of doing more of the same, but doing things differently, more efficiently and more sustainably. As a distributor, we typically work with medium- and small-size customers where we provide technical advice and access to products and services that may otherwise not be available to them. It often happens that the innovation and breakthrough ideas come from smaller players on the market so working with them, providing them with the infrastructure they may not possess themselves and partnering with them is a key to their and our own success.

What are the challenges distributors have to currently face?

It's the rising complexity of the environment in which we operate. There is a vast array of diverse topics that need to be addressed and they are increasing year over year. To mention only some: REACH and other increasingly stringent regulations, digitalization, Brexit, sustainability, global economic developments, etc. To keep all these balls in the air and still grow in a profitable way while keeping all our stakeholders happy and engaged is a true challenge, but it's the one we must tackle and one we are excited to take on, day in day out.

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European Association of Chemical Distributors

Rue du Luxembourg 16B | 1000 Brussels

Tel: +32 2 679 02 62

Website: www.fecc.org | Twitter: @FeccEurope



Contact us

Fecc Secretariat: +32 2 679 02 60

Communications Officer:

Michela Pichereddu - mpi@fecc.org

Fecc Congress: fecc-congress@fecc.org

Owner and publisher

European Association of Chemical Distributors
(Fecc)

Editorial Staff:

Fecc Secretariat

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