



Early in her career Collins found herself attracted to the idea of the top job as a long-term objective. Picture by Daragh Mc Sweeney/Provision

THE PERFECT ANTIDOTE – NEXT GENERATION OF PHARMA BOSS

● Edel Collins, the first woman GM at the Cork Thermo Fisher Scientific (formerly GSK) plant, hasn't let her lack of a science degree stop her either, writes Fearghal O'Connor

Finding a place to park at Thermo Fisher Scientific's plant near Ringaskiddy in Cork is a challenge. The car parks around the plant are packed. "Back in 2018 only the front car parks were being used. Now we've car parks all the way around the back," says Edel Collins, general manager of Thermo Fisher Scientific's Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) development and manufacturing campus.

The huge plant, with its towering wind turbine catching the stiff breeze from Cork Harbour to provide a quarter of its electricity, is at the end of a small country road that winds through fields full of cows and small country cottages.

It was set up almost 50 years ago in 1975 to produce Cimetidine, a treatment for ulcers that became the first ever billion dollar a year blockbuster drug.

In 2019 – following plenty of ups and downs – it was sold by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) to Boston contract development and manufacturing organisation Thermo Fisher Scientific.

The plant specialises in active pharmaceutical ingredient development for a wide range of phar-

ma and biotech customers and the Cork plant is now a key part of Thermo Fisher's global network.

"Since the sale we've gone from one customer to 20 and we're making close to 30 products for large pharmas and small biotechs. We've doubled the amount of

chemistry we manufacture. We've gone from 400 to 500 employees," says Collins.

The plant shipped over two million kilos of API in 2022 to countries all over the world, increasing its focus on R&D and expanding its capabilities.

"We used to have one development project a year, and now we have 11. The chemistry is exciting for the chemists. They get opportunities to work on a number of development programmes as opposed to just one.

"Chemists love that. So you start to attract more talent and people become more aware of the brand."

The plant – one of a number of major pharmaceutical facilities that encircle Ringaskiddy – is a €1bn asset.

It can handle everything from early-stage development of new molecules to the commercial supply of blockbuster drugs.

It manufactures active ingredients to treat diseases, including cancer, HIV, Parkinson's, depression and lupus.

"Cancer is something that touches every family. I've lost my own father to cancer. So not only is it a privilege to work in the industry but it's also something I'm passionate about because of what it can do for people," says Collins.

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THE KEY STRATEGY IS GROWTH – THE PLANT'S UTILISATION HAS GONE FROM ABOUT 40PC TO 75PC CAPACITY SINCE THE SALE BY GSK

In the last two years it also began manufacturing one of the major Covid-19 treatments on behalf of another big pharma firm.

"That brought new challenges. We had to suddenly manufacture a product in a really condensed timeline, with new chemistry, new stages to the market. But people here just come together around a problem."

Collins believes there are still huge opportunities for the site: "The site here is 150 acres. We have 10 production buildings and four laboratories. There's opportunity and land here to ensure that we could further invest if Thermo Fisher want and they do want to grow organically."

Collins says the site has been involved in discussions around a number of different opportunities for growth, but none that has come to fruition yet.

But the place is now buzzing compared to a few years ago because of the number of new programmes.

"When I go into the lab now it's almost like 'could you get out of the way, we're in the middle of something here'. It's almost like 'you're distracting us'."

"Back in 2017 and 2018 the labs were quiet, the pace was different. Now we have a much more energised team."

"You can feel it. They're doing things they want to do."

On Collins's desk is a page with a photo of each of the plant's general managers since 1975. It's hard to imagine anything other than the scientists standing to attention when the serious looking men in shirts and ties walked in the door of the labs.

"When they added me to that picture, I showed it to my 10-year-old daughter."

"Why are they all men?" her daughter asked.

"She asked that not because she thought, 'oh my gosh, you're the first female GM'. She just assumes women do the same job as men. So it is strange for her to see just one woman in the picture."

Collins grew up in Bishoptown. Her mother worked for a bank and her father worked in sales. She studied commerce in UCC, largely because she didn't know what she wanted to do.

After a short stint at nearby Pepsi she took a job at the GSK site in 2003 as a business analyst and then studied accountancy, ultimately becoming finance manager. But later she would move into manufacturing and operational roles, becoming operations director in 2017.

"When I look at my career, none of it was planned. Some of the challenges that arose on the site here in those days actually became opportunities for me."

"I was able to take on some tough jobs and lead some tough expansions and some tough downsizing."

"It gave me a diverse experience that I think equipped me probably to be in the job that I'm in now."

She may not have made plans but early in her career she found herself attracted to the idea of the top job as a long-term objective. But not only were all of the previous GMs male, perhaps even more importantly, they were all either chemists or engineers.

"I had a belief that you couldn't be a GM unless you went off and got a chemistry degree or you got an engineering qualification."

Getting a formal qualification in one of those fields while working full time and raising a family was not practical.

"So I learned by doing. Some of the jobs I did here were tough going and probably jobs that didn't lean on my strengths but they were jobs that helped me to learn the level of chemistry and the level of safety requirements I needed."

"I had people who helped me along the way. They told me that I had all the attributes to become GM but I had to prove that to myself as much as anyone else."

"I went on shift for a period of time to watch the shift operations. And I spent time with subject matter experts. I sat in on some of the chemistry reviews. And I think all of that was to make sure that I provide the right leadership and guidance to people in the role."

In late 2021, two years after



CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: Edell Collins

Age: 43

From: Bishoptown, Cork

Family: Married to John, who has son Eimhin (20) and the couple also have Sean (12), Abiageal (10) and Tess (4)

Hobbies: Watergrasshill GAA club where the couple coach UI2 camogie

Reading: *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down*, by Haemin Sunim

Favourite movie: "I love movies with an underdog"

BUSINESS LESSONS

What advice would you give to a young person preparing to come out of education and into the workplace? Keep your options open. Sometimes, the way you think things will work out is not the way it does. And I see that with young people sometimes, when a course doesn't work out the way they thought, they can get a little despondent. You have to work hard but there are always different routes available to get to where you want to go.

Thermo Fisher bought the plant, the firm appointed Collins as general manager.

When the sale of the plant was announced in October 2019, Collins was on a two-year maternity leave break for her third child. Her colleagues in the plant were initially nervous.

"The site's history has been one of ups and downs."

We went through huge growth, and then we had a number of different downsizings."

At the time of the sale the plant was only being 40pc utilised.

A €20m investment in new manufacturing facilities and expansion of R&D had not delivered the sales GSK had hoped after a new cancer drug ran into difficulties.

"That was a big product for the site and a big expectation around what the future of that was. When that product didn't come through, within GSK there was excess capacity for API and they had sites in Jurong in Singapore, in Scotland and ourselves."

After a number of restructurings, there were some fears that an announcement could involve a closure of the plant.

"The initial feeling, if I reflect myself when I heard first that GSK were selling, there was a bit of sadness. But we'd also been through a period of two or three years where the site was probably only 40pc utilised and we were waiting for the next big product."

"So I think the announcement brought nervousness but also a sense of hope and positivity for the future. Google went mad in the office that morning."

The Boston-based firm may have grown through acquisitions to have 100,000 employees but it did not have the same high profile as GSK and only had a small presence in Ireland at the time.

"We knew GSK so well and Thermo Fisher was very different in terms of structure. You're trying to figure out who are they, what's the corporate structure, what are they like to work for?"

"But when they came in, straight away there was a positive energy. They had very similar values to ourselves and it spoke to the same type of culture that we had on site."

"It did take us time to regroup, reorganise and restructure to become a different operating model under Thermo Fisher. We were aligned to the GSK ways of working, with functions that aligned to the hierarchy of GSK."

"Thermo Fisher is a much flatter structure. It has to be because you have to be more flexible and agile to the market. We went through that reorganisation to change ourselves as a company and I think people got behind it."

Now the key strategy for the site is to grow the business. Since the sale, plant utilisation has gone from 40pc to about 75pc capacity.

"We want to stretch that up to 95pc capacity. We've just gained our 21st customer."

"Thermo Fisher is interested in organic growth."

"And we have plenty of infrastructure and land here that we could further develop. And we continue to seek out those opportunities to see if we can continue to grow."

MEDIA & MARKETING

EU braces for digital ads battle as telcos take on the US giants

John McGee



A few weeks ago, the European Commission's anti-trust division gave the unconditional go-ahead to a joint venture between four of Europe's largest telcos to develop a new EU-wide digital advertising platform which, if successful, could seriously challenge the lucrative hegemony of Google and Meta throughout Europe.

The four telcos - Vodafone, Deutsche Telekom, Orange and Telefonica have been working on the joint venture for nearly two years. While it will be headquartered in Belgium, the plan is to trial the new offering in Germany, Spain and France first, with the rest of Europe, including Ireland, likely to follow at a later date.

The aim of the joint venture is to create a pan-European digital advertising platform that will respect both the consumers' desire for greater privacy and control while also adhering to EU's increasingly strict regulatory regime in areas like data privacy, transparency and competition.

Customer privacy, in particular, has been singled out by the joint venture partners.

According to their joint statement, the new offering will give "consumers a step-change in the control, transparency and protection of their data, which is currently collected, distributed and stored at scale by major, non-European players," a very clear reference to Google and Meta.

The telecommunications industry has been down this road before. On paper, it makes sense. In reality, however, the experience has been somewhat different.

The US telecommunications giant AT&T, for example, had high hopes when it bought the programmatic AdTech platform AppNexus in 2018 for \$1.6bn (€1.5bn).

At the time AT&T said it would integrate the business into its premium video content arm and use its first-party data to help grow

its nascent advertising business. Having rebranded it as Xandr but failing to successfully integrate it with its core business, AT&T sold the business three years later to Microsoft for \$600m less than what it coughed up initially.

AT&T is by no means unique. Other telcos such as SingTel in Singapore bailed out of the Ad-Tech sector when it sold Amobee in July 2022 while Telenor effectively exited the market in 2020 when it sold TapAd. Then there was the US telco Verizon which beat a hasty retreat when it off-loaded Yahoo in May 2021.

One of the main reasons why telcos have struggled to crack the digital advertising market is the significant technological barriers to entry.

AdTech is a hugely competitive, complex and resource-draining business and established players like Google, Meta and Amazon have invested billions of euro in developing their platforms while building up vast networks of advertisers and publishers.

This makes it extremely difficult for new entrants to compete and build any meaningful scale. But they are also two completely different business models, each with their own unique characteristics and financial and infrastructural requirements.

On the other hand, the timing of this new offering might be right. The EU and its various regulatory outposts have made no secret of their suspicion of non-European Big Tech companies and their errant ways when it comes to data privacy and transparency in an advertising market that has become increasingly opaque.

Indeed the announcement of a tie-up between four of the largest telcos in Europe came within weeks of the EU publishing a report in January which described the current setup of the digital advertising sector across Europe as "unsustainable" and in need of reform if the EU is to lessen the power held by the likes of Google.

While only time will tell if this new offering will be successful, it looks like the digital advertising market in Europe looks set for a very interesting battle in the years ahead.

Here is the News

NewsBrands Ireland has launched a new print and digital campaign to highlight the fact that 82pc of Irish adults now read a print or online news title every week. According to the latest Kantar TGI Republic of Ireland research, some 3.25 million people read a print or digital news title every week. In addition, 78pc of 16 to 31-year-olds read a news title or access a news app every week, according to Kantar which publishes the research twice a year.

Spunout campaign

Spunout, the youth mental health and information charity has partnered with Accenture for a new awareness campaign designed to engage, educate and encourage young people to talk about issues surrounding equality. The campaign, which is called GEN E, will showcase the voices, stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ young people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds in an effort to encourage conversations about real inclusion and diversity issues.