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DATA MANAGEMENT PROVES TO BE AN EFFECTIVE MEDICINE FOR ASPEN

As at so many other companies, Aspen was not giving data the full attention it deserved. With no clear data plan, the knock-on effect of this was evident in the company's processes. That was, until Aspen changed tack and set up a solid data management approach. Simon van Dingstee, Supply Chain Director at Aspen, explains how the company is now reaping the benefits.

Aspen Oss, part of the South African Aspen Pharmacare Group, produces active ingredients for pharmaceutical companies all over the world. These APIs (active pharmaceutical ingredients) are used in countless medicines. Areas of application range from contraception and anaesthesia to neurological diseases.

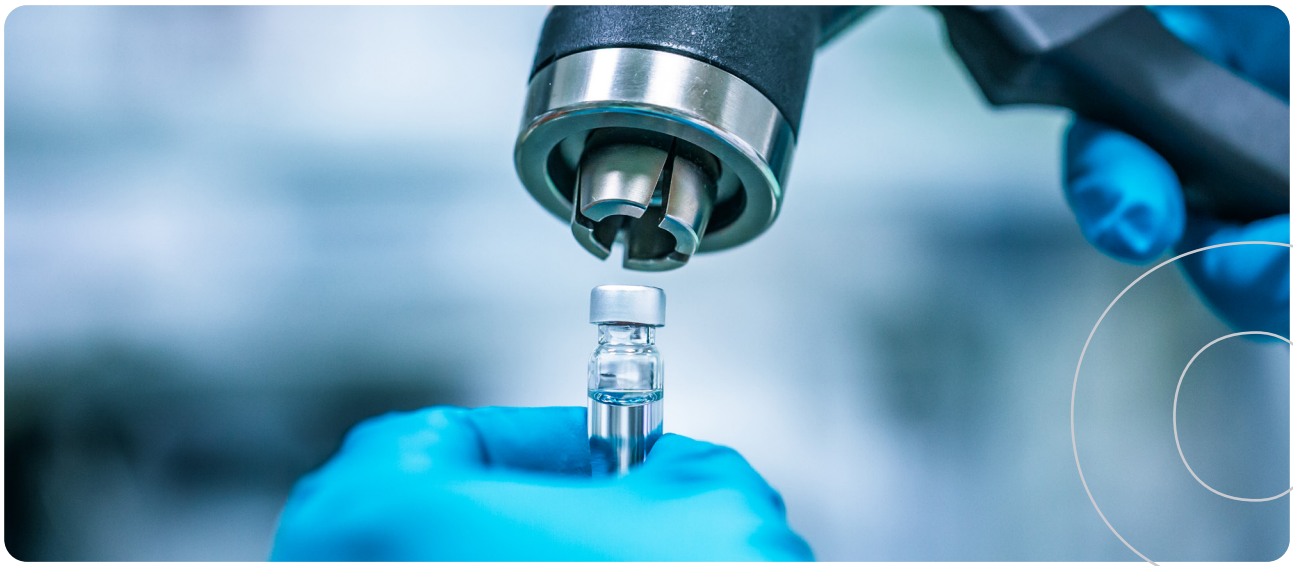
An error-sensitive process caused by manual operations

"Data plays an important role in Aspen's supply chain," says Supply Chain Director Simon van Dingstee. "This primarily involves managing our processes, including ordering planning and producing, and analysing and reporting. Accurate process data is especially important in our field because pharmaceutical production lead times are very long. The process from raw material to finished product can often take between six and eighteen months. This is why information always has to be traceable – this is also required to comply with strict pharmaceutical industry laws and regulations."

To lay good foundations for this process, Aspen implemented the SAP ERP platform in 2016. This implementation was just the first step. "I noticed that despite our new platform, it didn't immediately result in more efficient work," explains the Supply Chain Director. "For example, our process was quite prone to errors. As a result, we had to make extensive manual corrections, which resulted in a heavy workload. For example, incorrect invoices were regularly returned to us. We decided to tackle these issues at the root: our data management."

Minor errors can have major consequences

Aspen's production process consists of countless interlocking cogs. This means that one seemingly minor mistake can have major consequences. Van Dingstee: "Minor errors are things like a wrong VAT number, a missing postal code or an unusual unit for ordering raw materials. These can lead to incorrect deliveries,



unpaid invoices or the inability to start production. This is why we started to improve our data handling step by step, starting with data entry."

Proper input is half the battle

"Our data was often entered manually," explains Van Dingstee. "We wanted to define in detail how we did this. First of all, we examined which data fields we actually had. We then categorised and defined them. We found that our data fields fall broadly into four categories: empty, linked, serial and special fields."

The four data field categories defined by Aspen were:

1. **Empty fields:** fields that must be left blank or are supplied externally.
2. **Linked fields:** fields that depend on each other's values. For example, if the value in field A is 12, the value of field B is always 24.
3. **Serial fields:** locked fields with a limited number of fixed selection options.
4. **Special fields:** fields that cannot be checked automatically and always require a manual check.

"After defining the fields, we created "business rules" to ensure the data was entered correctly," states Van Dingstee. "We then implemented control mechanisms to enforce the rules. Thanks to the level of standardisation we achieved with this, we were able to automate the controls as much as possible."

An underlying data library

Aspen then built up a data library. Van Dingstee: "This is a collection of all the rules, properties and characteristics of each of the various data fields. It also shows who owns which fields. The data library is the reference book for employees. They can always check it in case of questions or ambiguities."

A better understanding of processes

"We put together the data library with the whole of the master data team and all the data owners within the organisation," continues Van Dingstee. "This resulted in some interesting discussions. Employees became enthusiastic when they thought about how we could better organise the data processes. It was very valuable to discuss why we do things the way we do. Thinking about responsibilities, ownership and guidelines enriched our colleagues' knowledge and led to a better understanding of the processes."

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> Supply Chain Director - Aspen Oss

Supporting data management software

Van Dingstee explains that when implementing the data management approach, there are a few ingredients that are indispensable: "We use a data extraction tool to check, structure and clean up our data. We can upload our data to SAP in bulk using the Winshuttle software that Ctac supplied and implemented. We use the Winshuttle workflow solution to record data processes and automate operations. Finally, it is important that the SAP data is easily accessible and presented in an understandable manner so that everyone can work with it – including business colleagues."

Fewer errors, a reduced workload and less static

Although Aspen's approach took some time and effort to implement, Van Dingstee states that it is now paying off. "Now that we have our data in order, the problems of the past will soon be forgotten. It goes without saying that stock numbers are correct and that purchasing and sales are running smoothly. We know this is largely because we have invested in data management."

The problems involving incorrect invoices have virtually disappeared. This is one reason that the employees who work with SAP are now far less stressed. Van Dingstee: "They no longer need to make things add up or spend a long time searching for information. Much of the previous static has disappeared from our processes. This is especially noticeable at times when the pressure is on. Where things used to break down, processes now keep running as normal despite the pressure. This does not mean that we are done with it – there is always room for improvement."

Find initiators and start small

Aspen has gained much from this data management initiative. Even so, every successful journey starts with a first step. "The ball began to roll because we no longer treated data management as an administrative job for someone else, but as a potential value creator. "

Van Dingstee also finds it important to involve people who enjoy delving into the master data. "Personal motivation is the most important thing; knowledge of data and analytical skills are an advantage," he states. "To gain traction and understanding within your organisation, it is advisable to have other employees working alongside your data management team. "

"Finally, don't be frightened by the time you need to invest or the complexity involved," states Van Dingstee. "It's not as complicated or comprehensive as you might think. Just get started with one data set as a trial. Make sure the data set you choose is large enough. Your supplier data is a good option here. Then the added value becomes clearer sooner, because you discover links, discrepancies and patterns. Initially, this takes time, but if you do it right it will save you a lot more time in the long run. So just get started, and don't give up too quickly."

"Need help? Call in an expert – like Ctac. And if you want to know more about how we approached this at Aspen, please contact me. I will be happy to answer your questions."

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