At year-end 2018, Alfa Laval had more than 3,500 patents in its portfolio. Investments in R&D will amount to 2.5 percent of sales per year. Every year, the patent department handles a large number of internal reports on new inventions, of which approximately 35–70 lead to new patent applications. At year-end 2018, Alfa Laval had more than 3,500 patents in its portfolio.

Driving development and change

Many factors can contribute to profitable growth. One of them is research and development. Alfa Laval’s goal is to offer products and process solutions that can enhance the efficiency of customers’ processes and thereby increase their competitiveness. In a world increasingly focused on competition, Alfa Laval wants to be customers’ first choice. To maintain this position, continuous investments in research and development are necessary to ensure that the company’s products and solutions are the latest and most efficient on the market.

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Alfa Laval has always attached great importance to R&D. Over the last few years, however, the pace has been turned up further and considerable investments have been made. These will result in the launch of two new platforms for separators and heat exchangers as well as the development of various digital solutions, to name a few examples. The work performed over the past few years is the result of a review carried out of the entire group in 2016. Everything was questioned, from the company’s R&D processes to the product range itself. Was it sharp enough? Was development fast enough? Were investments made in areas with the potential to generate favorable returns? Were they properly researched? Can they be modularized? How much are we considering the aftermarket offering when developing new products? What role does digitalization play for Alfa Laval?

Product launches held a high pace during 2018, and new, even more efficient products were rolled out every quarter. The focus is on delivering improvements for the customer, whether in terms of energy efficiency or the ability to digitally monitor product performance. Life cycle analysis can help define and implement methodologies that take environmental aspects into consideration during the development and design of the company’s key technologies. The ambition is that every new product has a smaller impact on the environment than the product it replaces. It is not only about the product’s own life cycle, however – it is also about developing an offering that can help make the customer’s processes more resource efficient.

Alfa Laval’s product centers serve as a hub
Development work involves many different roles. Service technicians, for example, may observe signals indicating a change in needs and goals when they visit customers, and bring the information back to the development units. Customers may discuss their thoughts directly with a sales representative. But the development units – Alfa Laval’s product centers – are at the real core of the work. These units are responsible for research, development and product management as well as market research and application areas. There are a number of product and business centers responsible for everything from compact heat exchangers and fluid handling products to separators and boilers, to name a few examples. Product development includes such areas as concept development, development of new and existing products, documentation and testing, while product management refers to strategy, pricing, business forecasts, sales tools and training.

The patent department follows up
The development of new products, new designs or new functions also involves Alfa Laval’s patent department. Considering all of the efforts and investments made, patent protection is essential. Every year, this organization handles a large number of internal reports on new inventions, of which around 35–70 lead to patent applications. It also deals with trademark registration and research as well as monitoring and handling patent infringements.

Development in response to a changing world
Development is more than R&D; it must continuously permeate all areas of Alfa Laval for the company to be able to respond to a world in constant change. In terms of the supply chain – that is, the Operations Division – this work is handled by Operations Development. This unit is responsible for implementing sustainable improvements within all areas of the division, from procurement and production to distribution and logistics. Representatives for the unit are spread globally across Alfa Laval’s major production facilities. They help find different solutions to give the company competitive advantages. Hundreds of projects are managed in a year, including everything from major structural changes to minor adjustments.

Another unit that also works with development is Corporate Development. This unit takes a strategic, long-term view of technical development in terms of potential future growth areas and new market concepts for the company as a whole. It supports long-term activities that run throughout different functions in the company, but also looks at possibilities regarding new technologies or areas that can entail challenges or create opportunities in the future.

Operations Development
Contributes to the development and optimization of the supply chain. Refines procurement processes and investigates, develops and evaluates new cost-efficient production technologies.

Corporate Development
Takes a strategic, long-term view of technical development in terms of potential future growth areas and new market concepts for the company as a whole.