Here’s an example of everyday innovation: the diaper pant. For the longest time, there was the traditional diaper, the kind with tape on both sides for which a baby needing changing had to be lying down. But when Kimberly-Clark researchers studied consumer habits around the world, they found that moms and babies are on the move, that sometimes it isn’t so easy to lay a baby down. And so the diaper pant, the kind you just pull up, was born.

As a producer of mainly paper-based, personal-care products with brands including Kleenex, Huggies, Scott and Kotex, Kimberly-Clark is focused on innovating to meet changing and unmet consumer needs. One way the 134-year-old company does this is through its three Global Innovation Centers (GIC) worldwide, one of which is in Gyeonggi Province, Korea.

And when it comes to innovation, location matters.

“Innovation. I’ve been in that field for so long, it’s something that really requires you to be in the right place, actually, with the right people around you,” said Hari Nair, Global Managing Director of the Kimberly-Clark Global Innovation Center Korea. “And by that what I mean is, you have to be able to connect with different things.”

Kimberly-Clark chose Korea as one of its three GIC bases — the others are the United States and Colombia — for three reasons: Its strong 40-plus-year partnership with Yuhan-Kimberly, a joint venture between the United States-based Kimberly-Clark Corporation and Korea’s Yuhan Corporation; the fact that much of the company’s innovations had already been coming from the Korea team, be it for baby-care lines or senior products; and, finally, for the broader eco-system of Korea, which is where the connecting comes in.

The Korean government’s focus on a creative economy, the growth of Korea’s leading industries and the country’s location between China and Japan make for an environment of connectivity, where connections being made in other industries can be brought into your world to achieve innovation, said Nair.

The Korea GIC focuses on research and development (R&D) and innovating for a broad range of consumable products, including diapers, tissue-towel products and feminine hygiene products, for Kimberly-Clark globally. About 60 employees work with state-of-the-art pilot plants where they can make prototypes of just about any product, and in an environment that encourages openness of ideas, creativity and even failure.

“To be successful in innovation, you have to fail a lot,” said Nair.

Though established in May of 2012, the GIC’s roots date back to 2006, when Kimberly-Clark saw the need for an innovation center in the region and established the Innovation Center of Asia — and with a USD 1.6 million incentive package provided by the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), of which Invest KOREA is a part. This center underwent a role change of sorts last year to focus on product development and became the Kimberly-Clark GIC. Adjacent to it is the Yuhan-Kimberly Innovation Center.

“Every product that you can imagine [Kimberly-Clark] makes, in some way we are working on it in Korea,” said Nair.

With Korean consumers known for being highly selective as well as early adopters of technology, Kimberly-Clark was drawn to how demanding they are in their performance requirements — “You cannot fool the Korean consumer into thinking ‘This is good enough,’” said Nair — and to how they do their research.

The managing director is constantly surprised by the depth of Korean consumers’ knowledge when it comes to a product’s technical features.

“As a leader in innovation, I think it’s amazing because all the great technologies you’re putting in the products, consumers are actually seeing it and talking about it,” he said. “Which makes [Korean consumers] a great fertile ground to do research with.”

Did you know?

- Kimberly-Clark products are used in more than 150 countries.
- One area in which the Kimberly-Clark Global Innovation Center Korea is leading innovation is wet wipes.