



Networking in the Middle East

Competition for jobs in the Middle East is heating up and job candidates are finding that making contact on the ground is the only way to stay ahead of the pack.

It's all in the networking, according to career-changer **Manuel Fernandez**, a construction engineer looking to move into the renewable energy sector.

Fernandez, MBA '13J, a participant in the school's first Abu Dhabi module in early 2013, was able to turn a meeting with Total Energy's vice president of institutional relations into an introduction to the company's head of renewable energy, by being in the right place at the right time.

"I met the vice president of [Total's] institutional relations at an INSEAD Doing Business with the Middle East panel," Canadian-based Fernandez told INSEAD Knowledge at the sides of the school's Middle East Career Fair recently. "Later I saw a newspaper article announcing the commissioning of their new solar plant here in Abu Dhabi so I called him up and now I have an introduction with the person responsible for renewable energy for the company."

"For a career changer like me, the only way I'm going to find my next position is not by applying for job openings but by being on the ground and networking with the right people."

How can he help the company?

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It's not just career-changers who are finding the need to create contacts and develop networks in the Middle East. With family businesses dominating the scene there, job candidates across the region are discovering it's who you know, as well as what you know that gets the vital interview.

Probably 60 percent of middle to senior management positions in the region aren't advertised, says **Ayman Badawi**, chief human resources officer for Aramex, the Middle East's top transport and logistics service. "It's all about networking," he adds, noting, "Sometimes when you meet somebody face to face you have a chemistry, and you might say to yourself, 'Now this person, how can he help the company?'"

Competition is fierce

With Europe in the doldrums and growth in the U.S. stalled, the books of Middle East executive recruitment agencies are filled with Western workers, and competition is fierce.

Add to this, the growing number of driven, experienced and well-educated Arab workers on the scene with commonality of language and with an understanding of how business in the region works, the drive to make contacts is more urgent than ever.

The response to INSEAD's first MBA Middle East module, part of its signature 10-month MBA programme, reflects job seekers' eagerness for a face-to-face meeting with potential Middle East employers. The module, which provided participants with significant networking opportunities while giving them first-hand experience at doing business in the region, closed four times over-subscribed. The 37 placements were joined by another 36 MBA students who paid their own way to Abu Dhabi to attend the Career Fair, which concluded the programme.



"The Middle

East is a region that economically has had many challenges but in many ways it's those challenges which make it all the more interesting and over the next five or ten years we're going to see tremendous opportunities," **Miguel Lobo**, director of the school's Abu Dhabi campus told INSEAD Knowledge.

To meet the challenges, relating to issues such as limited infrastructure, access to finance and foreign ownership limitations, business recruiters are seeking candidates with soft skills such as good communication, lateral thinking and an inquiring mind - attributes which don't necessarily translate on a CV.

Someone to make a difference

"We're looking at someone who can integrate fairly fast," **Wassim Merhi**, talent director for Mars Inc. notes. "We want someone who can connect to different regions and with people from different backgrounds. The market is growing very massively for us at Mars. We're building factories across the region, not only Dubai, but specifically Saudi Arabia and Egypt. We want someone who's thirsty to make a difference within the work environment, someone who's not coming to maintain the status quo but to

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make change, to introduce new concepts and face the new challenges in the business. The technical skills come after, we can help people develop those, it's what's in your mind that matters to us today."

Godfrey Sullivan, principal for Booz & Company agrees.

"One of the unique things about the Middle East region, and the consulting industry more broadly, is that you come across all kinds of problems which have not been experienced before. Someone who is educated in a whole series of frameworks or structures is useful but what really differentiates the people that we hire is the ability to think on a first-principles basis around a difficult situation they have never experienced before.

"What we really look for in our consultants is that critical mind and intellectual curiosity to join the dots though the problem."

As well as getting the chance to show off these skills, being on the ground and meeting potential employers gives job-seekers a chance to see if the Middle East is for them. There are many preconceptions about the region, such as what career paths are available for women here, says **Lisa Barrett** MBA '13J.

"Now that I've been here I've realised there are a lot of opportunities and I think it's not that dissimilar to other places where women are concerned."

The most important asset

Meanwhile by expanding its presence on the ground, INSEAD is developing its experience in the region, both culturally and through its understanding of industry dynamics, says Lobo. "Another important part of our strategy is to further develop an alumni network here which is one of the most important assets a business school can have."

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