

Abdulkarim: Working For "The Beautiful Company"

You'd think, to meet him, that he's seen it all. Almarai's General Manager of Administration — Abdullah Al Abdulkarim — has been with the company for over 21 years and there's not much over that time that he hasn't been involved with.

His main function is to oversee the company's liaisons with governmental departments so as to ensure the smooth running of Almarai's business — be that to do with the actual registration of the company, employees' visa requirements, planning applications, regional contacts — you name it, and he and his department have probably been involved somewhere down the line.

"There are tens of departments and governmental agencies that we deal with," Abdullah explains, "since most things that a company does are regulated by rules and regulations. For instance, you cannot just buy up some land and start farming on it; you need the appropriate permissions from the agricultural ministry, the environment department, security, safety, local administration, commercial licences... and that's before you even take into consideration dealing with the utilities for the provision of such essentials as water and electricity."

Part of Abdullah's role in all of this is to guide the company's executive board in the decisions it reaches. "It's my job to make sure they understand the legal and

logistical implications of the decisions they come to," he adds.

Most of Abdullah's wide-ranging knowledge of the rules has been picked up first hand in the same

department in which he has served for 21 years.

"In the early days, we — in common with all the Kingdom's dairy companies — were a very small outfit operating from a small villa in Riyadh's Malaz district. There were probably around 300 employees then and we had a farm at Al Kharj with another one at Durma — which now no longer exists," he continues.

"The market was small then. Those who could afford it kept their own cows and supplied their immediate neighbours. But times change, and Almarai was always the 'big brother' to the other dairy companies, leading the way forward whilst the others followed. We were lucky at the time having the right people and policies in place; and a commitment from our staff which was very important for our future strategies."

Abdullah's views on a committed workforce are unequivocal. Look after your workforce, and they will look after the company, is what he preaches. With a workforce of around 6,000 people, and with just over a quarter of those Saudis, he also believes the balance of expatriate staff to local employees is paramount in the success of the company.



"Expatriates bring in new ideas, and it's essential for any company that wants to prosper to continually re-examine their methods and processes, since otherwise you risk becoming stagnant and not moving forward with industry standards and customer demands."

Despite this, however, Almarai is well ahead of the government's Saudisation targets. The agricultural industry average is around 2% whilst Almarai has a 27% Saudi mix at the present time, with its nearest competitor achieving only around 11%.

"In the early days, there were only about four Saudis working for the company whilst today we have in excess of 1,500," Abdullah explains with not just a little pride in his voice; "but the foreigners add value and maintain our competitive advantage. We have a constant stream of new faces, and I advise everyone to try to maintain a happy working environment and to work as a team."

Before working for Almarai, Abdullah worked in the banking sector as well as GOSI – the social security agency. But following a degree course in California's State University, he worked in the banking, legal and public administration sectors in Sacramento and this appears to have been a defining moment for him, gaining experience that would prove to be very useful once he returned to Saudi Arabia in 1979.

Back in kingdom, Abdullah ran his own small business for a while, before joining the fledgling company. "In those days Almarai was very much a traditional company, but over the years we have changed —not just from a total of 2,000 cows to over 70,000, but in our systems and processes, in the creation of 'super-farms', and in our computerised systems — all working to

make us a major player in the world dairy industry," he explains.

For someone in a high profile job, the ability to relax is very important. Although he doesn't have a great deal of time to enjoy his passions of travel and swimming, it is clear that he will spend every available moment with his five year old daughter, Sarah. "She makes me laugh a lot," he says simply with obvious pride reflected in his face. That pride is also reserved for his other two children — aged 27 and 20 — who, he says, have grown up to stand on their own two feet and would be a credit to any family.

Does Abdullah have any other ambitions left? Well, when it's finally time to retire he would like to own a small business and to continue his interest in investment. But he is especially keen to contribute something back to society as a whole. "A society without charitable activities is a society without meaning," is how he explains his philosophy, adding that when the time comes, there will be plenty of such activities available to keep him busy.

So what advice does Abdullah Al Abdulkarim have to offer to Almarai's newer staff who are coming on stream? "Simply, define your relationship with your employer and contribute to the overall good of the company. Be committed!" he adds, with his own commitment very much in evidence as he speaks.

And how would you sum up your 21 years with Almarai, Tawasol wondered? Abdullah pauses for a second before giving a one-word answer.

"Beautiful!" he says. And somehow you can tell that the one word says it all.

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