

BUILDING AN INDUSTRY

DEVELOPING CUSTOMER
SERVICE IN BAHRAIN WITH
SILAH GULF



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you may hear the phrase 'customer service' and picture an uninterested figure in a dark room with a flowchart of responses to your problems and issues. Silah Gulf is striving to change exactly that image. Silah was launched in 2009 as a Joint Venture by UK-based Merchants (Dimension Data) and Bahrain's eGovernment Authority and has been breaching uncharted territories in the country with its premium customer service solutions. The company has over 550 employees, has received numerous awards for its excellent services and holds a powerful client portfolio throughout the GCC. *BIG* discusses the company and the growing customer service industry in Bahrain with its CEO, Ricardo Langwieder-Görner.

HOW DID YOU COME TO TAKE UP THE ROLE OF CEO OF SILAH GULF?

I had recently moved to Munich, Germany and I was there for 6 months when a friend called me and asked me to start something new in the Gulf. That was in May 2013. Initially, I was hesitant about the idea of moving again, specially out of Munich, but when I traveled to Bahrain to meet the team and see the kind of opportunities that existed here, I was very impressed.



Bahrain reminded me of what Ireland used to be for Europe in the eighties and early nineties in regards to the customer services industry.

WHAT ARE THE SIMILARITIES THAT YOU SEE BETWEEN THEM REGARDING THE CUSTOMER SERVICE INDUSTRY?

When the outsourcing industry started growing in Europe, everyone was looking for a near-shore location to outsource to or set-up operations.

Off-shoring to India and Philippines was not mature then and only relevant for the UK and IT Services. Ireland was a very small place, compared to traditional service regions like Germany, or Eastern Europe, but it became the outsourcing hub because it had privileged assets - the right talent, the right education system and crucial economic factors that allow people to develop at the right cost and pace. Above all Ireland had the appetite to become that services hub and the services industry was heavily supported by the government. Today, services account for almost 70% of the economic output, and 78% of

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employees in Ireland. When I came to Bahrain, I thought to myself "this is like Ireland." This country has the right privileged assets, a very liberal environment and it's also untapped in this market. For a company, these niche skills and the unconsolidated market suggest that it can do nothing but grow.

HOW DID YOU IMPLEMENT SUCH A VISION INTO SILAH GULF WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED THE COMPANY?

The mindset of the company before was one of a local company. I very much believed that we needed a vision and an ambitious mindset to grow. Many companies don't fail because they aim too high and miss, but because they aim too low and hit. The mindset is what I really had to change when I first came into the company; of the staff and the management team, and of most of the people involved. I think the belief that Silah was special has always existed in the firm, but for the idea that Silah could be a leading regional player was something we had to instill. So together with my key staff and the support of the board we created a comprehensive business plan that we named "Project Falcon". Project Falcon explained to the staff and stakeholders where the company was, where the company should be in and what it would take to get there. There were two sides to the project; the internal one, which was changing the mindset, growth processes, skills and the staff's understanding of Silah. The external phase of the project was focused on the market potential, the industry ecosystem, our products, commercials and the road map for success. The key was to combine Bahrain's privileged assets and Silah's proven methodologies and industry's best practice to create a solution tailored for the GCC service market and around our customers. People have a stigma regarding Business Process Outsourcing of a disinterested guy sitting far away in an office. We had to change that mindset and position ourselves as premium Customer Experience Solutions provider adding optimal value.

WHAT SERVICES DOES SILAH GULF PROVIDE THAT DIFFERENTIATES IT FROM ITS COMPETITORS?

At Silah we have a unique mix of tools and expertise, proven through a track record of over 30 years in this domain. We take a consultative yet pragmatic approach with real world operational experience. We are able to provide, end-to-end, the customer experience solutions starting from advising companies how to transform their customer experience infrastructure, to training and certification, the provisioning of the right technology solutions and actually running their customer service operations. We

support all contact channels, even social media and different languages. One service I am particularly proud of is the visual contact services we offer for the hearing-impaired within our National Contact Center service offering. They can contact us from their mobiles, via Skype or Facetime and they can communicate directly with our sign language expert to take care of their needs. At Silah we are passionate about our people and take pride in what we do. Our ability to attract the best talent, coupled with our rich history of success and innovation across different industries including Telecom, Financial Services, Travel and Tourism, Retail and Government is what differentiates us in our industry.

We have retained 100% of our clients since inception and we have achieved recognition for our accomplishments regional and globally with a host of awards including “Best Employer”, “Best Government Call Center”, “Market Leader for Bahrain” and “Best Outsourcing Provider” to name a few.

WHAT ASPECTS DO YOU THINK MAKE BAHRAIN A POTENTIAL HUB FOR BUSINESS PROCESS OUTSOURCING?

I dislike the terminology “outsourcing” because it suggests that you are giving something away. It’s actually

in-sourcing because you’re bringing in the skills of another company into yours. We really focus on our main expertise so that other companies can focus on what they do best – Win-Win. The key aspect is definitely the talented and skilled labor force Bahrain provides and the Arabic that is spoken. A local customer may feel much more comfortable talking to someone who speaks the same dialect as him or her as opposed to, for example, a northern African dialect. For some services, specifically something personal, people want to hear someone similar to them. With a call center, all you have is the voice because it’s the main channel of interaction. There’s no face involved,



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only the voice. Bahrain has a unique service proposition at the right costs which allows me to provide to the entire GCC. Within the GCC, Bahrain has a very positive image and reputation for its work ethics. Other GCC nationals feel comfortable around Bahrainis, which is a cultural advantage and makes business with us easy. So all in all, we have the right ingredients to become the service hub for the GCC region.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF THIS INDUSTRY DEVELOPING IN BAHRAIN?

More Service Companies will emerge in Bahrain and peu à peu more local companies will engage in outsourcing

services and more GCC neighbors will move their captives or outsourcing projects to Bahrain. The perception and brand for this industry will change. In the near future, when companies in the GCC will think about services or outsourcing solutions they will not think about Dubai, Cairo or Oman, they will think about Bahrain. The services industry will be a key economic factor creating thousands of job opportunities. Bahrain will transform itself to a preferred services and outsourcing destination in the GCC, attracting also international outsourcing leaders to set up their Hub for the Middle East in Bahrain. We are in a paradigm shift and customer experience is becoming a key differentiator for many companies, and our industry will be there to support the trend. Silah is clearly paving the way and I am proud to be part of this endeavor. **BIG**

