



Taking Outsourcing and Services to the Next Level

When Ricardo Langwieder-Goerner, Chief Executive of Silah Gulf received the award as the "Most Talented Leader in Outsourcing Industry" at the Asia BPO Summit this year no one from the industry was surprised. The prestigious annual event celebrates outstanding organizations and leaders in the outsourcing sector using a rigorous judging process with panels of independent judges, making it one of the most coveted trophies in the industry. The judges at the event spoke about Ricardo's "evident commitment and strong value-driven ethos, combined with leadership skills".

He is well-known in Bahrain and the region for his commitment, for driving customer service excellence and as the man responsible for powering Silah's vision to become the leading Customer Service provider in the Gulf. With Ricardo at the helm, Silah is today creating new benchmarks in customer service. Strategizing and using his high energy and unrelenting passion, he has spearheaded Silah's long-term strategies, and managed its performance, while setting a strong backbone of values and ethics.

The venue was the Capital Club, the ambience was tranquil and inspiring, the conversation dynamic and animated. Ricardo Langwieder-Goerner speaks to bizbahrain Founder and Managing Director, Ahmed Khalfan about the unrelenting efforts of the company to provide customers an outstanding experience.

"For my industry it's all about the people and the business environment. There's so much I can do myself to ensure we're going to grow, and that we will be profitable, but at the same time we need the right skills and business environment to operate from. Business environment means various things. It rules how IP is protected, consumer laws, business regulations, connectivity, the cost of living, how easy is it to attract people, how easy is it to grow and operate a successful operation and do business. For me, Capital Club represents exactly that. In Bahrain, we have a great business environment, we have platforms where we can meet and create, drive and innovate industries and markets. Capital Club is a landmark I feel! It's a place where you can network professionally and socially, a significant element of the business eco-system and the overall Bahrain business proposition. The Capital Club, part of a global Club network, is known for its best practices throughout the region. I use various Capital Club locations in the region and Signature Clubs internationally as well and having one here in Bahrain is a clear advantage for doing business."

Could you summarize for our readers your company profile, your target customer and reference market?

First of all, thank you very much for this interview, for having me, and for having Silah Gulf here at this great location. We come from a relatively new and niche industry. We are an organization which specializes in premium customer experience solutions for A brands in the GCC. We have grown to over 800 people over the last 6 years, since inauguration. When Silah was created, the objective was to create an incubator for premium citizen services for Bahrain. It all started with the vision of e-Government Authority Chief Executive Mohammad Al Qaid in that he recognized an actual need to provide best in class citizen services in line with the 2030 vision, we could not do that on our own, so the iGA joined forces with UK based Merchants (Dimension Data) to produce this joint venture and Silah was created.

Being an outsourcing provider, our assets are our people.

The initial mandate was to create best in class citizen services via the National Contact Centre and see where it takes us. And this is where we are now in 2016, after 6 years. We have been able to grow from being a local government contact centre to a profitable, regional customer experience solution provider. Today we not only have operations in Bahrain but also in Kuwait, and in Saudi, and operate throughout the GCC to provide end-to-end solutions for key brands in the travel, retail, banking, telecom and government sectors.

What makes Bahrain the ideal location for establishing business in the GCC region, and how has Silah Gulf benefited from being here?

Our objective is not to become a global BPO provider, that's not what we are, or what we aim for. Our

ambition is to be a regional leader and profile Bahrain as a regional hub, as a preferred outsourcing destination for GCC services. Silah was not only head quartered here but the key USP was that we have an ideal business eco-system in Bahrain - the right type of skill sets, and abundant options to tap into the local talent at competitive costs. Not only the scalability of the local talent and the skill sets, but also the culture behind how Bahrainis perceive business, how they approach certain projects and activities. There is a difference if you walk out of the Bahrain airport and engage with a local cab driver or if you do that in any other GCC state, there is a notable difference in how you are welcomed with authenticity.

The work ethic is very strong here. Being an outsourcing provider, our assets are our people. We are very much dependent on the skills of our people. So having the right skill sets and the right business environment allows us to grow as a regional player. We see ourselves now competing with Middle East or multinational BPO organizations. Our competitors are not the local players, but more regional organizations with structures in Egypt, Dubai or Jordan, or in some cases even India. While we handle numerous local projects we also handle projects for organizations which operate throughout the GCC. In some cases we support them onshore or we support them out of Bahrain.

For example one of our clients is one of the largest regional airlines and we support their GCC customers out of Bahrain. So if you contact the airline 24/7 for any type of customer service or booking from Kuwait, Oman, Saudi or UAE, you actually end up here in Bahrain. That is a very strong case study and business model because it demonstrates that what we can do for that A brand airline, we can do so for many other organizations in other verticals. So it's actually creating a business opportunity, which will allow not only Silah to grow but the Bahrain outsourcing and service industry to grow and position Bahrain as a

preferred near-shore service location for the region.

Please update our readers on some of the new technologies and digital enhancements that you have introduced.

Our business model is different than for other Contact Centre provider. We are not purely a call centre provider but we are what we call an integrated customer experience solution provider.

This means that besides running outsourcing solutions or driving customer service operations end to end from back office, collections, sales, complaint management to social media services, we provide complementary solutions from technology to training and consulting.

We are what we call an integrated customer experience solution provider.

Our technology business line allows us to provide adequate technology tools and platforms to run a successful service operation both in an outsourced or a captive, in-house, environment. The Silah Training Centre, allows us not only to train our people on best global practices but also train other organizations and provide certifications for various skill segments. This is a very powerful thing because it makes us more agile and independent from other organizations and creates credibility within the market.

Silah also has a consultancy practice. Many organizations know how to drive and set up technology, many of them know how to run certain call centre processes and there are many training centers in the GCC, but if you can combine all that with a consultancy practice which allows you to not only engage in tailored customer service or outsourcing solutions but actually consult and advise organizations on how to build,

improve and transform their service operations then you become a leader in this industry.

As an integrated solutions provider, you need to innovate constantly. You cannot depend on yesterday's technology to be ready for the future. In my role I travel quite a lot, and we engage in industry specific conferences and events in Europe and Asia to not only promote Silah and the Bahrain business hub, but also to stay up to date on new technologies and solutions.

I have been in this industry now over 20 years, so I have learned, in some cases the hard way, that you need to constantly innovate. Innovation is key because technology is advancing very fast in our industry. We are very much dependent on technology, on people and process efficiency. What we have seen is that when it comes to process efficiency there are a lot of dynamics in the market which takes us to tools such as analytics and robotics and process automations.

A new dynamic in the market is that customers want to engage less in calls or emails. So voice and email traffic is decreasing while alternative channels, like online, social media, live chat, IVR, SMS are increasing; not only because of the costs but also because of the evolving consumer behaviour. So the customer and the market demands are constantly evolving. A small example, people can order food via phone but they can also go online or order food via the app. If they have a problem with the transaction which channel would they chose to have the problem resolved?

Technology is changing constantly, and there are companies who are changing the market with interruptive technologies which forces us to be vigilant and curious. We are already engaging in partnerships with such organizations in regards to technology solutions, such as process automation and robotics, or skill enhancements and knowledge partners for our training centre. This is something that

is going to keep Silah at the forefront.

With this in mind, is there any analysis that could be the result of the experience that Silah Gulf has in the market with it's clientele and understanding what the end user needs to know and getting that information out to them in a more efficient manner?

You mentioned a really crucial point. In customer service, it's all about differentiation and usage of the market intelligence gained. Over the last two decades customer service and the enabling technologies have come a long way. When I started working in this industry, the customer experience industry as such didn't really exist. Service was a pure cost element and was called after or post sales service and predominantly handled in-house with unskilled resources. Things became more sophisticated as competition and markets become more challenging, service differentiation now became a key strategic enabler and post sales became customer service, then CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and slowly evolved into the new buzz word - customer experience with its all industry practices such as outsourcing, off-shoring and enabling technologies like cloud, Apps, Analytics (Big Data), Robotics etc etc.

Things have changed and customer service became customer relations management and now the buzz word is customer experience.

While the industry has become more complex the basic requirements remain the same, understanding how best to cope with the customer interactions, creating loyal customers, driving revenues and enhancing the brand. But many organizations don't want or are not structured to handle interactions efficiently, they want to sell a product and ideally this product is sold well, and it works well, and there is no issue behind it. But rather

than seeing customer experience as a cost factor it is now being used as a differentiator in the market. Like in banking or consumer business, products are usually very much the same, so you can play with the price and tune the products, but true differentiation is only achieved when you provide the complete package including the experience at the store, or on the website or through any interaction with the brand and its employees. It is only a pyrrhic victory if you sell a product once, but fail to provide a great experience a long the customer journey and the customer is not loyal to you.

Successful companies use their contact centres to gain knowledge of the customer behaviors, their preferences, their feedback and reaction to the products, so they can actually improve and evolve their product and market strategies.

So yes, in fact, knowledge, data, analytics, these are all key components and crucial for success. However, you need to be able to manage it efficiently from the technology platform to the people and operations structure. It is quite a complex environment and you need somebody focused and specialized on that - which is what we do. We are experts in customer experience. We know how to handle those interactions and help our clients

differentiate in their markets

This is why outsourcing has gained far more momentum the last few years, especially in this region. It's because organizations are realizing the need to focus on their core activities and partner with industry experts. Our clients face challenging decisions with regards to driving customer experience and increasing quality vs. managing operational spend and budgets. In partnership with us they are uniquely positioned to drive sustainable, superior customer service solutions based on global best practices, while focusing on what they do best. If you find the right partner and not just a supplier, then I think you're on the right path.

Organizations are realizing they need to focus on their core activities.

Can you tell us a little bit about how Silah helps in maximizing the customer experience while supporting the companies who use you?

If you are in the airline industry then you know exactly how the airline business works. If you find the right outsourcing partner who can take certain core activities from you and do

it better because it is their specialty then one plus one is not just two, it becomes three or four in some cases because you are adding skill sets and skill layers to an organization which usually wouldn't have those skills. That is something which allows you to drive productivity, drive process efficiency, reduce operational costs, or even capital expenses because we, as an outsourcing company, need to invest continuously in certain tools and technology.

Why would an airline or retail company continuously invest in customer service, or call center technology if it's not their core business? So we handle the process, the people management, we handle most of these operational infrastructures for our client which allows to drive their efficiencies better. It allows them to have their experts focus on what they are supposed to do and to operate flexible in a dynamic business environment.

Focus is a key imperative nowadays, because of quickly evolving market, customer and competitor dynamics. It drives efficiency, it drives differentiation and competitiveness. So I believe that this is one of the dynamics you can change by partnering with a specialized outsourcing company, it also changes the speed of innovation, as we continuously have to focus on innovation on behalf of our client. Clients should not have to worry about what is the newest service or sales tool, what is the newest customer service process, etc when it comes to my market because I am already by default focusing on that. One of the downsides of an in-house customer service structure is the lack of access to innovation, you work within a bubble, and rarely look beyond your vertical. Whereas we work across verticals for a number of industries and programmes, and we can easily take those best practices and share them so clients can actually benefit from the business we do with other clients, and constantly drive innovation and add new skills.



To prove that, Silah has won several significant awards recently. Can you tell us a bit about what this means to Silah Gulf and what it means to Ricardo as the CEO?

Awards are about recognition, and recognition is something you need to earn in a hard and honest way. We have won over 30 awards since we have been in operations. We recently came back from one of the largest contact centre awards in Dubai, we received 4 awards and one of them was for the best large outsourcing service provider in the Middle East. I think this is great recognition for us and for Bahrain - it shows we have done things right, it shows that the path we have chosen to invest in our people and in quality, to bet on the Bahrain business hub and constantly evolve as a business was the right one. It demonstrates not only to myself and my Management, but more importantly, to our 800 employees, that they are working for the right organization.

Our vision since I have come on board has always been to grow, to become a regional solution provider, to become a regional player, to grow beyond what we have targeted.

I am also proud that two of our clients have been awarded as well. The National Contact Centre was awarded "Best Small Helpdesk" and our Airline client has been awarded "Best New Helpdesk." So really, lots of things to be proud of.

The purpose of Silah is to create an organization which will drive the service industry in Bahrain and creates opportunities for the local workforce. 800 people are not just 800 people, it is 800 families. Supporting 800 families in a region like ours is a huge thing and something to be proud of. When I'm walking somewhere in Bahrain, someone will raise their hand to say

hello - it's a very small environment and Silah has become a big family itself. So we touch a lot of people and with that comes a lot of responsibility.

The service industry and the workload that some of our agents and staff members have is quite challenging. We operate 24/7, sometimes we work over weekends, we always strive to exceed our goals. For me, each one of these awards just demonstrates that we have made the right choices, we are on the right path and we act with responsibility and integrity, which makes me sleep well at night. It is a very challenging environment and job but it serves my passion, which is also one of our key company values - passion for our clients and our people.

How is Silah demonstrating the strategy behind Bahrainization and the utilization of talent in the Kingdom?

We are a profitable organization, which requires strict compliance on how we are governed, handle processes, costs, people, accounts and our commercials. We are a business at the end of the day, but we are a business with a purpose. Besides the standard commercial KPIs around EBITDA, SG&A revenues etc we have implemented people KPIs such as Bahrainization, gender ratio and employee satisfaction. We don't only act as an organization that wants to be profitable but one that acts with responsibility to our employees or clients, our shareholders and the Bahrain business hub. Our percentage of women is 40% as an organization. In my executive team it's 50%. I think this is a great story in this region. It demonstrates that if you're tough, ambitious and talented you can grow and develop yourself, whatever gender or background.

We are at 70% Bahrainization, and this demonstrates that our business model works. My business model is not only to provide onshore solutions in Bahrain for local clients, it is about attracting large A-brands from the GCC to be serviced out of Bahrain. Bahrain's

main USP is its talented people, with their work ethics and language skills. I have a lot of multilingual customer service agents and Bahrain provides very competitive operating costs. For me, having 70% Bahrainization is not just a target or a burden, on the contrary it is a part of our business model, our differentiator in the GCC. **And finally, how do you maintain such a momentum of success?**

I believe you need vision, perseverance and you need to be bold as management, and as an organization which clearly wants to grow and make a difference. Of course you need the right tools and skills, but at the end of the day it's about leadership, people and culture. I believe what makes Silah so competitive is our capability to evolve, to challenge the status quo and our commitment to our people and clients. There were quite a few bold decisions we had to make in terms of business model, the business clients or regions we want to focus on, what are the key markets or verticals we have to prioritize, but also what are the opportunities and services we don't want to focus on, because sometimes it also takes leadership and guts to say no to promising, but short-term gain and really focus on what you believe is core and sustainable.

Awards are about recognition, and recognition is something you need to earn the hard and honest way.

Our vision and path is clear - to grow beyond what we have targeted, to become a regional leader, invest in our people, drive the service industry in Bahrain and develop the future leaders for this key industry. ©



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