



Sara Akbar
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“It is crucial that the younger generation promote ethical and sustainable business practices, and have room to test their ideas”

Interview with Sara Akbar

TURNING AMBITIONS INTO REALITY

How would you define the role of young people in the energy industry? What is the greatest contribution that the younger generation of today has to offer the industry of the future?

Rest assured that young people have a role in every profound event, change or breakthrough that occurs in a business industry, from culture, to technology, or the arts. This is the reason why involving our youth in the energy industry ensures that our business will remain vibrant, relevant and on the cutting edge of technology. The youth are more in tune with technological advancements, human rights and social responsibility. I read recently about a business group, Equilibrium, established by a group of Year 12 students in the UK. They managed to raise thousands of pounds for a charity that builds schools in rural parts of India. It is crucial that the younger generation promote ethical and sustainable business practices, and have room to test their ideas.

Why is it, do you think, that some good ideas from young people do not get the chance to penetrate the organisation of a company? How is your company structured to absorb and implement new ideas contributed by young professionals?

It is natural for business leaders to turn to experienced professionals in order to execute strategies and business decisions. However, this should not be at the expense of new ideas by fresh recruits. At Kuwait Energy, we have a highly successful internship programme where young professionals receive mentoring by senior staff. The interns get to work with us, join us in our meetings, and are even challenged to produce original research or develop projects during their time at the company. At the end of the programme, the interns are asked to present their outcomes to the management. I’ve been impressed many a time with the analysis and presentation styles of these professionals-to-be. You would be surprised to know that there have been times when our business decisions were influenced by our interns and new recruits.

How were you able to make an impact as a young professional in your organisation?

There is no secret in building a progressive and successful career. Anyone can tell you that it is based

on hard work, commitment, and making sure you are on the top of your game at all times. Now I know that might sound somewhat repetitive and even cliché, nonetheless, it is true, and I can't help but use myself as a case example. I have always believed that it is important to challenge myself and not to be afraid from stepping out of my comfort zone... even as a young engineer fresh out of college seeking a job opportunity. Allow me to share two examples of where this has paid off:

I graduated college in 1981 with a petroleum engineering degree. Luckily, I was able to join the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), where I knew that there were some career paths within the company that were secure, comfortable, and safe, but I also knew these paths were to be very limited in real career development and growth. On other hand, I also knew that if I wanted to flourish career-wise, I needed to get real, hands-on, field experience. In Kuwait, this means working tirelessly out in the desert under Kuwait's scorching 50-degree sun, and I pursued it. But it wasn't as easy as it sounds. At first my request was rejected, as it was – and still is – unusual for a woman to become a field engineer, but I was persistent. Eventually, I was granted this opportunity and became the only woman in my team at fieldwork, day in and day out. It was tough, excruciating, incredibly demanding both mentally and physically, but I have absolutely no regrets, and would not have wanted it to be any less demanding. Those years developed my skills and even helped me acquire a whole new set of skills that paved my career path to where I am today... and I still look to the future.

The second example was my experience in putting out what is now known as "the oil fires of Kuwait." Shortly before Kuwait's liberation in February 1991 from the seven-month occupation of the country by the former Iraqi regime, the occupying forces ignited over 700 of Kuwait's oil wells, creating smoke clouds thick enough to block sunlight and turn middays into midnights. It was a major environmental catastrophe that required the help of dozens of fire fighting teams experienced in oil fires from all over the world. I was appointed to join in this global effort as part of the Kuwaiti oil fire fighting team, and I jumped in immediately to serve my country and what was, at the time, my work place; ie. the oil field. For seven months, "our office" was a fire zone and our job then was to put out the massive oil fires taking over Kuwait. I cannot describe what we went through

as a team, and the challenges we faced during those months, but I can say that the experience, the challenge, the pressure, and exposure I acquired as a result were priceless, especially when taking into account that I was the only woman out of all the teams who took part in putting out the fires.

In the last few decades, the oil industry has expanded massively, adding new technologies, countries and resources to the continuing challenge of extracting oil and bringing new products to market. Looking ahead, what do you think your generation has not achieved or could have done differently that should be the focus of the young professionals joining the industry today?

During my career I have seen huge progress in health, safety and environmental protection efforts in the oil industry. Today this has become an expected part of the business, but it wasn't always so and it goes without saying that progress in these areas will continue in the future. On the other hand, Corporate and Social Responsibility was rarely on the agenda prior to 1990, and has only risen in importance year on year since then. I expect future oil and gas professionals to continue in their drive towards making the oil industry a leader in social responsibility and sustainability across the world.

Which young person that you have met has most impressed you, and why?

I am constantly meeting young people who astonish me with how insightful and industrious they are. There are just too many young talents that have impressed me, and it would be unjust to point out just one. Kuwait Energy is a co-founder of a maths and science competition in Kuwait, the Kuwait Science Fair, which sees the participation of hundreds of high school students each year. Even at that young age, participants have shown great visions they would like to share. After all, with every new generation there will be different ways in which to view the world – and that is the value every new generation brings to the table, which us older professionals need to be able to utilise positively. Young generations have great imagination, and are ambitious; our role is to help them in developing their abilities to the fullest and provide them with the platform to turn their ambitions and goals into reality. ■