

DIGITAL | technology and internet

FOCUS | Francesca Sawalha meets Talal Abu Ghazaleh - father of auditing, accounting, consulting, and intellectual property protection in the Arab world

Shepherding the region into the global economy

THE OFFICE OF Talal Abu Ghazaleh vaguely resembles an admiral's cabin on a XIX century sailing ship: Floor, ceiling and walls are all in dark wood, interrupted only by elegant but sober drapes. After all, this pluri-decorated pioneer of intellectual property protection in the Arab world has fought his fair share of battles against the "pirates" of our days. And wisely sailing through the rough waters of this part of the world, this 'admiral', with a warm smile and gentle manners, has over the past 30 or so years built a small empire in its own right, with 32 offices across the Arab world and liaison offices in Edinburgh, Montreal, New York and Paris.

After taking a quick glance at the Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organisation - an umbrella gathering service firms in the fields of accounting, management consulting, technology transfer, training, intellectual property, legal services, information technology, capacity building, credit information and legal translation, as well as academic associations - it is easier to say what Abu Ghazaleh does not do than what he does. For a start, he does not do politics - a refreshing change at a time when success in business often seems to come with a ministerial post somewhere down the road - and admits it with the easy candour of those who need no favours from anyone - or almost.

After promoting international accounting standards in the Arab world and representing the profession at the highest levels regionally and internationally, Abu Ghazaleh set out to write his own dictionaries of accounting and intellectual property and developed a training system. His establishment, which issued the first Arab CPA certification ever, currently counts 3,000- students from all over the region.

Through Abu Ghazaleh Intellectual Property (AGIP), he led the drive for intellectual property protection, and has been president of the Arab Society for Intellectual Property since 1987.

His involvement in IT dates as far back as 1980.

"We started focusing on IT in 1980, and that same year we were mentioned in the International Herald Tribune as the number one computer user in the Arab world," he says.

In the early 1980s, Abu Ghazaleh introduced the first IT management system to the government of Kuwait, and since then

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has been developing IT-based accounting systems and offered a range of consulting services.

"Today we are providing information security, audit services as well as consulting on e-government and e-business in general," he explains.

No matter how many companies he's running - 15, according to one count - "the jewel" of his organisation seems to be the "Abu Ghazaleh Cambridge IT Skills Centre," which he describes as a proof of his "commitment to eliminate computer illiteracy in the Arab world."

The centre came as the result of a 2001 agreement between Talal Abu Ghazaleh International (TAGI) and Cambridge International Examinations to deliver IT training courses through a website, together with additional learning resources. Courses and exams have been translated into Arabic, and the partnership covers all 22 Arab countries. In Jordan, the centre has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education to certify 30,000 teachers, and is working with the Ministry of ICT under the umbrella of the e-government strategy to train and test government employees. Governments, banks and companies across the Arab world have listed the Abu Ghazaleh Cambridge IT Skills Award as a prerequisite for recruitment and/or promotion.

Abu Ghazaleh says spreading



Talal Abu Ghazaleh

computer literacy, and especially training the trainers programmes, is a focus of his work as vice-chair of the UN ICT Task Force (New York, 2001-2004), chairman of the Arab Regional Network of the UN ICT TF, and new board member of IT education-oriented organisation World Links.

Theoretically, "the Arab world is capable of joining the world information society and very rapidly," comments Abu Ghazaleh.

"The only problems are political will and concrete action plans; some countries, like Jordan, have both."

But what's perhaps the greatest

hurdle to regional IT development is lack of coordination amongst various initiatives within each country. In that regard, even in Jordan a "national coordination body" is needed, to ensure synergy and avoid waste and duplication of energies and resources, Abu Ghazaleh stresses. Such a body would report directly to the country's leader, and include all stakeholders, private and public, from banks to civil society, in addition to ministries, agencies, and companies. "If you don't organise your own house, you can't expect donors to organise it for you."

TECH 101 | Technology explained Fragmentation

1. Fragmentation refers to the condition of a disk in which files are divided into pieces scattered around the disk. Fragmentation occurs naturally when you use a disk frequently, creating, deleting, and modifying files. At some point, the operating system needs to store parts of a file in noncontiguous clusters. This is entirely invisible to users, but it can slow down the speed at which data is accessed because the disk drive must search through different parts of the disk to put together a single file.

2. Fragmentation can also refer to RAM that has small, unused holes scattered throughout it. This is called external fragmentation. With modern operating systems that use a paging scheme, a more common type of RAM fragmentation is internal fragmentation. This occurs when memory is allocated in frames and the frame size is larger than the amount of memory requested.