

focus on bahrain

A labour of love

Bahrain is the centre of human resource development for the Gulf region. Carol Byers interviews the state's Minister of Labour & Social Affairs, HE Abulnabi Al Sho'ala.

IN THE LAST few decades, the governments in the GCC states have been, by far, the largest spenders on employees, and as the largest employer, they have also provided the greatest investment in training.

However, that is all set to change, with the increasing participation of the private sector which is being roused into action by some clever government policies aimed at the creation of a more competitive and competent national workforce.

Behind such a drive is a man who came to his government position with vast experience both as an employee and an employer, and who now enjoys the admiration of many for his foresight and vision in helping young Bahrainis and for his creation of cohesion and co-ordination in human resource development amongst the GCC countries. That man is His Excellency the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs for Bahrain, Abdulnabi Al Sho'ala.

Mr. Al Sho'ala, who was appointed to his current position in June 1995, has attacked his role with an enthusiasm which can only be described as a labour of love for Bahrain. His dedication and concern for the success of the Bahraini people has been unthwarted as he very quickly realised the importance that any changes he made would have on the economy and the future of his country.

It is no secret that all the countries of the region, Bahrain included, are going through a stage of economic restructuring. This is mainly because of a number of factors including declining revenue, decreasing role of the state in economic activities and the increasing number of indigenous population looking for new job opportunities. Also the expenditure needed to complete most of the infrastructure requirements in these countries is another drain on resources.

All this means lower spending, more rational government expenditure and deficit in the budgets that will naturally require more efficiency in the overall performance of the economy. This, in turn, will necessitate that the workforce should be more trained,

more equipped and more capable of handling different responsibilities in ever-changing circumstances. This becomes even more important with the requirement, today, to resort to the latest technologies.

In lead position

Mr. Al Sho'ala's direction for Bahrain has been based on a strong belief that its human resources are its most important asset, being the key factor to attracting local and regional investment and in encouraging foreign investment into Bahrain. Compared to its neighbours, Bahrain has the most modest natural resources and hence its concentration on HRD is well understood and appreciated. More recently, it was recognised by a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report where Bahrain enjoyed the first position in Human Resource Development among all Arab countries. A position it has now held for four successive years.

As a businessmen himself, it was quickly

“Conservative estimates put the spending on Human Resources Development in the GCC at over \$10 billion, making it perhaps the highest per capita spend on training in the world, and Bahrain is at the forefront”

obvious to Mr. Al Sho'ala that the private sector's role had increased in influencing economic activities and its role would therefore also have to be increased if Bahrain was to have the better equipped workforce it so badly needed.

Mr. Al Sho'ala said "The early involvement of the private sector particularly at the beginning of the planning stage is the key to the success of the government's plans. It is important that any programmes which we needed to implement, should not be imposed from the top, but should evolve from a grass root level, and from a firm understanding and appreciation of the importance of these policies to the private sector organizations and to trainees."

"Co-ordination will be necessary and

imposed whether we plan for it nor not, the size of the countries of the GCC will necessitate that the labour market should be unified and expanded for the benefit of the people of the region. GCC countries already succeeded in achieving great areas of success in economic co-operation and integration, all the top policies are in place through the GCC joint economic agreement and the various resolutions of the GCC summit."

The labour market has its share of attention. Back in 1995 it was agreed that the labour market would be unified to include regulations and laws that a labour cross border movement would be encouraged so that citizens of any GCC country working in the other, would be treated as citizens of these countries equally.

Assessing the success of these policies in the GCC Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs Council with its executive bureau based in Bahrain. The Ministers are meeting more frequently than before to review policies and ensure implementation of resolutions of the summit meetings.

The next meeting is to be held in Kuwait in October 1998 and among the issues to be discussed and reviewed are the joint efforts in training in the region; unification of rules and regulations, and the degree of success the GCC has had in encouraging cross border movement. It is important to point out that there are now thousands of GCC nationals working in different countries.

"The expenditure made by the Government on training is regularly increasing, but we believe that as with any competitive nation, the private sector should take the leading role in this respect. We have already in place, rules and regulations that determine the role of the private sector which includes the payment of training levy from the Government for those companies who offer training to their employees."

Al Sho'ala's role has been to develop different divisions of training such as on-the-job training by major companies, and on-the-job training with other companies through the Ministry of Labour programmes. In addition, the Ministry offers job-seeker training, and specific economic sector training programmes. All such programmes in Bahrain are initiated and monitored by the high council for vocational training, the majority of whose members are from the professional and private sector. The flag ship of executing and implementing the programmes is the Government's Bahrain Training Institute (BTI) which last year achieved over four million man hours of training for over 30,000 trainees.

Bahrain's attention has been heavily targeted towards new job seekers in order to



ensure that they are successful in entering the labour market and hence reduce unemployment. On a sectoral basis Bahrain has concentrated on training in IT, banking and finance and tourism and industry-related programmes. In the future, it will concentrate on professional trades, particularly, in the construction industry in order to reduce the heavy dependence which Bahrain has on imported labour.

International expertise

However, unlike some, Mr. Al Sho'ala admits that the role of foreign expertise is extremely important, and says, "While Bahrain works hard to encourage its private sector to evolve training programmes, we consider that foreign investment and involvement is of vital importance. This will provide Bahraini and Gulf organizations, including the private sector, the opportunity to benefit from international expertise and the experience of other countries in this respect. With the concept of globalization and the removal of barriers, unified training methods and schemes will encourage the process of international economic integration and co-operation.

Under Mr Al Sho'ala's influence, the region is now looking at unified standards of training methods and at the experience which has already been gained by other countries. For example, Oman and Bahrain have already adopted the NVQ system of Great Britain in varying degrees, (see Technical Review July/August 1997) and other countries of the region are seriously considering the adoption of such a scheme.

When questioned as to why the British NVQ scheme was selected, Mr. Al So'ala stated that it is strongly based on performance and therefore matches better, compared to other systems, to meet the circumstances in the region. More importantly the NVQ provides the opportunity even for job seekers to benefit from the training right from the beginning of their entrance into the labour market. However, he pointed out the strong links between Bahrain and Britain may have had a certain influence.

The governments of the region, Bahrain included, have always allocated generous funds to education and health and, again with Mr. Al Sho'ala's influence, training and human resources development are now coming to prominence increasingly and receiving a larger allotment of these funds.

"The whole region now fully realizes that human resource development is an issue in which our prosperity, progress and development will heavily rely. Already, billions of dollars are being spent on HRD. Conservative estimates put that figure at over

\$10 billion and, with this, it makes the GCC having perhaps the highest per capita spend on training. Bahrain is in the forefront of such an endeavor and we strongly believe that our most important asset is our people and their capability" said Mr. Al Sho'ala.

Mr. Al Sho'ala has set a course to establish Bahrain as the Regional Centre for Human Resource Development and as such is encouraging companies to set up training centres in Bahrain offering the expertise needed for a young workforce to progress.

Mr. Al Sho'ala explained, "Our main factor in attracting and encouraging training and HRD organisations to set up in Bahrain is through the creation of a conducive environment which provides every possible assistance to such companies who wish to

public relations activities."

The encouragement of the participation in international conferences and exhibitions, and the holding of these in the region, will be yet another platform where the economies of the region can benefit from the experience and achievement of others in this respect.

Mr. Al Sho'ala is proud to admit that Bahrain has become a prominent player in related international scenes, such as with the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations (IFTDO), which will be holding its annual international conference and exhibition in 2002 in Bahrain which will have more than one thousand professionals and experts participating.

Increased awareness

However, Mr. Al Sho'ala still sees the main benefactors of this pro-active resolution as the people of Bahrain, both employees and employers. By the increased awareness of the need for training and human resource development in the region, training now figures prominently in the thinking of the private sector institutions, and conviction that it is an investment rather than an added expenditure is now deeply rooted.

The private sector now benefit from an increasing number of international organizations who are now based in Bahrain offering a wide spectrum of training facilities to all. Today, firmly backing the Governments enthusiasm for training and is resulting in young Bahrainis not only being offered a job by the private sector, but also the opportunity to develop skills and climb the corporate ladder.

Perhaps the extent of Mr. Al Sho'ala's efforts over the last three years will be seen at the first international exhibition and conference on HRD to be held in the region. This will take place at the Bahrain

International Exhibition Centre in November and has already attracted over 400 exhibitors from all over the world, and includes all of the GCC countries.

So how does Mr. Al Sho'ala see Bahrain in 10 years time? "A proud nation which has taken up and fulfilled its responsibility to the younger generation. I am sure that in ten years time we will see the results of our efforts and a tangible profit of our investment in our people. By ten years the workforce will be trained and capable of carrying out responsibilities of economic development with efficiency and confidence, and will be instilling these priorities to future generation, an attractive factor in encouraging more investment into Bahrain."



"The early involvement of the private sector is the key to the success of the government's plans."
Minister of Labour & Social Affairs, HE Abulnabi Al Sho'ala.

make Bahrain a bridgehead and a base for their activities throughout the region."

"We have found that one of the most attractive factors is the strong government commitment to HRD, having formed an office within the Ministry to offer support and facilities to the most credible and reputed organizations to set up their centres in Bahrain. The Bahrain Government provides them with studies, research and information. We also work closely with the Bahrain Promotions and Marketing Board (BPMB), lending a helping hand to them and continue to undertake a number of promotional activities including participation in international exhibitions, presentations and road shows, as well as advertising and