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**Leadership Series**

**Aujan Coca-Cola’s Masoud Golshani-Shirazi**

A global executive who has lived in Iran, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the UAE, Masoud Golshani-Shirazi serves as Vice President of Human Resources at Aujan Coca-Cola. In this interview, the Dubai-based leader shares his insights into HR management in the Middle East and the evolving landscape of talent acquisition.

By Boyden

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**Boyden’s Leadership Series presents discussions with business and thought leaders from organisations across the globe. The series focuses on topical issues that offer executives, political leaders and the media insight into current trends in business and talent management in the global marketplace.**

**This issue features Masoud Golshani-Shirazi, Vice President of Human Resources at Aujan Coca-Cola. He discusses his experiences as a global citizen of Iranian origin, HR management best practices in the Middle East, the evolving landscape of talent acquisition, how horse archery influenced his management style, and the importance of making yourself lucky by putting yourself in luck’s way.**

*Golshani-Shirazi joined Aujan Industries LLC in August 2010. Based in Dubai and reporting to the CEO, he is the company’s top HR executive, overseeing HR, property, administration and communications across all geographic operations.*

*Prior to joining Aujan, Golshani-Shirazi worked for Vodafone for 13 years in various roles and several countries. He has also worked in banking, fashion, retail and food businesses, and has significant experience both as a transformational and operational director, managing large teams and budgets. He has lived in Iran, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Golshani-Shirazi holds an MBA and a post-graduate degree in human resources.*

***Boyden****: You’ve worked as an HR expert in so many industries across the Middle East and Europe. How much do you believe in planning a career?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: I believe in taking opportunities to learn and moving out of your comfort zone to acquire new experiences. Honestly, I can’t say that my career was planned in any way, shape or form. Thankfully, I’ve made some good calls in taking the risk of going to countries I didn’t know anything about and working in industries that were completely new to me, purely based on how I believed the role matched my strengths and motivation.

In my career, I’ve managed a shopping center, retail shops and restaurants, and a sushi factory. Looking at this trajectory, people may think my unusual path hasn’t really added any value to my current HR role, but the time I’ve spent in these roles has lent significantly more value to my current role as an HR director than the amount of time I’ve spent in the field of HR alone. Looking at my career profile no one would conclude that it’s been a planned one, but I don’t believe in a plan that goes from point A to B in a straight line or via the shortest possible route. I do, however, believe in acquiring skills and capabilities anywhere that one finds an opportunity.

***Boyden****: What stands out to you as unique about Aujan Coca-Cola’s approach to HR management vis-à-vis other companies you’ve served at?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: When I joined Aujan Coca-Cola there was a very skeletal HR function in place, primarily with a payroll and employee relations element. There were no centres of expertise for resourcing, learning and development or compensation and benefits, and there were certainly no HR business partners. I saw this as an opportunity to really create value and capability. We have an amazingly committed shareholder base and management team, and I wasn’t going to let them down. I’m not interested in HR processes for HR processes’ sake. Everything we do is about business value. That being said, we focus on two primary things: transformation of the business ahead of the growth curve and talent development.

At Aujan, we measure everything down to the minutest detail, with very specific KPIs that directly impact the P&L. Our focus is in line with maximising the effectiveness of our sales and distribution. In terms of building our talent pipeline, it’s not always all about a hard system approach only - heavy appraisal systems, career development reviews, succession plans, etc. It’s equally important to be sincere in what you’re trying to do and believe a person’s potential can be maximised for the benefit of the business.

Ultimately, the attitude taken toward HR implementation is key. The way you drive business value is not by going in with lots of heavy machinery, procedures and forms, but by really understanding the business and then executing excellence to get the maximum value from the initiatives you put in practice. Few initiatives, done really well and with the right people and the right intention bring credibility.

***Boyden****: Aujan Coca-Cola operates across the GCC countries, including Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, North Africa and across Southeast Asia. How do you stay connected in managing such a diverse, complex region?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: We travel and we’re out and about in the market a lot. I visit our markets and factories on a regular basis and walk around to see the execution and talk to people. I remember once asking my former boss, “Have you ever had a country visit that you felt was a waste of time and the company’s money? He said “Never.”

There are many companies that limit travel and access to the markets for their executives the moment things get difficult. They suddenly want to have everything done by email, and I just can’t believe it. You never understand what’s really going on through Skype or emails.

For instance, when I visit our factories across the Middle East every year during the peak of summer, I spend three hours in a suit walking around in the heat. It’s important because employees see you in person. They see you wearing the same safety clothes they’re wearing, walking around and being with them in that environment. How are you going to do that via Skype or email? In order to really understand your business you need to get into the details and break bread with your people - eat and drink with them, and let them tell you their stories.

***Boyden****: Both the Aujan Group and Coca-Cola are individually well established identities. How challenging was it to merge these iconic brands from an HR perspective?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** It’s not been challenging at all. Coca-Cola was the perfect partner for Aujan because we have genuine synergies and truly find value in each other. In my view, both parties are benefitting from this partnership, which makes for a really good rapport, both professionally and personally.

For instance, if you talk to my HR team, they will tell you I’m not one to support PowerPoint ‘talk’. Instead I embrace and reward execution, which is why we don’t spend a lot of time designing templates and competency frameworks. Coca-Cola has perfected that already, and they have beautiful tools and methodologies in place that we leverage and adapt to the best of our ability. The time and effort saved there, due to Coke’s competencies, allows me to focus 80% of our efforts on staying close to our business and driving execution excellence.

***Boyden****: What role does sustainability play in Aujan Coca-Cola’s business strategy? How do you find the balance between “doing good” for society and also ensuring that you make a profit?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: Aujan is a very old company. We’ve been around since 1905. I know it’s not quite as old as Coca-Cola, but we’re both well over hundred-year-old companies that definitely take a long-term view of any business ventures we undertake. The name “Aujan” and the reputation of our business are extremely important to us. In the Middle East, maybe more than anywhere else in the world, your reputation is far more important than many capital assets that you might have. Hence, any investments we make have to be within the context of benefitting the society in which we operate – whether it’s around talent development, sustainability or being a good corporate citizen.

For instance, in our business we have ample opportunity to contribute to water and energy conservation. Also, there’s an impact being made in the way we treat our people, their families and the communities they live in. We operate in communities where there is a lot of unemployable local talent, which we help turn into talent that can help sustain the economies of those particular countries.

Environmentally we’re operating in a very fragile part of the world, whether it’s water shortage or energy conservation. We realize our business can have a huge impact. Also, from a business point of view, Aujan is the leader in juices and Coca-Cola sees the benefit of widening their product range into healthier options.

***Boyden****: In which of Aujan Coca-Cola’s markets have you found it most difficult to recruit and why, and vice versa, has there been any market that’s been really great in terms of talent recruitment?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** Within our region clearly there are countries that supply excellent capability and talent. Egypt and Lebanon are the main ones that immediately spring to mind. We also recruit from the Far East and more now from Africa and Europe as well. We have a massively diverse workforce and the diversity is constantly increasing, both from a gender and ethnic standpoint, which is important to us.

I’ve found Iraq to be a challenge for recruiting. Previously when Iran was part of our business, it was a serious challenge as well. In both cases, the issues were primarily due to the closed nature of these countries’ societies and the lack of infrastructure development, be it in the availability of head-hunters or finding alternate means of accessing people. They are also very challenging locations from a safety point of view, and the ethnic, religious and sectarian divides in the region don’t make it easy to have the same approach to talent that you might have in other countries. Overall, I think there are particular challenges and opportunities in each one of our markets, particularly those with inflexible regulatory, cultural or political environments.

***Boyden****: What advantages do you think executive search firms provide that aren’t available in-house?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** At Aujan Coca-Cola we’ve developed our own internal recruitment capability over the last few years, and we’ve moved from 70% of our roles being filled via external agencies to 80% being completed in-house. I think there is a serious role for executive search firms, even with companies like ours which have developed their own capabilities, because there are always challenging assignments. Also, search firms can play an important role due to the confidential nature of the role or because one needs to specifically target a particular segment, set of companies or market expertise in a challenging region for talent. In any one of those situations there is certainly a lot of value-add that we gain from using executive search companies.

That said, we are very careful and judicious in how we select an executive search firm for any head-hunter assignment. We prefer to be very close to the people we assign so that they really understand our needs and act as our partners in meeting them. I don’t believe it’s a one-way street where you have a perfect client or a good head-hunter. I think there are responsibilities on both sides for the client/search firm relationship to work.

***Boyden****: How do you envision the landscape of talent acquisition developing in the Middle East over the next five to 10 years? And what are the key opportunities and challenges senior HR executives will face in the region?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** Everybody talks about how the talent war is becoming more difficult and how there’s more competition for top talent going forward. My view is that the game really is changing because there’s so much more change happening in the world, whether it’s the retirement of the baby boomer generation or the need for more flexible working hours, diverse talent that’s still untapped, or the different types of employment contracts being offered. The truth is it’s not one single factor that’s driving the changing landscape of talent acquisition but a whole range of issues.

To keep up with this changing landscape, it’s imperative to really pay attention to what the younger generations want. Their needs are different. Their requirements in terms of decision-making, flexibility and fun at work are different. It’s also important to realize that there’s a whole bunch of diverse, untapped talent out there that doesn’t fit a cookie-cutter standard but is important to leverage for future growth.

In the evolving talent scene, the other question to consider is whether talent is really an HR issue. Isn’t every single person in the business, especially line managers, supposed to be a talent scout, talent developer and talent retainer? For companies it’s important to consider what you’re offering that talent. Are you offering them a job to put on their CV so that after they’ve been with the company a respectable length of time they move on, or are you offering them experiences that vary as the company changes, and experiences that build on their career plan by exposing them to new, valuable environments?

In the end, talent acquisition and retention is all about trust. The reality is that employees will not listen to what you say; instead, they will look at what you’ve done. There’s a real need for companies to be more open about where they’re really at and where they need to be, and to communicate this to employees. Ultimately, the quality of your communication and engagement with your talent is critical.

***Boyden****: How would you describe your management style?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** My management style, first and foremost, is focused on building trust. If you’re not trustworthy, nothing else works. Then, if you’re working in a commercial environment, you have to be a good business person and make smart, commercially viable decisions. In addition, you also have to be a good manager and leader who efficiently engages resources.

So my management approach is that I like to give people a chance. I like to think I am somebody who is not driven by status or politics. Also, I believe that if you’re not prepared to say something to people’s faces then don’t say it behind their backs. That’s how you develop trust. Personally, this approach helps reduce my stress, because I don’t have any energy to waste on pretending to be something else or projecting a different picture than what I really think.

The bottom line is I believe in building a personal brand on authenticity and sincerity. If you genuinely engage with people, one-to-one and with a win/win attitude, then everything else flows. I like to think that everything I say is what I actually do or try to do to the best of my ability.

***Boyden****: What are the three skills or attributes you look for in your direct reports?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** I’ve gone from a very traits-based approach to actually looking beyond and focusing on people’s value systems. To me it’s far more important to find the right fit of a person within a balanced team that has diverse types and needs. I look for evidence that shows me whether the person is a political animal or a selfish, status-conscious individual, or if they are collaborators and achievers. That is my starting point, and from there it’s all about looking for skills that nurture an open environment where everyone’s focused on active team building. I definitely avoid bringing people with negative work attitudes into my company.

I was brought up in England in a very Anglo-Saxon way, with a clear divide between one’s personal life and work life. Here in the Middle East that’s not the way things work. You first develop personal relationships and only then do you do business, whereas in the US it’s usually the opposite. Even in Europe, work tends to be more relationship-based. I’m not saying one approach is better than the other – it’s just the way it is.

I’m sort of a chameleon from a culture standpoint, but I know which one I enjoy the most. I enjoy the close personal relationship and the friendly, emotional way of working; the way we work here in the Middle East. I think the whole idea of the “collective” and being together in the journey of life is beautiful. Unfortunately though, as companies get bigger, they get more formalized in their approach.

***Boyden****: What are your deal makers and breakers in hiring?*

**Golshani-Shirazi:** For me, self-awareness and openness are top-of-mind qualities in terms of being differentiators in hiring. I like people who are open and transparent. There’s also a great thing to be said for individuals that are self-aware. I find it difficult to trust individuals that are either unaware of themselves or are not prepared to share, to an extent, the human nature of their own strengths and limitations.

If somebody says to me, “I’ve made some terrible mistakes and I’ve got these weaknesses, which I’m aware of and I’m working on,” that message is hugely positive for me. After all, we are all human beings and we all have weaknesses. And quite frankly, if you have any kind of potential at all, you take risks and eventually some of your risks don’t pay off. It’s impossible for you to not have failed if you’ve tried enough challenging things. So I really like to test individual potential during the selection process.

Because we are a growing company, hiring is not just about being able to do a job right now, for one department and at one point in time. It’s very much about bringing people in that can grow with us. Naturally there are other things we look for as well, including candidates’ abilities to learn and grow, their strategic long- and short-term views, whether they have enough intellectual power to handle the complexity of our work, and their ability to manage people through a display of good emotional intelligence.

***Boyden****: What’s been the greatest milestone or achievement in your career?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: Well, I’m going to talk beyond Aujan Coca-Cola because it’s absolutely been a dream company to work at. Prior to this, my most wonderful experience was working with Vodafone in the Netherlands. During my tenure there I experienced the flow of challenges and opportunities in equal measure, as the company underwent a complete overhaul of its business performance in less than two years, to beat the competition and emerge an industry leader. The open culture in the Netherlands also really facilitated positive work interactions. I’ve had fantastic experiences in all the countries I’ve lived in, but from a work perspective, the Netherlands was brilliant.

***Boyden****: What’s been the most important leadership challenge you’ve learned from?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: I’ve learned that irrespective of the diversity in cultures, basic human needs are never going to be different. In every country I’ve ever worked in or travelled to, the first thing people have said to me is, “Yes, but this is Italy,” “this is Iran,” “this is Saudi Arabia,” or “we are different.”

I can tell you this – it doesn’t matter how different cultures are, people are all the same at the end of the day. They have a need to feel that their contributions are important. They have a need to understand how what they do matches the business goals. They have a need to feel that they’re recognized and appreciated for what they’re doing.

At the same time, it’s ironic that few leaders actually practice this approach. What is to stop them from walking down the corridors and giving a quick shout out to someone? You’ll see the guy light up and what did it cost you? Nothing. So then what’s to stop you from doing it? People sit in their offices and don’t do that.

***Boyden****: You enjoy the sport of horse archery. How does your passion for this sport influence your work ethic?*

**Golshani-Shirazi**: I picked up archery in the Netherlands because the village I lived in had only one club and it was an archery club. Later on, in Turkey, I met two young men that were practicing traditional horse archery, with wooden bows and arrows. Traditional archery means the bow has no sight and everything’s moving at the same time – the horse is moving, you’re incessantly pounding the ground and breathing, the wind’s blowing, the target’s moving and you’re all over the place! There’s no anchor point, as they call it, because the target is moving, which is why the arrow and the direction of the bow is constantly moving as well. In that environment, and with all those factors in mind, you have to be able to hit the target, while staying calm, collected and focused at the same time. Traditional archery is all about instinct, whereas modern archery, on the other hand, is all about standardization, technological precision and rules.

The idea of instinctive, traditional archery is a perfect metaphor for how things should get done while we manage the chaos of multiple moving targets in our daily work lives. There’s constant change and movement in our lives. Technology is changing, the needs of people are changing, regulations are changing and pay scales are changing, though you still need success in all the chaos. You do it through positive visualization, drive and instinct, and through confidence and patience.

***Boyden****: What advice would you give to up-and-coming HR managers trying to move up the ranks?*

**Golshani-Shiraz**i: First thing is you really have to get to know your own talent. It’s important to know your own strengths and invest in your own capabilities while also being aware of your weaknesses. Second thing is if you’re stuck in a place where you’re no longer growing and learning, move on. At the same time, say “no” to opportunities when there is still growth and learning where you currently are.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, make yourself lucky by putting yourself in luck’s way. Be out there, be visible, and network. Really know what’s going on in your industry and the people that are making it happen. Put yourself in challenging and painful situations deliberately. Pain is good if you choose it, and if someone else isn’t inflicting it on you.

The bottom line is: know your talent and invest in it and let luck find you.

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*The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of Boyden; only those of Mr Golshani-Shirazi.*

*For Ms Tavoulari’s insights into Middle East talent acquisition, please continue to the Boyden View section.*

**The Boyden View: Middle East Talent Acquisition Poised for Growth**

**Athena Tavoulari is a Partner of Boyden Middle East**

*Which sectors have the most demand for senior executives in the Middle East?*

In the Middle East, the major market sectors that are experiencing a strong demand for senior executives would include the consumer and retail sectors - especially luxury retail - services and tourism, real estate development, oil and gas, and financial services.

*What is unique about retained executive search, and what are the challenges in the region?*

As in a number of emerging markets, companies in the Middle East and especially regional conglomerates outside of the UAE are not yet very familiar with the retained executive search approach. However, this does not generally apply for multinational companies in the Middle East.

The main challenges that major retained executive search companies face in this region are educating the market on the value-add of the thorough senior talent mapping approach, as well as global search capabilities, of leading retained executive search firms such as Boyden. There are also a number of contingent recruitment agencies in this region that claim they are offering executive search services, but in reality they are not involved in senior talent mapping. In fact, they focus mostly on CV selection, LinkedIn and advertisements.

*What characteristics of executives are often needed to be successful working in the Middle East?*

The key competencies that C-level executives need to develop in order to be successful in the Middle East include a strong multicultural understanding, flexibility and conceptual thinking. In addition, a senior executive coming from western markets would find that he or she would also need to develop his or her entrepreneurial ability.

*Are you seeing more opportunities for women in the region?*

In some countries, including the UAE, the opportunities for female executives would be almost equal to the opportunities of male executives. We have met and interacted with a handful of very successful and interesting female C-level executives in this region, both local and expatriate. The only issue female executives sometimes face include restrictions on travelling. In some countries, it is challenging to obtain a visit visa for a woman, especially if she is single and under a certain age.

*How do you expect executive search to evolve or change in the Middle East over the next few years?*

With Dubai Expo 2020 as well as new investments related to start-ups, executive search companies will further grow in the market. The Middle East is a region with an unprecedented GDP growth, especially compared to mature markets, and there are a number of opportunities for C-level executives.

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