

Q&A

Supporting a kingdom of change

Workplace diversity is key to success, says Reem Abdullah Al-Ghanim, Head of HR & Support Services in Chemicals Business, Saudi Aramco, who will be speaking at IP Week 2021.*

What is Saudi Aramco doing to encourage workplace diversity and gender balance? Saudi Aramco has focused on increasing gender balance in the workforce, by supporting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education, offering young women sponsorship opportunities, and developing the female pipeline after joining the workplace. We are committed to making the company the best place to work for diverse talent of any gender.

One example is the 'College Degree Programme for Non-Employees'. This initiative is one of Saudi Aramco's primary sources for entry-level Saudi professionals. It targets high performing high-school students, and supports them as they earn degrees in engineering disciplines and geosciences. This programme has enabled more women to join the different technical fields that Saudi Aramco requires, such as geophysicists, and petroleum and chemical engineers.

Another example is the range of leadership and mentoring programmes to develop skills and fast-track advancement. Our 'Women in Business Programme', for example, supports women who are beginning their careers, while our 'Women in Leadership Programme' offers mentorship and development opportunities to high-performing female leaders in the company.

How has the pandemic impacted Saudi Aramco's operations? Have there been any significant changes in terms of mental health and wellbeing? The focus on mental health and wellbeing is the responsibility of every colleague in Saudi Aramco. From the start of the pandemic, the company has offered different resources for employee support, including a dedicated site and mental health



Reem Abdullah Al-Ghanim,
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Photo: Saudi Aramco

line through Johns Hopkins Aramco Healthcare.

We have also relied more heavily on virtual ways of working, communicating, learning and collaboration across the company, and continued the development and advancement of our diverse talent.

What are you doing in terms of innovation and human resources (HR)? Are any initiatives related to the energy transition and need to build new skills in terms of ESG, ie environmental and sustainability goals? Innovation has been a part of our corporate culture from the very beginning. From the start, the primary considerations were that an innovation had to be practical, effective, economic and safe.

In recent years operational excellence (OE) has become a corporate mandate. OE can be defined as Saudi Aramco's ability to achieve and sustain excellent performance in reliability and efficiency in a cost-effective manner, while adhering to the highest standards of health, safety and environmental protection.

An essential component of OE is the innovation process. All our organisations are assessed on their performance in this area. We provide training in how to innovate and reward those who come up with innovations that we can implement.

What's even more exciting is that for most of our history we could only hire males. Which meant that we could only access 50% of the available talent. But despite that limitation, we were able to create one of the world's most valuable companies. Now we can hire women for the same jobs as men. Just imagine what we will achieve now that we can access 100% of the available talent!

As for HR, the greatest changes are taking place not only in our workforce, but in the tools being made available thanks to IR4.0 (also known at the fourth industrial revolution, or Industry 4.0 – see p24). One of our latest initiatives is the establishment of the HR Intelligent Solutions Center (HRISC). HRISC acts as a one-stop-shop for all workforce-related measures, providing real-time workforce insights with scenario planning, benchmarking and multiple data views from corporate to division level. It provides a holistic overview of the organisation, supporting evidence-based decision-making processes for leadership. Because of IR4.0, HR is evolving from a service provider to a crucial business driver. HRISC will help Saudi Aramco identify gaps between its business strategies and available HR resources, and will enable collective efforts to bridge these gaps, to assure further growth and success.

In terms of ESG, we have an established track record. Saudi Aramco has always been a leader in environmental protection, and we have established satellite research centres around the globe that are working on such concepts as crude-to-chemicals, carbon capture, and establishment of a circular economy that ensures recycling of plastic. We also offer courses to employees on all of these topics, including sustainability.

Our corporate citizenship initiatives include supporting the establishment of businesses that provide job opportunities for women, persons with disability, and disadvantaged communities in the Kingdom and throughout the world.

Since the IPO in 2019, our corporate governance has been even more transparent, and employees attend workshops and courses on ethics. As part of OE, organisations ensure our internal procedures and controls are effective and documented, and of course constantly improved.

As a major NOC, how do you see the workforce changing by 2050, given the increasing use of AI, automation, remote working, the energy transition and changing HR demands? Let's begin with what work was like 30 years ago. In 1990, many offices still used typewriters and rotary phones. We relied on hard copy filing systems. The internet was not widely available. If a computer was in the office, it was not part of a network, but used as an individual workstation to run installed software for specific business uses. Large companies depended on mainframe computers for data processing, and small companies would lease time occasionally. Long-distance phone calls were expensive and fax machines were essential. Smartphones did not exist; business meetings were in person and often required costly and time-consuming travel; and

training was done in person. Working from home was not an option.

The workforce had the same structure in almost every country. Men dominated technical and administrative work, women (if they were present) did clerical work, and the disabled were rarely employed except in government offices.

Thirty years later, typewriters and fax machines are gone. Today every office employee has a PC. Meetings are held virtually, and smartphones allow us to video conference with people all over the world, at no cost. The internet allows employees to research information, take training courses, and communicate with others. And working from home is practical and normal. Most importantly, a workforce that was once defined by gender and physical ability, is now defined by intellect and productivity.

And that change is the one that I believe will continue to define the workforce of 2050. The introduction of technology not only makes us more efficient, it allows us to be judged not by how we look, but by what we can contribute. In essence, technology facilitates diversity.

The other observation I want to make is how Saudi Aramco has changed its focus. Thirty years ago we were focused on selling crude oil. Now we're focused on selling energy and petrochemicals. We have gone from a narrow focus to one that encompasses a broad range of markets. As technology has enabled us to adapt to a changing world, it has also changed our corporate culture to one that is more inclusive, not just in terms of workforce makeup, but in accepting innovative ideas. Thirty years ago, if an employee had suggested we get into renewables, they would have been laughed at. Today we actively encourage employees to suggest new revenue streams. Why the difference in response? Because technology does not just enable a diverse workforce, it enables diversity of thought. By being open to new ways of doing business, we can be open to new ideas. And that is good business.

Therefore, I believe in 2050 we will have an even more talented and diverse workforce that provides energy to the world. ●

*IP Week will be taking place as a three-day virtual event on 23–25 February 2021. See inside front cover for details.



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