

# THE REPORT

## Ras Al Khaimah 2008

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Talal Abu-Ghazaleh

## Ramping up technology

OBG talks to Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, Chairman and CEO, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organisation, and Deputy-Chairman, UN Global Compact

**How do you envisage the future economic change that will take place in RAK?**

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** I opened my office in RAK almost 40 years ago – a decision I have never regretted. I was attracted by the potential of and need for professional services. An added bonus was that it was and still is one of the most beautiful and unspoiled areas in the UAE. Today, in addition to being an attractive place to live, it has many social and economic advantages for both residents and companies. Compared to other areas in the UAE, business and private accumulations are relatively cheap. Additionally, road conditions are excellent and the commuting problems many large cities face, such as time-consuming traffic jams and peak-hour chaos, are not present. There has been great economic growth in recent years – GDP has grown almost 100% and in 2007 alone the population of RAK increased by 20%. This has attracted a huge population of expatriates and prompted the need for a highly skilled workforce including IT users, technicians and experts. We can see this through the activities of my IT company, TAGITI, and my human resources and recruitment services company, TAGIRECRUIT.

**How would you characterise RAK's current level of computer literacy and digital awareness?**

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** Computer literacy and digital awareness in RAK is rapidly increasing as a result of the many initiatives taken earlier by the government to foster IT literacy in the emirate. One such initiative by the RAK Education Zone provided professional IT training to its teachers as they play a vital role in the spread of IT literacy and in transforming education into the digital age. As a result, teachers and students have become more resourceful and empowered with access to the latest educational practices and methodologies. We plan to soon open Abu-Ghazaleh Cambridge Centres in RAK to join the many others we have in other parts of the UAE. These centres – a joint initiative between the UK's University of Cambridge and ourselves – pro-

vide training and jointly branded IT skills certification. I am certain IT literacy will be continuously extended.

**What initiatives could RAK endorse to further encourage professional training and build the capacity of the local business community?**

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** As a result of current economic growth, expected to continue for the foreseeable future, there has to be a constant supply of skilled workers. With government policies promoting investment and creating a viable environment for more such investments, there is a huge opportunity for investment in capacity-building services, including IT.

One government effort is the International Hospitality Trade and Training Zone. This is meant to address the needs of all segments of the international hospitality and tourism industry. This project will provide focused trade support services and multi-level professional training for the expanding and dynamic tourism industry in the emirate, the region and beyond. The project reflects a clear anticipation of future trends for the hospitality industry and tourism market and a desire to invest in and provide world-class training.

**RAK recently established the Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Academy for Capacity Building. How will this help advance economic progress in the emirate?**

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** This important academy will contribute to building and developing the capacity of the local business community in the fields of digital knowledge, computer skills, English-language education and professional training. In addition, it will ensure the creation of a knowledgeable, educated and well-trained community capable of working and dealing with high-tech developments. We anticipate that this will encourage other academies to follow suit. For example, the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh College of Business, which is a faculty of the German-Jordanian University in Amman and includes the TAG ICT Academy, is currently exploring the possibility of opening a centre in RAK. This would



most likely be done in cooperation with one of the academic institutions located in RAK.

#### How can RAK build a stronger information and communications technology (ICT) environment?

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** The most important steps are to further enhance awareness among people and to invest in the emirate's ICT infrastructure. Another is to encourage ICT education and ICT-based education models. Investing in educating and training individuals and providing them with the right environment to learn and progress will reflect positively on all sectors of business, and thereby on the economy at large.

#### What benefits would be realised from the electronic integration of RAK's government?

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** RAK's economy is currently equipped to rapidly grow as the government is devoted to a stable macroeconomic development. Over the last couple of years, RAK's economy has achieved remarkable progress, as evidenced by its performance. This growth is attributable to wise leadership and liberal economic policies aimed at attracting investment.

E-governance is rapidly finding favour with governments in countries all around the world, and RAK is at the forefront of these efforts. With the Sheikh Saqr Programme for Government Excellence, the government is hoping to reach out to the population at large. Most models for e-governance are built around objectives that include quicker dissemination and better use of information, transparency in government transactions and creating services that are useful for a broad spectrum of society. It allows the government to participate in many business transactions in a more efficient and profitable manner.

As a result, communication between the various government departments improves. Information-sharing becomes much more efficient. This aids in governance and business transactions and stimulates the growth of a sound economy. Companies that deal with

government organisations also benefit from the implementation of e-governance measures. Their bids and offerings can be customised to government requirements in a more efficient and timely manner.

#### How can a more vibrant research and development community be fostered within RAK?

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** We should remember RAK was the first emirate to pass a trademarks law in the early 1970s, demonstrating that from the very beginning RAK knew the importance of innovation and the need to protect it. I believe the investor-friendly regulations and easy procedures in the emirate will play a great role in encouraging research and development (R&D). They will also create stronger links between universities and the public and private sectors to help encourage a vibrant R&D community within RAK. This can be achieved through creating centres of excellence to explore new concepts and develop new applications.

#### With regard to ICT, in what sectors do you see the greatest potential for private investors?

**ABU-GHAZALEH:** RAK offers substantial investment opportunities in many sectors, including manufacturing, real estate, tourism and education. In addition to being well located, the emirate is especially suited to be globally competitive with a very sound infrastructure and reasonable living and manufacturing costs.

RAK undoubtedly has great potential for investors in the ICT sector. A variety of factors combine to ensure that the emirate will provide the ideal location for many ICT-related industries. Those include electronics, business software development and data centres. Connectivity will be a fundamental requirement, bringing with it the consequent investment opportunities for broadband, fibre-optic and related industries and suppliers. RAK is expected to become the region's premier ICT centre, due to a continuing flow of investments to boost the emirate's technological potential and the benefits of the RAK Media City and its free trade zones.