

Dr. Abdullah Abonamah: “Technology is Embedded in Our Educational System”

Every year, the Abu Dhabi School of Management transforms a new group of students into entrepreneurial managers, changing mindsets along the way and creating real success stories with its MBA Signature Learning Experience.

At the helm of this influential academic model is Dr. Abdullah Abonamah, President of Abu Dhabi School of Management. With his unique background as an educator and a technology business strategist, Dr. Abonamah explains how technology is reshaping the future of education and corporations.

Q. What would you say are the most remarkable improvements to have taken place within the Abu Dhabi School of Management (ADSM) as a result of digitization?

ADSM was conceived in 2008. We wanted to design a college where innovation and entrepreneurship would be embedded in its DNA. Therefore, our academic program, learning experience and education infrastructure are unique and innovative.

Digitization here happens at a very organic level. For example, we use smart boards in the classroom, and rely on a Learning Management System (LMS), an interactive platform through which students can access material and upload their assignments. The LMS also enables interaction between the faculty member and the student, as they can



Dr. Abdullah A. Abonamah, President ADSM

have synchronous or asynchronous sessions. In synchronous sessions, they agree to meet at a certain time and date to have a chat, while in asynchronous sessions, the students send a posting and the faculty accesses it later on and responds.

We also have a very strong digital library with over 130,000 titles in business and management, and students have to demonstrate access to these resources. From an academic management point of view, we have a dashboard that tracks various academic and financial activities. This

is accessible by all faculty members at different levels.

Q. Abu Dhabi School of Management is the first college to specialize in entrepreneurship education in the region. In what way does digital technology underpin the institute's MBA Signature Learning Experience (SLE)?

We have embedded two aspects in the SLE – first is technology. Whichever project you decide to do, you have to demonstrate the role technology will play in your project.

The reason is that we live in a highly digitized, information-rich world, a knowledge economy where technology is the enabler. So we need to instill in the students that technology is an integrated part of any business. Even if they don't plan to use technology in their project, they still need to explain why they don't want to use it. Sometimes this leads them to change their mind.

The second aspect we have embedded in the SLE is sustainability. We are very conscious of the environment and our carbon footprint, so again, whichever project the student decides to do, they have to explain how sustainability is going to be addressed and what effect will their business have on the environment.

Q. Very recently, ADSM signed a partnership agreement with the UK's Imperial College Business School, which is among the one per cent of business schools worldwide to be triple-accredited. What is the significance of this cooperation and what will it entail?

At ADSM, we wanted to ensure that our academic programs, infrastructure and educational experience is on par with the highest international standards. We already work with the Ministry of Higher Education and Abu Dhabi Education Council, who offer us guidance and support. We are lucky to have partnered with Imperial College Business School. We will cooperate on teaching and collaborative research, as well as on student and faculty exchange. It's a working partnership, where we leverage our position here locally and benefit from their experience and global footprint.

Q. As a professor of management sciences, you have conducted numerous strategy workshops for organizations within the Gulf region and worked on projects for Siemens, Etihad

Airways, and Microsoft, to name a few. What is your view on technological innovation among UAE enterprises? Do you think certain industries are ahead of others?

As you know, the UAE is in a very advanced position in terms of technological penetration. Having that basic infrastructure, however, does not mean it translates into business value. IT is an enabler, it allows you to do things, but it does not tell you what to do. One of the things we focus on at ADSM is educating people on how to leverage IT for business value, and that translates into business strategies that are aligned with the IT strategy.

One of the industries that is extremely ahead of others is the banking industry, and the UAE is very advanced because technology is infused into its whole banking system. You notice this especially when you travel abroad. Also, the airline industry is extremely ahead when it comes to technological innovation, and so is the educational system, whether at K-12, high school, or university level.

Q. Ten years ago, when you founded the Gulf Chapter of the IT Service Management Forum (itSMF), you said that Middle East companies perceived IT as a commodity, rather than using it to leverage their organizations. How much has changed since then?

The itSMF is an international organization with local chapters. The idea was to bring to the region best practices in IT service management. A lot has changed since; many organisations have moved to leveraging IT as a strategic resource and have realized the benefits of IT. It is an ongoing process though, because the IT director or executive has to have a position in the board and that is not happening as quickly as it should be.

When the IT chief has a position at the board, he has a voice and can help the organization from the business side. Lots of progress has been made but it's a journey and it takes time.

Q. To what extent do you believe digitization can transform government organizations and private-sector companies? Is there a limit to how much a company can digitize its business processes?

The UAE government has done a great job in digitizing many of their services and this is commendable. Of course, there is a limit to how much one can digitize because you still need that human factor. There are certain things you cannot digitize. If you are in the court system, for instance, you cannot digitize the judge and the lawyers. The supporting aspects can be digitized but there are certain core elements that cannot. Similarly, in the learning environment, you may digitize processes as we are doing at ADSM, but having the professor in front of the classroom will always be essential and cannot be digitized.

Q. What future do you envisage for ADSM? How do you see the institute contributing to Emiratization and the overall success of the UAE?

Our vision is to become the hub for entrepreneurship and innovation in the UAE and the Middle East. The majority of our students at ADSM are Emirati, nearly 99%, so we are committed to Emiratization and will continue to be a major contributor to the development of UAE nationals. Our goal is to be one of the best business and management schools in the UAE and the region focusing on entrepreneurship and innovation.

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- Heba Hashem