

Top performer

Arabian Business speaks to the CEO of Lebanon-based firm Align, on the importance of project management and business performance in today's cash-tight climate.

BY ELIZABETH BROOMHALL

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WITH TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS worth of projects in the Gulf region alone, the Middle East is regarded as one of the most attractive emerging markets around the globe. Developments range from oil and gas plants and water recycling facilities to railways and mixed-use real estate developments, all offering lucrative contract opportunities for consultants, suppliers and construction firms who are eager to get a piece of the pie.

However, for Grace Najjar, the CEO of Lebanon-based Align Management Solutions, there is one key ingredient missing in the region. As a project management expert, she says skills in this field are not only lacking,

but are becoming increasingly more essential to ensure no money or time is wasted in an era when cash is tight.

“There is a real skills gap which is supported by a lot of surveys and research,” she tells *Arabian Business*. “If you look at the graduates, even if they are engineers, often they lack the skills that enable them to produce results. This is where companies are at risk.”

Asked how she thinks the situation could be improved, Najjar says educational institutions should be encouraged to do more. Not only should they be providing a range of courses in project management, but they should also seek international accreditation for their teaching.

“Universities have to start teaching project



▲ **Project management should start in universities.**

management; they can take it further to have degrees in project management and masters' courses in project management. They should also engage in accreditation with international bodies and organisations like PMI [Project Management Institute] for their



▲ **Najjar says enhancing a company's output has become important in the wake of the recession.**

programmes that will secure quality, and align the curriculum with the industry and recognised credentials. This will better prepare their students for the market.”

Given her seventeen years of experience in the market, it comes as no surprise that Najjar was the founding member of the PMI Lebanon Chapter and later elected to serve as PMI regional mentor for the Middle East.

Lending her project management skills is of course, not all Najjar does. Through Align, she is also involved in providing consultancy in areas such as human resources, business technology, risk management, and business process reengineering, and in boosting organisations' performance by analysing the business for gaps and inefficiencies. Enhanc-

ing a company's output, she says, has become particularly important in the wake of the recession, as firms have become eager to get more for their expenses.

“There is a focus on better performance now,” she explains. “People are starting to think about how to get better value and results. There is no room for loss of money or waste or rework. People need now to increase their revenue, open up new markets, new products, and it's a very competitive environment. You need to have an edge, a competitive advantage over the existing or emerging competition.”

Crucially, Najjar's company also lends a hand in familiarising organisations with international standards, and helping them to apply

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those standards to their specific business and portfolio of projects. Najjar believes this is also of utmost importance as the competition for projects heats up.

“The challenge nowadays is that there are many standards and different models in the market. We get lost in which model and which certificate to use, and how to apply these methods. I think the trend is not only to understand the model, but to adapt this to the environment and the strategic objectives of the company.

“Before, companies had large budgets so they just cared about big infrastructure and getting all the standards available, but now I think people are starting to think more about what is the best model for them.”

As for the direction of the business, Najjar says the focus in the past has been primarily on Lebanese governmental organisations and on the education sector particularly. But in the last year or so, since the company was formally established in 2010, the firm has acquired an increasing number of private, governmental and non-profit clients in the Gulf region, and in a boarder range of industries. Among them are RasGas and Dohaland in Qatar, Abu Dhabi Information Systems Committee and Jordan Customs. She adds that the business has seen little impact from the recession, with revenues up 30 percent this year, but could encounter some difficulties on the back of the Arab Spring.

“We have no major involvement in the countries that were really affected like Egypt. In Syria we have, but we don't see the situation affecting us too much. It might stop organisations from initiating projects, which could limit us, but I think we can turn it around. Companies and consultants are starting to look at how to partner with experts outside Syria, and we have an advantage being based in Beirut.”

Going forward, she hopes to uphold the firm's presence in the Levant region and in Europe, whilst also expanding further into the Gulf, tapping markets such as banking, healthcare and oil and gas. 