



Interview

Chra Hussain

Chief Commercial Officer, Asiacell

Chra Hussain is the Chief Commercial Officer at Asiacell. She has a rich experience of almost two decades in the telecommunications sector, driving the growth of her organization and, consequently, the country's digital transformation forward.

Ms. Chra talked to the Business LANDSCAPE about her journey and challenges as a key woman

figure in a leading position and how to support and empower women in the workplace and ecosystem.

In addition to Asiacell's role in developing human capital, their current projects and initiatives targeting youth employment, and the unrecognized power of analytics.

We would like to know the story behind this inspiring long career. How was your journey, and what were some of the challenges you encountered along the way?

I graduated among the top ten of my class from the English Department in 1995. Then, I was offered an immediate job in my department as a lecturer at the University of Sulaymaniyah. That is when I encountered my first challenge; gaining the respect of students at the early age of 21 in a class of 30-40 students; keep in mind that some of them were older than me. To earn their respect, I knew I had to work hard and strive to prove myself.

My English language skills introduced me to countless opportunities. One of them is joining the United Nations-affiliated agencies that entered the country in the late 90s through the Oil-for-Food Programme, which aimed to improve the living situation in Iraq that was caused by politics.

I obtained an opportunity to work in Mines Advisory Group, a British demining organization that operated back then and still operates today in Kurdistan. When I started working there, I had to learn many things, like policies and procedures, following rules and regulations, and the importance of commitment.

At that time, spending so many hours working, especially as a woman, was not an easy thing for me. But again, it was a challenge and a turning point to explore and grow in new domains. In addition, my job required me to stay after working hours, drive for miles outside the city to reach schools in remote areas to establish an awareness program for those exposed to the risk of getting in contact with mines.

Then I moved to work among UN agencies that were more about international domains and systems, which opened my eyes to many new things and motivated me to keep learning.

After 2003, many companies and investments entered the Iraqi market, and the wheel of development of the private sector started turning.

Prior to that, the available jobs were affiliated with the public sector. This new change certainly captured me. I started my 18 years journey working in Asiacell in 2004. My job at that time was as a product manager while launching SMS services; I was part of Asiacell's journey of success from the beginning.

I was fortunate to be working in an environment that had many women in leading positions. My first marketing director was a lady, and we had many other women leaders within the organization. Asiacell was and still is a workplace where one is given the resources needed to grow.

During my journey, I worked in different fields in Asiacell, including business design and various areas of marketing. I learned a lot from my colleagues, managers, partners and from the many training sessions held at Asiacell. I always set my targets to continue learning. Even today, I am enrolled in a program at Harvard to keep up to date with the current information in the business world and keep growing and developing.

It is not the norm to have women in leadership in many companies. What is it like to be a leading woman in the private sector, and how do you deal with the hardships you face?

This is the mindset generally in the Middle East, not specific to a country or a company, and this is the society we live in. However, I personally do not perceive anything as an obstacle, which I see as key. We should not focus on the fact that we, as women, are subjected to more obstacles or challenges. We must disassociate from this fact.

I think the biggest challenge is to lead in a time of uncertainties, and how to develop an agile and resilient team. Change can be especially difficult for successful leaders because they are faced with the possibility that things might not work out.



More than ever, in this dynamic world, we need leaders with the ability to recognize the fears and risks and how we can still deliver on our goals and be successful. Female leaders are relatively more reflective and collaborative in their decision-making process, and this means that it will be easier for them to adopt a positive-thinking leadership style.

What is Asiacell doing to empower and support women?

At Asiacell, women are always encouraged to take leadership positions. Asiacell focuses on objectives and deliverables, regardless of gender. As a result, everyone gets equal opportunities for growing, learning, and training.

I have been truly fortunate to see a group of aspiring leaders. Asiacell's leadership built a set of core values around taking care of its people. Whether from a safety perspective, where we ensure everyone is working in a healthy, safe working environment or preparing individuals to navigate their career paths. Ultimately, it is easy to create core values and stick them on walls.

But it does not mean that it will be embodied throughout the entire organization. It takes time to build this culture, and I believe that culture has been embedded in Asiacell for some time now.

What main pillars does Asiacell focus on to build this inclusive, healthy work environment?

At Asiacell, we set goals, and we evaluate performances accordingly. We avoid evaluation based on any intangible things. This method eliminates any other factor that will impact one's growth or promotion. We hire for merit and intellectual diversity—we do not overemphasize culture, gender, or religious fit. Asiacell also encourages input at all levels of the organization; everyone in the company has a voice, and their voice matters. We learned that it is not enough to invite someone into your business.

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They need a seat at the table and be active participants in the conversation. Leadership sets this tone. Asiacell team leaders are well versed in the philosophy of inclusion to understand its best practices and implement them properly.

Throughout your experience in the private sector, how do you evaluate the transition in the Iraqi market, are the culture and the ecosystem more inclusive?

I believe that women in the Middle East can contribute positively to country reforms and use their capacities in their professional careers to further excel in society at large and be agents of change. When I started working in the private sector, it was a different work environment for women. Being a working woman in itself was a challenge. For example, if you were a mother, you were not expected to work but stay home to care of your child.

While currently, we can see more participation of women in the labor force. Women are working in all different sectors and are in leading positions and can stay late or work multiple shifts. Asiacell, for example, invested in the role of women in economic and social development.



To do more, I believe promoting equality in education would play a pivotal role in bridging the gender gap between men and women, as would advocating for women’s rights so more women can pave the way for a successful future in Iraq. This can be achieved through the support of initiatives that seek primarily to improve women’s social and legal rights in Iraq, which is something I am glad Asiacell is doing too.

What is the responsibility we have to take, as women, to lead this transformation in the ecosystem forward?

The most important thing women can do is keep on learning and growing to earn their place in any organization. They should constantly challenge the barriers and break the glass ceilings. Women leaders should lead by example and support the women around them. For instance, in my role, it is my responsibility to mentor some women employees to help them handle work and life balance and set their priorities. My door is always open for them.

Women in leading roles must share their experiences and guide others to overcome the challenges. It is not easy, simply because our culture demands women to be at home more than men. Hence, women have more responsibilities at home, and it is pretty tricky to manage and create a balance between work and family.

Asiacell has been a significant player in the ecosystem and a supporter of youth employment and the entrepreneurial scene. Why is this a core value of the company?

Asiacell focuses on creating more employment opportunities for the local community in general. Our strategy is localization, training, developing the local human capacity, and attracting and developing the youth segment of our organization and the ecosystem.

We are a technology company; we always need new blood to understand and keep up with the rapidly evolving technology and digital transformation. We partner with different local and international entities and support programs that empower the youth. Our partnership with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq, for example, has combated unemployment among the youth and made it easier to find suitable jobs. Our collaboration with KAPITA, The Station, and Orange Corners, among others, has been supporting the entrepreneurial scene for years now.

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Can we know more about Asiacell’s current projects and initiatives in the ecosystem?

We are pleased to lead the entrepreneurship model in Iraq. We have been implementing various programs for many years now. We have worked with many international programs with the Netherlands Government, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the International Organization of Migration (IOM), and recently with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). We also collaborated with other substantial organizations and firms in Iraq, especially with KAPITA, which we believe in their capabilities as a youth entrepreneurship enabler in Iraq.



In addition, we supported Qaf Media Lab in their Business Shortcut program in Mosul and had other collaborations with the Station, Five One Lab, and other incubators.

We focus on youth, and we believe in the youth's capabilities to improve the economy of Iraq. Enabling entrepreneurship is a part of Asiacell's strategy.

Annually, we have a program to develop the entrepreneurship and the startup scene. We have more than 200 successful businesses running in the market out of the thousands that we have already mentored and gone through our programs.

Furthermore, we are partners with many youth domains, like the IQESF (Iraqi Esports Federation). We are helping them to build up their capabilities to be able to compete globally. In addition, we have many internship programs with universities. Each summer, around 1000 students get the chance to receive courses and real-life training through our internship programs. We also try to acquire any talent that we see through our internships.

To make things easier, Asiacell has launched ASAS, which is a platform under which the youth can find all the local and international programs and initiatives we are offering, sponsoring, or supporting. They can see what meets their needs best and join. We really want to make a change and offer this generation the opportunities we were not offered ourselves.

Recently Asiacell has launched a digital platform aimed towards youth and the digital transformation of Iraq. Can we know more about this platform, the reason behind this launch, and what you are trying to achieve?

We value differences and celebrate similarities. We connect people with diverse backgrounds and visions across Iraq. After conducting extensive research, we have recognized an excellent potential: the youth want something different,

fully digital, and flexible to match their lifestyle. We wanted to offer new channels for them to be active. Therefore, we came up with a unique brand that fits their needs.

A specific platform we call YOOZ. The bright, happy colors represent the positive energy we see in the Iraqi youth. It shows them that they are the future of this country.

We encourage digital transformation with unique apps and user experience through this platform. For example, youth will have a specific channel for chatting with our agents via WhatsApp through texting, as we are aware that they prefer texting over phone calls. We even try to reach them in universities and other youth gathering areas, integrating with their lifestyle, offering discount cards for places like cafes and gyms.

How is analytics relevant to your career, and why is it a powerful tool to understand your customers?

Not just my career, I believe that the telecommunications industry as a whole is all about analytics. We have to understand our customers, how they perceive our advertisements, when they make an action to purchase, how they experience our services, and how they feel after making a transaction. Analytics is not just about reading numbers while sitting behind the screen.

It is about the relation of internal or external factors to customer behavior. It is also about analyzing the ecosystem around your customer to understand their needs. Analytics plays a critical role in our modern world, not only the numbers but also the insights. Understanding the market and the economy is overly complicated, and it requires having a 360 degree look to evaluate every decision.

The analysis sometimes forecasts the future, which direction one would like to move, and where to invest. Analytics create the foundation to build the right strategy for the company.



How do you think we can further employ analytics in the Iraqi private sector and encourage the youth to acquire those skills?

Primarily, I would start with education. Universities need to open new study majors; many universities are still not providing the required market skills. We should educate our university students and provide them with new domains to employ these skills and add value to the existing companies in the market. We must stop relying on foreign experts only because these skills are not being taught in Iraq. It is just baby steps, but we have to start from somewhere.

At Asiacell, when we bring new calibers, we make sure that a knowledge transfer takes place. However, we need to start with education to expand our pool of calibers. This case is not specific to a particular gender; we lack both men and women with the skills and mindset of analytics. I emphasize that locals are the ones we need to improve and integrate into the market for the thrive of the private sector.

After this long career, how would you describe yourself?

I am industrious, I love a good challenge, and I am incredibly competitive. I want to be known as a woman that will cause a threat to the competition. The sky is the limit for me, and I always strive to improve and learn as much as possible. I am a perfectionist; I want the company I work with to be the best in its domain, our employees to be of the highest caliber, and my work to be of the highest impact.

I keep challenging myself all the time, each goal I achieve is the start of another one, and I do not know where to stop; I am always restless to achieve more.

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My advice is to simply go ahead and pave your way into the scene. Do not doubt yourself or your abilities. You need to prioritize your education and self-improvement and always keep up with the new developments.

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What is your message for women navigating their way into the Iraqi ecosystem?

I think, in Iraq, it is too often that women learn too late in their careers to stand up and speak for themselves. I think that is partially contributed to the culture and the way we have been taught in schools. Hence, it is essential to find both men and women as allies, mentors, and sponsors. Also, focus on the transition points in your careers. For example, if you have kids, you are going to need more support, so having the right network is really critical.

My advice is to simply go ahead and pave your way into the scene. Do not doubt yourself or your abilities. You need to prioritize your education and self-improvement and always keep up with the new developments. You also need to work on creating excellent work and family balance.

Finally, never stop somewhere thinking you have learned it all; it is a constant journey of learning and growing. Iraqi women have always had big names in different sectors and industries, and hopefully, they could continue carrying this torch and driving forward the prosperity of our country.



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