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PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCE SERIES

PORTRAIT OF A GLOBAL CPO

Singapore Post's Group Chief People Officer,
Sehr Ahmed, talks to Criticaleye's **Marc Barber** about the need to shift mindsets and create energy as the leadership team seek to expand and strengthen the international presence of an organisation that's over 165 years old





It is often said that the highest performing Group Chief People Officers understand the business and broader strategic context in a way that goes way beyond HR. **Sehr Ahmed** certainly fits that bill, having started out over 20 years ago as a corporate banker before a CEO tapped her on the shoulder and suggested a switch.

“I had never thought about a career in HR, but I was at that moment in my life where I was crunching financial ratios, writing credit proposals and knew I was ready for a change,” she recalls. This desire to do something different dovetailed with a desire to build out a truly global career and to leave Pakistan, where she was based at the time.

Sehr, who was working with ABN AMRO, said ‘yes’ to the CEO’s offer and immersed herself in learning the fundamentals of HR. “I had to roll up my sleeves, bring what I knew to the table and learn the rest quickly. I had to go into it with ‘high-learning agility,’” she says. “The business really welcomed me because I spoke their language and I understood their challenges. The minute you understand the business, you’re able to provide ‘thought-partnership’ to real commercial challenges. After all, every decision a CEO makes has a financial and a cultural dimension.”

In many ways, **Sehr** never looked back. The roles she went on to hold at ABN AMRO, based in Hong Kong, included Head of Human Resources for Greater China, then Asia Pacific and eventually the whole Asia region, before taking on global and regional HR leadership roles at BNY Mellon, Chartis Insurance, McDonalds, Mercer and IFM Investors, among others. This entailed crossing

“The company needed someone with a global mindset to align the business and cultural transformation”

seven industries, including banking and insurance to professional services and, most recently, logistics. What is more remarkable is that she moved across borders and industries, while taking on progressively senior positions with two young kids in tow as a single parent.

Those early years in finance gave **Sehr** a strong foundation on which to build her international career. “If anyone thought HR was warm and fuzzy, they’ve got it completely wrong,” she says. “The amount of numbers that we have to crunch in HR is significant. Though highly strategic, it’s also highly quantitative. You have to see patterns and trends and be able to tell the story behind the numbers.”

Delivering Transformation

Sehr is warm, friendly and welcoming in person. She enthusiastically describes her latest position as Group Chief People Officer at Singapore Post (SingPost) and the organisational and cultural

transformation she’ll be a part of leading. The company, which is over 165 years old, has evolved from being Singapore’s postal services provider into an international logistics and digital services business. It has offices in 14 markets around the world.

“The company needed someone with a global mindset to align the business and cultural transformation while pivoting to being a global logistics player, which is the growth engine,” she explains. “You don’t want a centralised structure. You want to create a structure where decisions can be made in those critical businesses and regions. You want to create agility, empowerment and the right environment where decisions can be made in real-time.”

It sounds like a natural fit, where **Sehr** can draw on her diverse experience working across different countries and sectors to bring a fresh perspective. “People can’t think in silos,” she says. “They need to think enterprise-wide and solve problems that help the entire business.”

The latest financial results show net profits are robust, rising to S\$81.5 million in FY2023/24 from S\$38.8 million the year before. The strategy is to push international growth, building out SingPost’s capabilities as a technology-led logistics business. It’s a complex transformation where decisions made in the Boardroom will directly impact the day-to-day operations of the business.

Again, **Sehr** has the reference points to know that she will need great alignment with the CEO and the leadership team to make an impact. >



“You can't do the transformation without it; you have to move in lockstep together. Otherwise, you're not going to deliver on that transformation agenda—getting this alignment is absolutely critical.”

The relationship between the Group CPO and Board has traditionally centred around the Remuneration Committee. However, that's becoming far more nuanced as questions around building culture, skills and talent get to the heart of an organisation's plans for value creation.

Sehr says: “When communicating with the Board, you must understand the organisational context—the challenges and opportunities, as well as articulating the risks and how you can mitigate it for the business.”

She notes that culture should be top of the Board agenda. “It's what differentiates you,” she says. “It's why

people join, stay and never think of leaving. It's the glue that you create in the company to bind people together.”

Sehr seems energised by the task in hand as Group Chief People Officer. She knows that stakeholder management will be a vital aspect of executing the ‘strategic shift’ at SingPost, particularly as it expands into other territories. “I have the ability to shift mindsets, build skillsets and help people problem solve in a different way,” she comments.

Integration, Not Balance

As a leader, she also understands the importance of creating space and time in a high-pressured position. “I'm a big believer in energy,” she says. “you have to take care of yourself. These jobs are non-stop and unrelenting. I believe in work-life integration rather than balance. You need to create boundaries and take care of your health, well-being and energy.”

It's said with a smile and it's clear she means it. Sehr's professional story is as fascinating as her personal story. Taking the big bold decision to step out of a marriage and raise her kids on her own when her son and daughter were respectively three years and 18-months old, was a life changing decision. “At that very moment your DNA is changed forever, you are not the person you were before you made that decision,” she reflects.

Today her kids are young adults living and working in the US and Europe. She says her greatest accomplishment has been to be a mother while managing a global career with all the challenges associated with it.

“I have made that journey from mother to solo parent on to friend and coach in their lives,” she comments. ■

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