



Dr. Ghulum Bakiri
Founder & President, MicroCentre

SUPPORTING BAHRAIN'S ICT FUTURE

When MicroCenter was declared "ICT Company of the Year" by Bahrain Information Technology Companies Society (BiTECH) at the MEET ICT Award ceremony during BITECH 2018 last month, many felt that the recognition was a long overdue acknowledgement of the outstanding services and expertise contributed by the company to the ICT industry in Bahrain. Receiving the award for MicroCenter was its founder and president, Dr. Ghulum Bakiri, a respected veteran in the IT industry and a pioneer in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) education in Bahrain. As one of

Bahrain's earliest IT and AI professionals, Dr. Bakiri completed his PhD degree from Oregon State University, USA in Computer Science with Specialization in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML).

A quick look back into its history will tell you, MicroCenter was established 33 years ago and has grown since to a group of tech-centric companies dealing with IT Business Solutions, GIS, and Utility Network GIS Surveys, LIDAR Technology, BIM modelling, Plastic/Smart card Solutions and highly specialised GIS and ERP Training. During this time, it has built up an impressive roster of over

150 loyal clients that come primarily from government bodies as well as the corporate sector.

As the sole distributor for Esri Inc. USA, a gold partner for Oracle, reseller for Trimble GPS systems, reseller for Digital Globe (Satellite Imagery) and Snappy QMS and Digital Signage, and with over 120 qualified staff and a branch in Saudi Arabia, MicroCenter aims to refine its capabilities in developing innovative software solutions and expand its expertise into different corners of the GCC.

In an exclusive interview set up by bizbahrain, the MicroCenter team led

by Dr. Ghulum Bakiri talked to Reena Abraham about their work and the resulting award and recognition, precious because it was recognition from peers in the industry.

Sitting around the table in the conference with Dr. Ghulum Bakiri are Nasir Warsi (NW), Chief Marketing Officer; Dr. Anirudha Kale (AK), Chief Technology Officer; Younus Rathore (YR), Divisional Head / Manager; Abraham Thomas (AT), Manager Operations - MicroPromo.

Dr. Bakiri, can you give a short introduction into the history and background of the company?

Dr. GB: Actually, we started MicroCenter in 1983 just as microcomputers were coming into the market. This was the early stages of the IBM personal computer. I had just arrived from the US after my Master's degree, and I was so fascinated with technology and all what it can do, and how we can use this to bring down the cost of doing business. At that time, if you wanted to run your business, you would need a mainframe computer or at least a mini computer, costing maybe hundreds of thousands of dinars. We started developing the software for accounts and inventory management and stock control and things like that --- all integrated with the point of sale [POS] that runs on a PC or on a microcomputer --- thus drastically reducing the cost barrier to computerization of retail and wholesale businesses.

That was the initial goal of the company. Of course, the company grew and technology changed and we redesigned and redeveloped our software to keep pace. It is now in its 5th generation, and we have about 150 customers who are using our technology and running their business with it.

In a sense, we have achieved the initial vision of the company but over the years we have expanded and we have grown. We currently have 6 divisions within the company, but the one division that constitutes the core business that we call MCA e-Biz is still at the forefront. It is an ERP solution for businesses that is state of the art and cloud ready, built from the Ground-up using Oracle latest technology and tools. This is just one part of the business but it remains

the core and the flagship product of MicroCenter since the company began.

You've talked about how the vision expanded and grew. What would you say the vision is now?

Dr. GB: The vision has always been customer-focussed. We see what our clients need and we provide the technologies that will support those needs. Initially, we were focused on the private sector. With the growth of the business and partnerships with international partners, we are now the exclusive distributors in Bahrain for Esri, the leading GIS (Geographical Information Systems) software company in the world.

So now, we provide solutions for the government of Bahrain for their intelligent maps and GIS solutions and so on. That is one of the areas that we have grown because of the demand by our government clients.

Similarly, we have tied up with Oracle for the cloud solutions, which is the new trend in technology now. Our customers can now choose to have their systems somewhere in a server in their office or they can move to the cloud. And we've done all the work to allow them to have that choice.

Hence the vision of the company is still the same. We have to do what is right for our customers. They have grown and we keep up with them. Of course our customer base has also grown and instead of just small and medium-size companies, we now cater to larger companies. We have almost all of the government organisations as our clients, who are using our GIS software. Right now, Bahrain for us is pretty much saturated, and our next expansion will be in the GCC.

Mr. Warsi, can you say something about the award and what it signifies to the company?

NW: Everybody likes to get an award, but the nice thing about this award is that it is given by our peers. We were being recognized by colleagues or partners in the field and that is very important for us because for a long time without thinking of rewards, we have been doing a lot of work which we feel deeply about, which has nothing to do with making money, or

running a business.

We have, for example, been running/ conducting free seminars every month on these premises (MicroCenter offices in Salmabad) on various topics. We have also been conducting the GIS Day for Bahrain every year for the past 15 years. It is a lot of work but it is an educational opportunity for companies in Bahrain, for our clients, as well as an opportunity for us to get feedback from them as to what they want.

Other than that we participate in and initiate many activities. We conduct seminars and especially so in the last year when we began doing it regularly every month

AK: These seminars that we conduct have two key aspects. One is to raise the professional standards of the local people here who have just passed out and are looking for a job. For them, we conduct seminars to educate them and then train them in different areas, right from smart cities to ICT, geo-spatial areas, BIM (Building Information Modeling), etc. So, once they are trained they get opportunities in various government departments or private organizations.

Another aspect that we work with is training for the professionals. We train them in specialized areas including the next generation topics in Geo spatial fields.

In addition, as an Esri Authorized Learning Centre, professionals from Saudi Arabia, like Aramco staff, have approached us and we are providing training to them as well. We have 50-seat facilities here, with two training labs that together constitutes almost 6000 sqft of infrastructure that we built here with all the facilities including servers, desktops, and advanced software.

What makes MicroCenter different from other companies with similar activities?

NW: I believe the continuity of employees and customers is a unique characteristic of MicroCenter. In the ICT industry where normally attrition is very high, we have employees who have been with the company for more than 15 to 20 years. That continuity has allowed the customers to have the confidence to stay with us for long periods. We still have the same people who were involved in writing the original software, and

that stability and the sustainability of the company is a very big part of why customers trust MicroCenter.

AK: The other thing is that, we are providing solutions, not selling boxes. So we consider ourselves as a partner to our customer. We study what their problem is and come up with a solution and then work with them to implement that solution, train their people, and then offer them maintenance and after-sales support. I think we are one of the few IT companies who have a specialised support centre, just for support and maintenance of existing customers.

How did you get into access and plastic cards? What exactly does MicroPromo do?

Dr. GB: We initially responded to one of our customers need to have loyalty cards accumulating points as their purchases are processed through their point of sale. Then it grew and a new division was created called MicroPromo.

AT: As a subsidiary of MicroCenter, MicroPromo was established in 2003 to cater for the requirements of plastic cards in Bahrain. It is focused on supplying customized PVC cards of different types, Smart cards, RFID/proximity/Access / loyalty and ID cards. Today MicroPromo is one of the prominent card suppliers in Bahrain with a long list of customers including Bapco, Gulf Air, many banks and most of the five-star hotels.

What are some of the new milestones that MicroCenter is looking to achieve?

NW: So as far as sales and marketing is concerned and the way we are looking at it; I feel that cloud is the next milestone. Everybody is talking about cloud, so our ERP has already been deployed on the cloud. The milestone that I am looking at is to make ourselves, MicroCenter, the vendor of choice for cloud services. And within the cloud, there is a hybrid model where we still customize as per the needs of the customer but make sure that it's available on the cloud. That is the kind of solution that we are trying to look at.

The other area milestone that we are particularly looking at is targeting the Saudi market. I have a big challenge here, a target from our President that X percentage of our business needs to come from Saudi Arabia this year. We

have a presence there but we are going to invest in terms of people and reaching out to the market.

DR. GB: For the utility survey project, EWA in Bahrain was the first GCC utility authority to outsource this. As such, they were pioneers. Other GCC countries traditionally do this in-house, because it is so important and mission critical. We have been working with EWA for nearly ten years and we have developed a system to manage these kinds of projects with them.

Other GCC countries have now realised that it is much more effective if they outsource these activities to an outside contractor, so now SEC (Saudi Electric Company) is also looking to outsource this work. There is no other company who has as much expertise and manpower in this field. We have --- not only the people and the management who are experienced --- but, we also have the engineers, the surveyors and the data editors and all the equipment and software needed for these kind of projects. We have also developed a unique project management software to manage all the aspects of the teams that are out there in the field and the data collection and monitoring. This is a specialized software that we have developed over a period of several years and kept on improving it. All of this puts MicroCenter at the forefront of companies that can carry out these Utility Survey Projects in other GCC countries.

We have almost all of the government organisations as our clients, who are using our GIS software.

What are some of the biggest challenges that you have taken on?

AK: Two big challenges were to train the professionals from Bahrain, as well as train the locals to get better opportunities, training them in such a manner that they can perform their job in a better way.

Another area where MicroCenter is the only organisation that is going full steam ahead is on special projects. This includes 3D lasers that we are

using to map the entire area including buildings, which has an advantage over the conventional techniques and technologies that everyone is using. With this technology, all the mapping and 3D modeling can be done in one-tenth of the time that it used to take with conventional techniques.

Bahrain is positioning itself as a IT hub that not just serves the Bahrain market but opens opportunities to work in other countries.

NW: The low cost and ease of doing business are extremely important and contributing factor as far as Bahrain is concerned, and moreover, there is a qualified pool of people. People in Bahrain are generally quite comfortably bilingual and technologically savvy. So, what we feel, is that initiatives like Tamkeen and Start-up Bahrain are great ideas of innovation and they need to be further encouraged. I also feel that there has to be a government push for Bahrainis to think more like job creators than like job seekers. Because the private sector has a limitation on the number of people that they can employ, it needs government support and programs. It is important therefore that we as MicroCenter use our solutions to encourage Bahrainis to look not just beyond Bahrain, but also beyond the region. To look and have a focus to see how they can contribute and innovate. We feel strongly that the government - public sector - and the private sector must work together and collaborate on various programmes.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

DR. GB: I want to add one more thing, which is: The move to cloud, is a two-pronged sword. On one side it is good. But on the other side when it comes to jobs, you are going to lose a lot of jobs. Before, if you went to any ministry they will have an IT department, they will have an Oracle specialist, and they will have a hardware specialist and so on. Now this will all disappear, and what will happen is that there will be a need for new professionals with new skills who can manage these kinds of systems. So there is now a need to be more focused not on the machines themselves, but on the security issues, cyber security, and how



The MicroCentre Dream Team

to optimize their database which is kept hidden somewhere in the cloud. So there has to be a shift in how we train our IT people and how we develop them to focus more on the communication aspects and security and data integrity issues. This is why it used to be called IT. Now it is ICT.

What are some of the effective ways in which an ICT company can integrate technologies into community efforts?

NW: We have always been involved in educating people in technology. Perhaps, in the future, we need to look into some sort of an incubation center within our current competency and learning centre here in Salmabad. And there are so many ideas in GIS that we can explore where we can involve students and young Bahrainis to learn and carry out useful GIS projects for the society and community and at the same time boost their knowledge and skills. There is a lot of scope within GIS that makes this possible and we believe that we have the infrastructure and the expertise to encourage this and make it happen.

DR. GB: I have been teaching for more than 26 years in the Computer Science Department at Bahrain University and much of the work that we talked about, we are currently doing with the universities like: Al Ahlia University and the University of Bahrain. We

collaborate with them and literally train their students on GIS and teach them for free. This is because we think nobody else can or will do it, but we can. This is one aspect of community work that we have been doing with the universities and the students in the past and we intend to continue doing it in the future. In fact, it is worth mentioning that the first few times that we conducted the GIS Awareness Day in Bahrain more than 15 years ago, we did it in schools. Government secondary schools.

The other part of this question is a little bit subtler. First of all, we help our government clients in their work to serve the community. We have the technology through our partners to do it, so we work with them. This is one way of ensuring for example that GIS data, maps etc. are available to whoever needs to have access to it.

The other way for us to make an impact is to include content into our software offerings. We can make the data or the content part of our software offering so that it will be ready to run. If a new supermarket comes on the market, for example, we not only have the system in the cloud, but it will also be populated with whatever items that any supermarket needs to sell. They can start immediately and worry about changing their prices and promotions

etc. as they go along. The important thing is that they can start immediately if they choose to do so.

The other example of this is: we are a GIS company and we have software to handle maps and do analysis on maps and so on. For that, you need data. You have to have a map of Bahrain with roads, addresses, and all of that. Again, we can include this content in our offering. So, instead of requiring potential customers purchase the software, they can subscribe to the system in the cloud with the content included and they can start using it and do useful work immediately --- rather than concentrating on how to procure and manage their own data. However, to be able to do this, we also need collaboration with certain entities within the government of Bahrain because they own some of this data. So, without collaboration and without the government being in the picture, this cannot be done.

We have been doing our own workshops and bringing people from outside to do the workshops at our cost. We have done also workshops and seminars with Esri and with Oracle. We will keep on doing these things. But, no matter how much you do, there is still much more to be done. That's the nature of our work and our field. ©