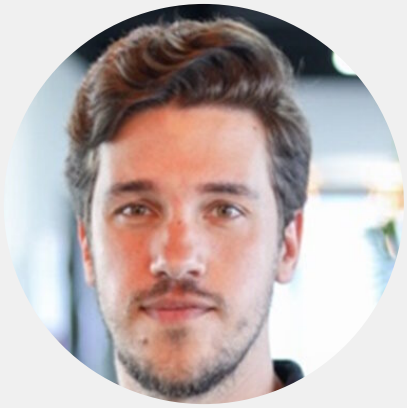
Amer Benouda – Vice President, ABA Technology



We plan to continue to empower the territories we serve by providing access to better healthcare, safe cities, and sustainable environments

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From Morocco to the world, ABA Technology is an industrialisation, integration, and software development service partner providing solutions to private and public sector stakeholders in four continents. Vice President Amer Benouda lays out some of the company's key success stories thus far; its future international expansion plans; and its mission fo preserving healthcare, the environment, and safety.

Can you begin by providing a brief introduction of yourself and the history of ABA Technology?

I am VP of ABA Technology, leading the development and international expansion of the company. In simple terms, our company is a strategic partner to help private and public organizations accelerate their business model transformation through innovation. We do this in three steps: **industrialization** (relying on our own manufacturing capabilities to produce any kind of connected device), **integration**, and lastly, **software development**. Full integration of value chain from end-to-end. Our mission is clear: preserve the environment, procure health solutions, and security in all of the territories we serve.

What products and services does the company provide today?

ABA Technology is organized into three activities. The first is Industry X.0 with our Nextronic subsidiary. Because of our two manufacturing plants in Casablanca, we are making solutions such as digital twins, connected coworkers, production efficiency, assets management, and other solutions that can help industrial players improve their day-to-day operations.

The second is Connected Health, with our subsidiary Mediot. Our purpose is to provide preventive medicine, to resolve medical desert issues, and to control epidemiology and crises. Our technological offerings include telemedicine devices which were invented and made in Morocco, as well as medical mobile units, local health centres, and even cold chain monitoring.

The third is Smart Cities, or Smart Territories activity with the subsidiary iCity. This area allows us to deploy solutions around smart traffic, smart lighting, smart grids, fleet management systems, and so on.

We have four offices located in Casablanca, Barcelona, Paris, and Shenzhen with a total of more than 650 employees. We operate as well and export in other countries like Saudi Arabia, especially for the Ministry of Health. In Japan, we are providing computer vision capability [a field of artificial intelligence (AI) that trains computers to interpret and understand the visual world] to different medtech companies. In France, besides our strong local presence, we are working for example on the digitalization of the hemodialysis network centres. In Guinea, we are highly involved in the digital transformation of some mining fields.

ABA Technology invests 25 percent of its turnover in research and development. We believe that multidisciplinarity is key and for each project we must find the right profiles from different backgrounds to ensure a high level of capability to meet industry and international standards.

What are some of the challenges and opportunities of building a company like ABA Technology in a developing country like Morocco?

We believe that the challenges are almost the same in different countries, not only specific to Morocco. Finding, upskilling, and retaining human resources can be one of the major challenges for a technological and industrial company like ABA Technology. Funding especially for companies that are not profitable enough can be a challenging situation to maintain their existence and secure business development.

In terms of opportunities, I'll say that necessity can drive innovation. A lot of technological companies are finding creative solutions to local challenges in the existing manner, and it was a general rule during the Covid period which each company had to manage itself without relying on external parties or partners. The markets are emerging and growing from the middle-class perspective which creates a new consumer market, and the government's initiatives for economic and social transformation, which can be an important lever of expansion for private companies.

Can you share some of the trends you see and some of the potential needs of your clients, the industry, and the different regions in Morocco?

The trends we see in the Moroccan market can also be applied to the international markets. That being said, the technologies available can change from one region to another, but how the technology is useful for a specific need or specific country is often the same. Three examples of the technologies that are reshaping all countries around the world include the AI of things (AIoT) [the combination of AI technologies and Internet of things (IoT)], computer vision, and data platforms.

AIoT has transformative potential that can enhance efficiency and productivity for many kinds of players, and it helps with decision-making across various sectors. Through the combination of IoT and AI, we can get immediate data-driven insight and conduct predictive maintenance. This has been especially useful with respect to our cold chain monitoring projects as a use case among others.

Computer vision, or automation of the visual task, is about extracting valuable insights from visual data and we are working with one of the big five automotive companies in the world on this. Thanks to computer vision, we are helping them to inspect and detect all the defects in the production line. With cameras and systems, we can give real-time alerts to the operator. In the healthcare sector, we can rely on computer vision to assist in medical imaging analysis. For

example, we are working on detection through the retina, as the retina can be used to identify and analyze diseases that a person can have. Computer vision plays a crucial role in our smart cities specifically in security systems by detecting anomalies or by recognizing dangerous objects, which is vital for public safety.

The third trend is data platforms which play a central role in managing, processing, and deriving insights from complex data sets. Data platforms are transforming how organizations operate and make decisions.

Can you expand on some of the work that you have done in partnership with the Ministry of Health in Morocco? Also, how do you see ABA contributing to the country's national goal of being more independent and developing the healthcare sector as a whole?

Since 2020, technologically speaking, there have been some key milestones we have achieved in the healthcare sector. During the first year of COVID, we started manufacturing medical devices for vital signs monitoring such as the Oximeter Thermometer as there was a lack of these products in the market. Another milestone was achieved during the vaccination period when our teams managed four vaccination and prevention centres, which included managing nurses and doctors and administering the vaccines themselves. Another important milestone was our capacity to provide telemedicine solutions with a panel of specialized doctors to tackle and provide quick answers for the most impacted citizens.

Can you comment further on your expansion plans and where you see your international footprint, which clients you are considering together with your ambitions going forward?

Currently, we have various activities throughout Europe; the Middle East, mainly in Saudi Arabia; East Asia in countries such as Japan; and in the sub-Saharan African countries as well. We believe in being present locally throughout the value chain. Beyond understanding the requirements of our partners and deploying our solutions, we try to set up local teams, with our own offices and industrial and technological capacity to help for local development, but also to provide answers according to local specificities. For example, when we started to do business in Spain and France, we opened offices there and started hiring people right away.

As we learned during COVID, you cannot continue with the same economic model of importing products and solutions from far-away countries, you need to have some localization and start producing closer to your customers.

How much of your business is international versus what you are doing here in Morocco?

Our goal for 2023 is to achieve 10 percent of global revenue coming from international business. This also includes striving to have 10 percent of our people and investments based and happening internationally.

Can you provide some details regarding your project in Saudi Arabia?

With respect to our recent activity in healthcare, we have been trying to resolve three challenges in territories where we are present: medical deserts, pandemic management, and preventative medicine. These are the three pillars that direct our strategic positioning. Our goal with respect to **medical deserts** is to facilitate access to care for all territories. To achieve this, we have deployed mobile units in partnership with public bodies, and monitoring devices that we are manufacturing. We had also important experience managing vaccination and prevention healthcare centers for dedicated campaigns like blood donation, breast cancer diagnostics, and cervical cancer screening. With respect to preventive medicine, our focus is to promote health rather than just treating existing illnesses through local health centres.

We believe preventive health is the solution and have relied on the same strategy when working in Saudi Arabia. Together with the Ministry of Health we have deployed mobile health checkup cabins for their citizens. The clinics can be found in public areas like shopping centres, airports, and universities. Anyone that suspects there is something wrong can use these places to have a checkup. If there is an emergency, it can be treated immediately. In the upcoming weeks, we will have some other use cases with different players that we are working with in Suadi Arabia and that we can talk about.

As a relatively new company and with new processes that are not common knowledge in Morocco, how did you establish a highly skilled manufacturing team and how was it funded?

The early acquisition of the manufacturing company, Nextronic helped us a lot. Because of this, we were able to move forward faster by having access to a team with backgrounds in mechanics, electronics, and plastics. Nextronic specialises in making connected devices and small sensors like humidity, temperature, lighting, vibration sensors, which enabled us to make parts dedicated to electronics and plastic injections. Trying to produce internally is not an easy task. However, as projects become more complex, mixing different skills, as well as the increase in the volume of our production capacity, we have managed to produce much larger sizes of products such as open and closed telemedicine cabins.

From a capital perspective, the company is 100 percent owned by two shareholders: M. Mohamed BENOUDA and M. Yassine Abbouch. We have not taken any external funding for the time being. From the first year, the company has had a positive cash flow and has been able to finance all projects we have taken on.

Looking forward, what are ABA Technology's biggest priorities, expectations and vision for 2024 and 2025?

We plan to continue to empower the territories we serve by providing access to better healthcare, safe cities, and sustainable environments. Our key goals include the expansion of our technologies to underserved communities, by leveraging the technology and partnering with local organizations to create a sustainable ecosystem.

From a technological point of view, it is difficult to predict the changes that can occur especially with what we saw with COVID and how there was constant change with the situation and with our attitude toward technology. There are technologies that we are developing internally called, 'the vision computing system', which will converge two groups of people that are not talking together enough today, those being the IT people coming from software and the people coming from the OT, or the operational technologies and the devices.

Please share with us some of your key learnings that have been from this journey that will help others succeed.

I will leave you with our company values. We have five values that we want to share with anyone looking to work with ABA Technology: hard work, humility, multidisciplinarity, gratitude and a positive attitude. Our doors are open to any person or company that demonstrates these traits

because by following them I believe we can achieve our mission which is preserving healthcare, the environment and safety.

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