Peter Harradine – President, Swiss Business Council Dubai and Northern Emirates



The rulers of the UAE have made it a very attractive investment destination

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The mission of the Swiss Business Council (SBC) is to provide a forum for Swiss executives and those with Swiss business interested to identify, discuss and pursue common interests regarding their activities. Peter Harradine, president of SBC Dubai & Northern Emirates discusses FDI inflows into the UAE, the strategic significance of Dubai for healthcare and pharmaceutical firms and his advice to Swiss companies trying to enter the market.

As president of the SBC Dubai and Northern Emirates, can you please introduce yourself and the SBC?

I came to the UAE over 42 years ago and had only intended to stay for six months; however, I grew an affinity for the country and decided to stay. My primary business is however, designing golf courses. I also founded a landscape construction company that currently employs around 1000 staff, and our biggest client is the Dubai municipality.

We have been very fortunate to work on many public parks, as well as for private clients, including hotels and Sheikhs. The purpose of the SBC is to function as a platform for new companies entering the market, along with organizing venues for people to gather with one another and exchange ideas.

According to the UNCTAD World Investment Report 2019, the UAE saw its inflows of FDI increase by USD 31 million between 2017 and 2018, reaching over USD ten billion. What makes the UAE an attractive investment destination?

When Dubai was establishing itself, the returns were incredible! I remember approaching the locals and asking them to consider investing in Europe, however, when they realized it would take upwards of ten years to realize any significant returns, this put them off. In Dubai they could make back their initial investment within three years, therefore, this was the obvious place for them to invest.

The rulers of the UAE have made it a very attractive investment destination. The incredible success story of the UAE would not have been possible if this country was governed by the pathetic and ineffectual democracy witnessed in most countries. The only downside of this tranquility is that it encourages many companies and individuals to explore and establish themselves in the UAE. This fact is very good for the country and the consumer but creates enormous competition, which drives prices down and makes it more and more difficult to sell quality products and services.

The UAE is ranked eleventh globally for ease of doing business. What improvements are needed for the UAE to enter the top ten?

My hope is that the UAE will not be become laden down by bureaucracy as Europe is. Bureaucracy is killing Europe, and at the moment the UAE is not as bad but is slowly following suit. The UAE has many things going for it, including the IT/ICT sector, as most services can be accessed online. The UAE is one of the most advanced countries that I know of when it comes to IT.

What can people in the GCC region learn from the UAE from a business perspective?

The big advantage of the UAE is that it is ruled by Emirs, therefore, decisions can be made at a much faster rate than most countries. In Europe we are bogged down by a democracy that is killing us, I believe it is Europe which truly needs to reform, not the UAE. The UAE is a young country; therefore, it has the advantage of being able to look toward the future and firmly establishing a global presence.

What industry opportunities exist for companies looking to enter the UAE market and what are some key sectors that may be driving this growth?

The UAE is not a large market, one must not forget that Dubai is an international platform. It is very difficult to foresee what will happen from one day to the next especially with today's global political climate. Even within the GCC, many external influences can directly affect the UAE. For example, it is the countries around us that can have a large impact on determining what will happen within the UAE, as they are also major players.

How important is the healthcare and pharmaceutical market to Swiss companies in the UAE?

Two major companies originate from Switzerland, namely, Roche and Novartis. For these larger industry players, the UAE is not a large market, therefore, they tend to use the UAE as a platform for importing and exporting within the large regional market. 24 of the top 30 pharmaceutical companies have their regional headquarters in Dubai largely due to this being an ideally located logistical hub.

As a successful businessman with more than 40 years of expertise in the region, what is your advice for Swiss firms looking to do business in the UAE?

One of my duties is to talk to new companies that enter the market. My advice to these companies is that emailing, or phoning will not work. One needs to go personally, to meet the people and once you've met them, they will need to follow up repeatedly, because perseverance is incredibly important.

Furthermore, it is a mistake to believe that a business can be run from Switzerland, it will need to be run from the UAE. The GCC market is a large market and a great deal of travel is required within the region to ultimately be successful. A major way the SBC can help these Swiss companies is through our contacts and our extensive knowledge of the market. We have established contacts with the government, municipalities and the private sector.

What is your vision for the SBC in the next five years and beyond?

Younger people will take over and will bring new and different ideas with them. Furthermore, they have alternative methods of communication, with social media and so on. The Swiss mentality is to be timely and, in the UAE, this is simply not the case, although it is getting slightly better. I believe many Swiss will have to adapt themselves to fit the vastly different cultural norms found in the Middle East.

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