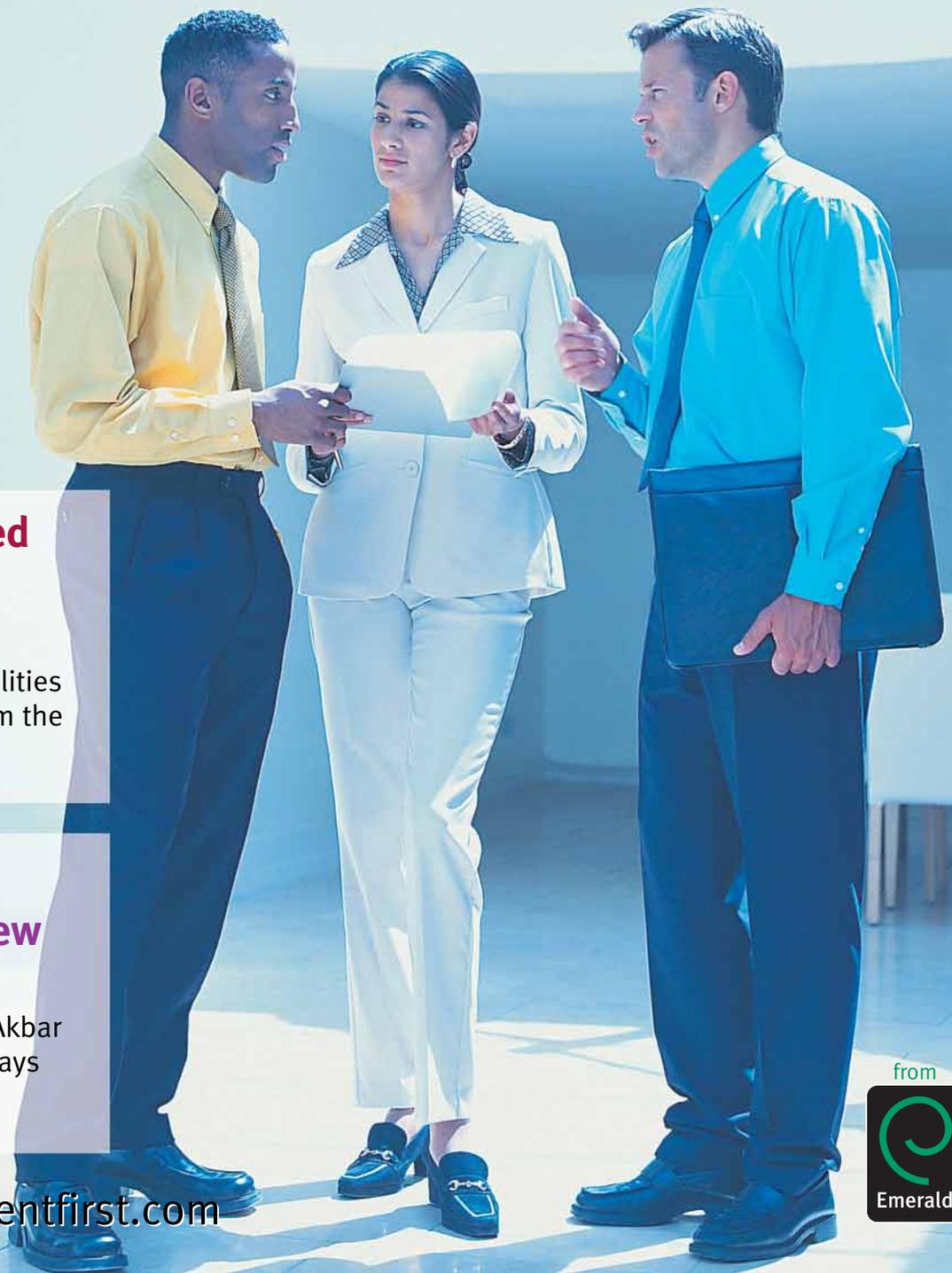management *first*

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Featured article

E-government: the realities of using IT to transform the public sector

Guru interview

An interview with Mr Akbar Al Baker of Qatar Airways

Interview by Alistair Craven

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Welcome to
Management Focus

. . . and welcome to the January/February issue.

Since the mid-1980s the public sector has undergone something of a "service revolution". Throughout the 1990s this gathered momentum and we are now probably in the midst of the most intensive programme of change the public sector has ever seen.

The present government's agenda for public sector reform includes three main aims of modernizing government and focuses heavily on the role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in delivering these aims. Discover more about the reality of using ICT to effect radical change in our featured article.

Mr Akbar Al Baker was appointed to the position of Chief Executive Officer of Qatar Airways in 1997 after a very successful career within the State of Qatar's Department of Civil Aviation. He re-launched Qatar Airways in 1997 and has implemented an aggressive ten-year strategic plan to extend the airline's route network, build a modern fleet, and create Doha as a major regional aviation hub. In this interview read about the success and future growth of Qatar Airways, and the leadership and management style of Mr Al Baker.

On a different note, our resident expert answers your question on standalone "e-business strategy" and whether or not it should be more closely associated with general business strategy. Read his thoughts in our popular *Management Matters* section.

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Best wishes for a successful year ahead.

Debbie Read and Alistair Craven
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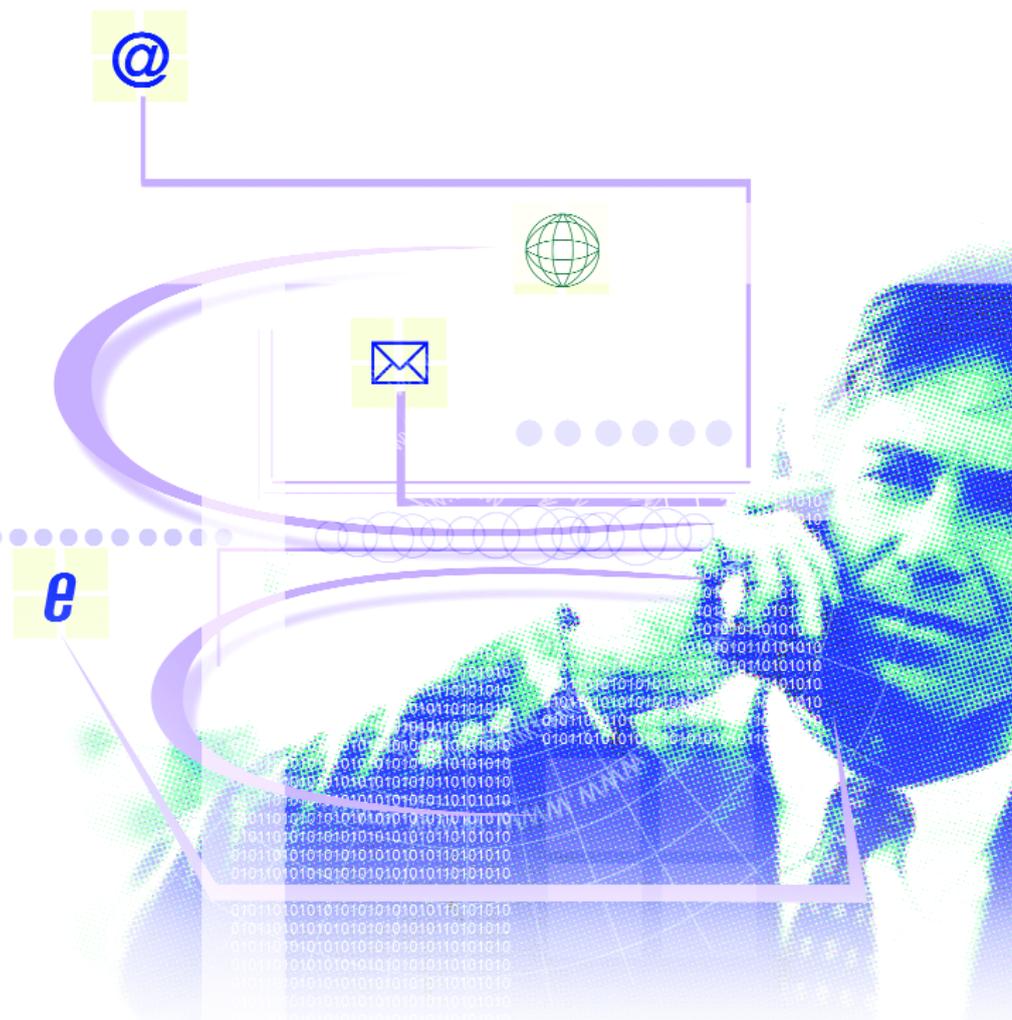
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E-government: the realities of using IT to transform the public sector

Since the mid-1980s the public sector has undergone something of a "service revolution". Throughout the 1990s this gathered momentum and we are now probably in the midst of the most intensive programme of change the public sector has ever seen.

Delivery of e-government

The present government's agenda for public sector reform includes three main aims of modernizing government, envisaged as a "long-term programme of improvement", but also offering a new package of immediate reforms. These aims are:

(1) Ensure that policy-making is more joined-up and strategic.

(2) Make sure that public service users are the focus, by matching services more closely to people's lives.

(3) Deliver public services that are high quality and efficient.

The government's policy focuses heavily on the role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in delivering its reforming aims. It states that the government must bring about a fundamental change in the way it uses IT. It must modernize the business of government, achieving joined-up working between different parts of government and providing new, efficient and convenient ways for citizens and businesses to communicate with government and to receive services.

The reality of e-government

Effecting radical change in the public sector is a massive and complex undertaking. The new service delivery agenda is being applied to more than 1,000,000 staff, comprising the Civil Service, local government, education, the police and the criminal justice system. Furthermore, in many instances public services are delivered through a complex network of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Meanwhile, citizens, influenced by private sector experiences, are expecting public services that not only are of high quality, but also are integrated across different public bodies and agencies. Such pressures to co-ordinate information have always been present in government but the Internet exacerbates the need.

There are many approaches to the use of ICT, one of which is the "idolize" approach, where public sector officials are "over-aware" of ICT's potential. They believe it can transform the business of government, and are only dimly aware that information is something important. In consequence, the public sector becomes swamped with ICT-driven projects, many of which have proved spectacular failures. However, an "integrated approach" recognizes information as a key organizational resource central to all governmental functions, while ICT is relegated to a secondary role.

Achieving high quality e-service

Electronic delivery of services creates complex issues for the public sector. These challenges and stumbling-blocks must be removed if e-government is to become a reality. Among others these issues include the following:

Understanding the needs of users

It is essential to investigate what kinds of factors influence consumer attitudes and behaviours towards e-service. Consumers will be attracted to innovations that provide an advantage over existing products and services, such as ease-of-use, time saving and convenience. Accordingly, organizations need to attempt to offer better and more unique customer service options in their e-service provision.

Understanding processes and systems – creating real improvements

Understanding and learning from the experiences of the private sector can be a useful way to progress. "E-service masters" in the private sector not only learn from their customers, they also synthesize their understanding of customers' wants, needs and expectations into unique, clever and sometimes highly innovative solutions. Therefore, those responsible for creating and providing e-government services should be familiar with best practice in the private sector, not least because this will inform the citizens' expectations of electronic public services.

Cost versus quality

The two central government aims of using ICT to deliver high quality services to citizens and value for money are potentially in conflict with each other. A higher level of customization causes a higher cost of provision. A related intention concerns inclusivity, whereby the contents of online public services must be well designed and accessible to all. Nevertheless, the costs entailed in delivering public services through ICT will increase further if many citizens, probably those in most need, have to be specially trained to use the technology, and/or the technology has to be developed to be readily usable by groups with special needs, such as the disabled, those with limited mobility and the elderly.

> Unless public sector agencies and departments put citizens and consumers, and their needs and problems, first, then e-government is likely to be nothing more than a financial black hole.

The future of e-government

Regardless of the fate of dot-coms in the past, the number of dot-govs continues to increase. The quest to transform base government into golden government through the use of IT will continue to pose significant problems for the public sector until non-accountability and optimism are replaced with realism and scepticism, and criticism is encouraged.

Unless public sector agencies and departments put citizens and consumers, and their needs and problems, first, then e-government is likely to be nothing more than a financial black hole.

One cannot deny the enormity of the task in trying to ensure that IT will deliver a better government. Unfortunately, there is not yet a single silver bullet technology to drive this change in the way services are delivered over the Web.

In order to ensure high quality services in the future, the only relevant question for citizens interacting with agencies online will be: "Have you solved the right problem and have you helped me solve it well?"

However, it is acknowledged that the very real tensions, which exist between technology, cost, currency and accuracy of information, quality of service and the needs of the citizens, are complex issues with no easy solutions. It is by no means certain that e-government can produce truly innovative, responsive public services – indeed it may merely exacerbate, electronically, existing shortcomings. There is a clear need to deploy Internet technologies in a far more considered and integrated manner, if the limited resources are to be employed effectively in serving citizens. Perhaps, the role of IT in delivering better government might not be as great as was originally thought.

This is a shortened version of the article written by Shirley-Ann Hazlett and Frances Hill of the School of Management and Economics, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

Read the full version of this article in *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 13 No. 6, 2003.
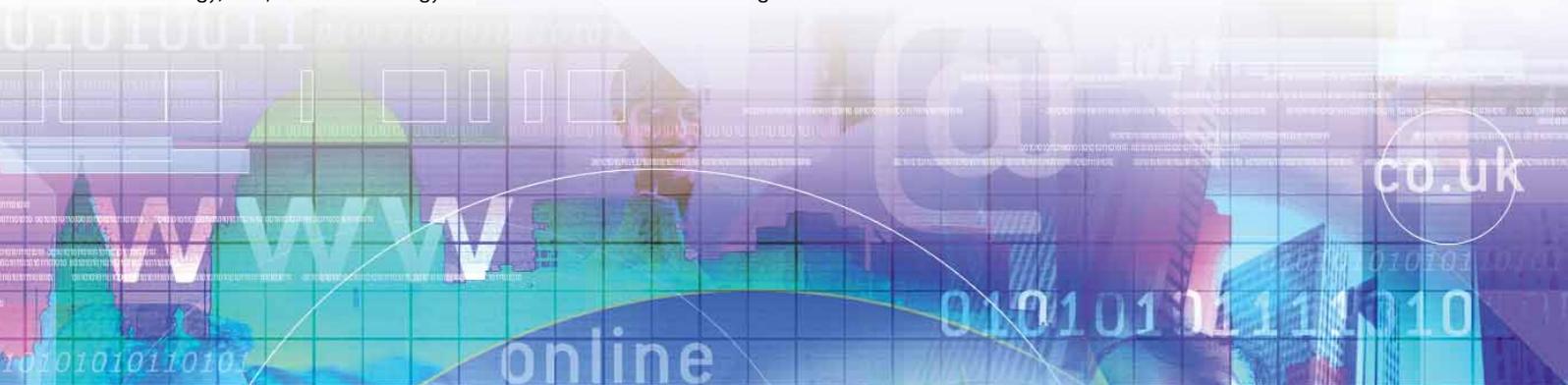
An interview with Mr Akbar Al Baker of Qatar Airways

Interview by Alistair Craven

Mr Akbar Al Baker was appointed to the position of Chief Executive Officer of Qatar Airways in 1997 after a very successful career within the State of Qatar's Department of Civil Aviation.

Mr Al Baker re-launched Qatar Airways in 1997 and has implemented an aggressive ten-year strategic plan to extend the airline's route network, build a modern fleet, and create Doha as a major regional aviation hub.

The strategic plan has been underpinned by a strong philosophy to make the airline a leader in airline standards. Mr Al Baker is also responsible for the development of the new Doha International Airport, which will have the capacity to handle 30 million passengers per annum.

Here he discusses the success and future growth of Qatar Airways, and his leadership and management style.

Q: Can you briefly introduce us to the history of your airline and its success so far?

A: Since its re-launch in 1997, Qatar Airways has achieved staggering growth in fleet size and passenger numbers. From only four aircraft in 1997, the airline grew to a fleet size of 28 aircraft by the end of 2003 and 42 by September 2005. I am proud to say that, by 2015, the fleet size will almost triple to 110 aircraft.

From our hub in Doha, Qatar Airways has developed a global network of destinations served, covering Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Indian subcontinent and the Far East. By the beginning of 2005, we flew to 56 destinations, rising to 66 by September 2005 with further expansion set to cover 70 cities by the end of 2005. We will be launching flights to Nairobi, Madrid and Berlin at the end of this year.

Q: Your airline is recognized as one of the fastest-growing in the world. As CEO, how would you describe your leadership and management style?

A: I am very much hands-on, and involve myself in all aspects of the company, no matter how small the details are. I also surround myself with extremely qualified and capable people to assist me with running the daily operations not only of Qatar Airways, but also of Qatar Airways' seven subsidiary companies: Qatar Airways Holidays, Qatar Aviation Services, Qatar Aircraft Catering Company, Doha International Airport, United Media International, Qatar Distribution Company, and Qatar Duty-Free Company.

It is very important to be able to rely on people you can trust in order to run any successful company. It is through a lot of hard work and determination, as well as a group of extremely committed and driven employees, that Qatar Airways has reached the status it enjoys today – as one of the fastest-growing airlines in the world.

Q: Qatar Airways will almost triple its fleet size to 110 aircraft by 2015. How do you plan to cope with this growth?

A: In recent months (at the Paris Air Show in June 2005), Qatar Airways announced plans to acquire up to 80 aircraft, comprising 60 of the new generation Airbus A350s and 20 Boeing 777s in orders worth more than US$15 billion.

We are also one of the launch customers of the twin-deck A380-800 "super jumbo" – the world's biggest aircraft, capable of carrying 555 passengers in a luxurious configuration. Qatar Airways has ordered four A380s with a delivery schedule beginning in 2009. We are very much looking forward to introducing the A380s into our fleet, especially since their introduction will coincide with the opening of the New Doha International Airport – the first airport in the world to be designed and built specifically to accommodate this aircraft.

The New Doha International Airport is scheduled to open in 2009 at a cost of US$2.5 billion in the first phase and will initially be capable of handling 12 million passengers a year. Once fully developed in 2015 at a cost of US$5.5 billion, the airport is expected to handle up to 50 million passengers a year. One of the project's key features is that 40 per cent of the site will be built on reclaimed land from the Arabian Gulf.

Qatar Airways will manage the new airport, designed to help shape Doha as a key regional and global aviation hub. US engineering and construction giant Bechtel has been awarded the main contract to build the new airport, which will initially have a 26-gate passenger terminal complex, two runways of 4,850m and 4,250m in length respectively, maintenance hangar, cargo centre and extensive shopping facilities. By 2015 when the airport will be fully operational, the new airport will have 80 aircraft gates.

The new airport plays a large role in our expansion plans, as it will be able to support our new aircraft orders and be able to facilitate the large number of passengers we expect to be travelling through Doha International Airport.

To read the full, exclusive interview with Mr Akbar Al Baker, visit our Change Management Community at www.managementfirst.com

Management Matters

Welcome to our Q&A section – *Management Matters* – where you can find actionable advice on today's top management issues from our resident expert.

Q. **Is there such a thing as a standalone "e-business strategy"? Or should e-business and general business strategy be more closely associated?**

There was a time, not so long ago, when putting the "e" prefix before your business processes transformed them into something mysterious and exciting. Those days are gone!

Today, terms such as e-business and electronic commerce are standard elements of the corporate lexicon. The business press constantly reminds us of the "global marketplace" and international competition, and we still hear of innovative ways to deal with these problems – and those organizations that have failed and found themselves on the "technology scrap-heap."

But where does all of this leave us? Management guru Michael Porter observed that many companies assumed that the Internet and new technology changed everything – negating all the old rules about companies and competition. But the stark reality was very, very different. Change, yes, but negating hundreds of years of commerce? No!

The organizations that have survived and prospered are those that embraced the challenges of technology, yet combined this with an astute recognition that technology is an enabler, not a magic remedy. In the words of Leanne C. McGrath and Richard A. Heiens, instead of the Internet making strategy less important, as some have argued, it has actually made strategy more indispensable than ever.

Does all of this perhaps seem too obvious? Well, perhaps not. Five or six years on, it is now quite easy to forget just how much hype dotcom mania brought with it. With the benefit of hindsight, vastly over-valued companies and glitzy but ultimately hollow strategies led many executives who should have known better to falter in the face of the biggest opportunity facing the business world in decades. They now have a chance to put things right.

In the words of Porter once more, most ways in which the Internet influences industry structure actually have negative consequences for established businesses. The primary antidote to this, he suggests, is effective strategic planning. And here we reach a seemingly crucial building-block towards success. Any thriving company will always have its roots within a sound business model. Making the most of this model requires its executives never to lose sight of the basics, but at the same time to embrace opportunity with open arms. Technology can be a partner, not an enemy. When combined with more traditional strategic planning methods, the results can be remarkable.

Perhaps the best advice is to remain calm and objective. Investing thousands in technology will not solve all your problems and deliver overnight success. But planning, consulting and spending wisely on those components that can help to streamline your particular business model will deliver lasting and worthwhile benefit.

Whatever terms we wish to use and however we decide to brand our strategies, e-business and technology are here to stay. Isn't it time we all made them work better for our businesses?

Our resident expert has over 25 years' professional experience in management. If you would like to send him a question, write an e-mail to Web Content Manager Debbie Read at dread@managementfirst.com and the best submissions will be featured in a future issue of Management Focus.

Visit www.managementfirst.com and click on "e-business" for further reading.

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Final thought …

" The first rule of any technology used in a business is that automation applied to an efficient operation will magnify the efficiency. The second is that automation applied to an inefficient operation will magnify the inefficiency. "

Bill Gates