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A New Calling

Megha Bahree 04.16.07

For doing her job, Sukhriya Hassani gets hassled by goons, who call her "prostitute" and threaten to shut down her business. Her sin: doing business with men. But the 25-year-old widow needs the \$300 a month she earns--a lavish income in Afghanistan--by renting out cellular phone service by the call minute (10 cents for domestic, 45 for international). Her family of eight depends on her. She's willing to put up with thugs and her tiny office (freezing in winter, roasting in summer) on a bustling street in Kabul if it means she can afford to send her 8-year-old son to school and herself to night classes in English and computers.

Hassani is one of 50 Afghan women who earn such commissions by working for a cell company called Roshan ("light" in Dari and Pashto). It is one of Afghanistan's largest private businesses, with 850 employees, 23% of them women. Since its January 2003 launch Roshan has invested \$250 million in infrastructure, with another \$75 million slated for this year, to spread across 175 cities and villages and provide mobile phone service to 1.2 million customers--half the market. No profits yet, though revenue is climbing, up from \$170 million in 2005 to an estimated \$200 million last year.

Roshan is an odd corporate amalgam. It's 51%-owned by the Aga Khan Fund for Economic Development (a for-profit unit of the Aga Khan Foundation); 36.75% by a unit of Britain's Cable & Wireless; and 12.25% by MCT Corp., a Washington, D.C. mobile telecom outfit with operations focused on central Asia. "In Afghanistan," says Lutaf Kassam, director of the Aga Khan Fund, "communications was a key gap."

And how. After two decades of the Soviets, civil war and the Taliban--not to mention government corruption and threats from warlords--there isn't a lot of infrastructure to work with. Starting from scratch has proved to be a boon and a bane. The demand is certainly there. "People had to walk several hours to Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan to make a phone call," recalls Karim Khoja, Roshan's chief executive. At 47, he has worked as an executive at RAM Mobile Data in the U.K. and run telecom companies in Pakistan, Poland and Croatia. On opening day 3,000 people were waiting to buy a Roshan connection (the company offers service packages, ranging from \$13 to \$25 a month, without free phones; there are plenty of used models for sale everywhere). Within three weeks Roshan realized that its initial business plan, which called for 150,000 subscribers and \$50 million in investments over five years, was too timid. In the first 18 months it pulled in 350,000 customers and ran through the whole \$50 million.

Building out a GSM network seemed easy--in principle. In the first week of recruitment Roshan's chief technology officer more or less decided that if a candidate knew how to turn on a computer, he'd be hired and receive the title "engineer." Giants like Ericsson and Motorola agreed to sell base stations, switches, networks to manage customer data and the like but refused to send in any tech assistants because the country was too dangerous. Even figuring out where to set up cell towers was tough: The real estate had been redistributed by the Communists, then the Taliban; finding rightful owners took time. To get a base station up and running costs \$100,000 to \$200,000, depending on how much mine clearing and road building needs to be done. Other big expenses: fuel (\$2 million a year, including backup generators) and security to guard the towers (\$12 million a year).

How to deal with corruption? "We just don't do baksheesh," says Khoja. When customs officials held up a consignment of switches from Alcatel, under the pretext of "improper paperwork," Roshan scooped up letters from the ministries of communication, finance and commerce--and got the switches three days later. Another time a warlord in the eastern Khost Province arrested two Roshan employees and threw them in jail, complaining that villagers were unhappy with the service and found it too expensive. The ransom: a demand for free airtime for the warlord and senior commanders. No way, said Khoja, who countered that he would shut off service in the area and run a full-page ad in the newspaper explaining why no cell phones were working. Within six hours the employees were back.

Because Afghanistan had no access to printing plants, Roshan had to rely on promotional services in Dubai, a two-and-a-half-hour flight away. An early billboard showing a man and a woman with a cell phone drew outrage when it went up in the northeast province of Kunduz; residents threw black paint all over it. Lesson: no women on billboards.

Employee training proved challenging. Nine out of ten employees are Afghans; since their average age is 23, many grew up in refugee camps with minimal education. So Roshan must spend an average \$1,500 per person per year to train them in basic computer and English language skills. Senior staffers learn about marketing in the Philippines; customer service reps study call centers in Malaysia; and tech experts receive network training in Alcatel's offices in Paris. Some course work costs \$10,000 a head.

Roshan is committed to putting women to work, but the very notion is so radical here that recruiters often don't even pay a visit

to a family without getting a referral first. Even then, male Roshan managers deal with the father, the husband or a son. To clinch the deal the recruiters invite the patriarchs to meet office managers and see for themselves that Roshan is a respectable business.

Hamasa Zaki, a plucky 19-year-old, started out in the call center but within two years has worked her way up to handling 30 accounts across Heraat, Bamiyan and Kabul. Slim in a pair of jeans and a fitted hip-length tunic with a sweatshirt on top, she says her neighbors often gossip about her and tell her parents that she "talks to boys all the time and runs around town"--all part of her job. "But I don't care because my parents have seen my work, and they trust me," she says. Shireen Rahmani moved up to associate director of personnel in less than three years and today makes more than her husband, a doctor.

Hassani, who runs the phone booth in Kabul, has her eye on a Roshan dealership that sells a full suite of services and would allow her to pocket more of the proceeds. So far only men run such operations. "One day," she says, "I will."

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