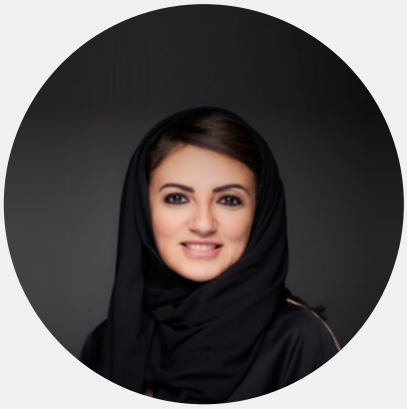
Samar Nassar – Managing Director, Healthcare, Middle East, Accenture



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As Managing Director for Healthcare at Accenture Middle East, Samar Nassar oversees the global consultancy's healthcare practice in the region, focusing on end-to-end management of large clients in both public and private sectors. Nassar highlights some of the key healthcare trends and challenges in the region, including workforce shortages, mental health stigma, and rising non-communicable diseases while foregrounding the need for technological adoption and training programs to address these issues, alongside public-private partnerships to drive healthcare advancements.

Could you provide an overview of your background and your current role at Accenture?

I have a background in biochemistry, complemented by an MBA and an MSc in healthcare and design. With over 20 years of experience in healthcare, I began my career as a sales representative for J&J MedTech, where I was the first female representative hired in Saudi Arabia. I later transitioned to roles in advanced wound care and women’s health. After completing my MBA on a British Council scholarship, I joined GE Healthcare, where I held various positions, including country-focused roles in Saudi Arabia and regional roles in Turkey and Dubai. Following my tenure at GE, I worked with the National Center for Privatization and PPP and later joined a startup called Arterys, focusing on diagnostic imaging with AI. Subsequently, I joined KPMG as the Director of Healthcare in Riyadh, where I collaborated with the Ministry of Health on primary care reform and

the Saudi Genome 2.0 strategy. I then served as the Managing Director for Healthcare at the Ministry of Investment, where I worked on driving foreign and domestic direct investments into the healthcare sector. Currently, I am the Managing Director for Healthcare at Accenture, overseeing the region and leading end-to-end management of large clients in the public and private sectors.

One of the projects I'm proud of during my tenure at MISA is the collaboration with Medtronic on medical device manufacturing localization. Recognizing the importance of localized supply chains, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we worked with Medtronic to establish assembly lines for basic and advanced ventilators. This phased approach involved starting with assembly to build know-how and gradually transitioning to fully-fledged manufacturing. These efforts established local assembly lines, contributing to healthcare resilience and readiness for future pandemics.

What are your responsibilities as the Managing Director for Healthcare at Accenture?

In my role at Accenture, I oversee the region's healthcare practice. This involves end-to-end management of large clients, particularly in the public sector, and some engagements in the private sector. Additionally, I focus on bringing industry expertise and industry-focused solutions to the region, aligning with Accenture's strategic direction and investments in the Middle East. This includes investing in local talent and establishing a stronger regional industry presence.

One of the things we have been discussing with our regional clients is AI applications and the need for responsible use of AI, addressing privacy and security concerns, and embracing technology.

How do you plan to leverage your diverse background and expertise in your current role at Accenture?

My diverse background and extensive experience in healthcare allow me to bring a unique perspective to my role at Accenture. I plan to leverage my insights from various healthcare industry segments to drive innovative solutions and deliver value to our clients. Additionally, my experience in investment facilitation and policy engagement equips me to navigate complex healthcare landscapes and drive meaningful change in the industry.

Can you share your perspective on transitioning back to the consulting sector after working in various roles within the healthcare industry?

While many individuals typically start their careers in consulting and then move into industry roles, my journey has been somewhat unconventional. I have always been drawn to the dynamic nature of consulting, where you have the opportunity to solve diverse problems for different clients across various markets. The thrill of tackling key challenges and being the preferred partner to help economies achieve their ambitions is incredibly stimulating for me. Additionally, consulting allows me to continuously learn and stay updated on the latest emerging technologies and trends in healthcare, which is personally enriching. So, my return to the consulting sector was driven by my passion for solving complex problems and driving meaningful impact in the industry.

Can you outline some of the prominent trends and challenges in the healthcare industry, particularly in the Middle East region, and discuss the opportunities associated with them?

Several significant trends and challenges are shaping the healthcare landscape in the Middle East region. One of the foremost challenges is workforce shortages, particularly in critical areas such as nursing and mental health, like psychiatry and psychology. This shortage is exacerbated by heavy reliance on expatriate healthcare professionals in general. Addressing this issue requires capacity planning, the development of new skill sets, and the adoption of technologies like AI to augment healthcare staff roles.

Another pressing issue is mental health stigma and the lack of sufficient resources to meet the growing demand for mental health services. In the Middle East, there is often a reluctance to seek help for psychological issues due to societal stigma. To address this, there is a need for public awareness campaigns to encourage individuals, especially young people, to seek support. Additionally, there is a need for specialized mental health facilities and trained professionals to provide comprehensive care, as highlighted in the example of workforce shortages.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) or population health management, such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, are also on the rise in the region. In Saudi Arabia, for example, diabetes prevalence is high, with one out of every five individuals affected. Addressing the NCD burden requires comprehensive public health interventions for prevention, early detection, and management.

Furthermore, road traffic accidents remain a significant concern in Saudi Arabia, contributing to morbidity and mortality rates. While efforts have been made to improve road safety, more interventions are needed to address this issue effectively.

Finally, on a global level, healthcare organizations are increasingly using artificial intelligence to revolutionize patient care, but they must also address the ethical implications and potential risks associated with AI adoption. The three key challenges in responsible AI strategy for healthcare organizations are unreliable or toxic outputs, privacy and security concerns, and liability and compliance. These challenges include the potential for biased or inaccurate AI-generated results, the need to protect sensitive patient data, and the necessity of navigating complex regulatory environments. By addressing these challenges, organizations can ensure that AI is used responsibly and ethically to improve healthcare access, experience, and outcomes.

How do you perceive the evolution of workforce shortages in light of the Saudization efforts, and what initiatives are being taken to address skill gaps in the workforce?

The fast-paced deployment of Saudis into the workforce, particularly in healthcare, is indeed a positive trend. We are witnessing more Saudi doctors, nurses, biomedical engineers, and even scientists contributing to various sectors. However, while there has been significant progress in increasing the number of Saudis in the workforce, there remains a noticeable skill gap. Many young Saudis are taking on substantial roles, but they often lack the necessary skills to excel in these positions.

Initiatives like Accenture’s LearnVantage academy are crucial to bridge this gap. This academy provides comprehensive training programs to equip employees with the latest skills and technologies relevant to their roles. Additionally, by acquiring Udacity, Accenture can offer online learning opportunities to enhance skill development.

In Saudi Arabia, Accenture’s newly established Capability Hub offers a rigorous multi-track training program accredited and exclusive to Accenture employees, covering various areas such as security, cloud, data, artificial intelligence, and change management. Soon, we will also offer comprehensive technology education and training services to businesses and organizations in the Kingdom, allowing them to reskill and upskill their employees, help them reinvent their organizations and achieve greater business value.

In the healthcare sector specifically, these initiatives play a vital role in ensuring that workforce skill sets align with the industry’s evolving demands. By assessing the skill gaps within healthcare organizations and providing targeted training programs, Accenture aims to advance the workforce’s capabilities and ensure the sector remains relevant amid rapid technological advancements.

Investing in skills development is a win-win situation for both organizations and their employees. It enables employees to grow professionally and adapt to changes in the industry while empowering organizations to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic healthcare landscape.

Could you provide a specific example of how initiatives like the LearnVantage academy are impacting the healthcare sector?

One area where our initiatives are making a significant impact is in training the healthcare workforce on critical technologies and transformations. For instance, we are exploring opportunities to provide training on electronic medical record (EMR) transformation, healthcare cloud migration, and leveraging cloud technologies to improve healthcare delivery.

By offering specialized training programs through the Academy, healthcare professionals can acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate these technological advancements effectively. This not only enhances their individual capabilities but also contributes to the overall modernization and efficiency of healthcare systems.

Can you elaborate on the ongoing transformation within the healthcare sector and how you’re guiding your clients through it?

The healthcare sector in Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing a significant transformation, which is at the core of Vision 2030. This transformation involves several key initiatives to improve healthcare delivery, increase life expectancy, and transition to a non-oil-dependent economy. Some of these initiatives include transforming the Ministry of Health into a sole thin regulator, establishing the health holding company, forming accountable care organizations (now called clusters), and creating the Center of National Health Insurance (CNHI).

Navigating through such a multifaceted transformation can be challenging for stakeholders, particularly for those who are not deeply immersed in the sector. At Accenture, we assist our clients by providing strategic guidance, leveraging our expertise in healthcare technology consulting. We help our clients understand the evolving landscape to better adapt by identifying opportunities to strengthen their digital core and make the leap through technology transformation.

Furthermore, the focus on biotechnology in Saudi Arabia is part of a larger strategy aimed at reducing dependence on oil and transforming it into a regional biotech hub. This includes initiatives like the National Biotechnology Strategy, which includes drug manufacturing and biopharma localization efforts. However, navigating the transformation involves challenges due to the involvement of various stakeholders and the need for integration and consolidation. Entities may undergo integration, consolidation, or dismantling to align with the target state, such as the autonomy of clusters and the eventual dismantling of the health holding company. This transition requires clear direction and collaboration among all involved parties.

How does Accenture contribute to fostering public-private partnerships in the healthcare sector?

Accenture is pivotal in fostering public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the healthcare sector by strengthening the healthcare systems' digital core. We aim to fully leverage electronic medical records (EMRs) and hospital information systems, ensuring seamless integration and interoperability across different components of the digital infrastructure. Establishing a robust digital foundation enables our clients to embark on digital health transformations that enhance patient care, optimize clinical workflows, and drive operational efficiencies.

Our approach involves collaborating with public and private entities to bridge gaps in technology adoption, data-driven decision-making, and workforce upskilling. We work closely with government agencies, healthcare providers, and technology vendors to develop strategies and initiatives that align with national healthcare priorities and objectives. Additionally, we facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building, and technology transfer to empower local stakeholders and accelerate the pace of digital transformation.

One of our key areas of focus is health equity, particularly addressing disparities in access to healthcare services and outcomes. We advocate for initiatives prioritizing women's health, improving access to care in rural areas, and leveraging virtual solutions to reach underserved populations. By championing inclusivity and equity in healthcare delivery between government, private, academia, investors and startup ecosystem, we contribute to advancing public-private partnerships that drive positive societal impact and promote universal healthcare coverage.

In summary, Accenture distinguishes itself in the healthcare consulting landscape by leveraging technology, fostering collaboration, and prioritizing societal impact. Through our strategic partnerships and innovative solutions, we strive to shape the future of healthcare and drive

sustainable progress toward achieving healthcare for all.

In the consultancy landscape of Saudi Arabia, how does Accenture distinguish itself, particularly in the context of Vision 2030's focus on technology and innovation?

Accenture excels in healthcare technology, emphasizing areas like data-driven decision-making, digital transformation, and upskilling the workforce in Gen-AI. By owning the entire value chain in healthcare technology, we position ourselves as leaders in the industry. Our approach prioritizes service and innovation, driving technological advancements and developing our own trends to stay ahead of the curve. This strategy aligns with the significant growth observed in the healthcare and technology sectors, making it a key focus for us moving forward.

As a prominent figure in your field, could you share your insights on the progression of women into leadership roles, and what advice would you offer to women aspiring to reach such positions?

It's crucial to recognize that gender should not define one's capabilities. Women possess the same intellect, energy, and potential as men, and it's essential not to limit oneself based on gender stereotypes. Having a mindset focused on serving a greater purpose beyond oneself can be incredibly empowering. My journey has taught me that aligning with my calling and vision has been instrumental in my success. For aspiring female leaders, I encourage them to believe in themselves unconditionally and to drown out any external doubts or noise. Additionally, fostering a supportive environment among women, where empowerment and advocacy are prioritized, is key. We're stronger together when we lift each other up and champion one another's successes**.**

As we conclude, do you have any final thoughts for our international audience?

I view this moment in Saudi Arabia and the broader region as a renaissance—a unique opportunity that arises once in a lifetime. We seek the best talent, expertise, and knowledge to contribute to our collective growth and progress. I urge you to consider being part of this transformative journey, bringing your skills, ideas, and passion to our vibrant community. In particular, healthcare stands as one of our foremost priorities, offering ample opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

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