Interview: Samer Kassem – CEO, Aspen Global Incorporated, Mauritius



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From humble beginnings to one of the largest companies in Mauritius; the CEO of Aspen Global Incorporated Mauritius explains the significance of the Mauritian holding for one of the fastest growing companies in the pharmaceutical sector. He illustrates how Mauritius has provided the right conditions for this success and sets Aspen apart.

Considering the exponential growth Aspen experiences on a global scale, with development projects internationally, and soon the US market, how does Mauritius fit into that context?

Established in February 2008 to facilitate the internationalization of the Aspen Group, Aspen Global is the holding company for more than 60 subsidiaries and the intellectual property owner of Aspen's entire internationally traded portfolio comprising about 80 products with 4 500 trademarks.

In Mauritius we are not limited to providing the holding structure, on the contrary, we are vital for all of Aspen's business activities, as we run the operations for all our global brands including acquisitions—starting with due diligence to the transfer of all the products / markets to Aspen; we are part of all these processes!

From Mauritius, we managed to set up and manage operations in all continents. Therefore, additional prospective growth initiatives in the US, or any other countries, would naturally fall under the same structure that is now in place for more than seven years.

I am greatly involved in, and leading some of, those initiatives. We do not work in closed quarters but as team, which is especially on the executive level vital, to avoid some of the mistakes that our industry peers allow every day. One of those mistakes is that the executive in charge of the decision to acquire or launch a product is not in charge of the operation. With us, decision-making is hand-in-hand with responsibility and accountability for the implementation in your business.

Our operation in Mauritius, in this context, is built with the ability to scale up – which we have continuously done ever since our very humble beginning here. We always think big, the difference to seven years ago is, that now we have the basics established and solid infrastructure built to drive growth initiatives.

What was the rationale behind setting up Aspen's global operations in Mauritius?

When I started the discussion with Aspen about of setting up their global operations in 2007, we evaluated all our possibilities. Choosing Mauritius was the logical result of our comprehensive analysis. It was—and still is—a fast developing economy which has many assets to offer: a stable political environment, favorable policies for investors, ease of setting up a business, exchange controls that allow us to operate in multiple currencies, security, and proximity to South Africa, which is important for us at Aspen.

The business that we run from here is no different than any of the large businesses that are managed from New York, London or Dubai. You have quick access to any support system whether to get help in funding, legal matters or simply drafting of agreements. Also, I appreciate that from a time zone perspective, we can communicate with all our affiliates and third parties around the world in one day – Australia and the Asian continent in the morning and the US and Latin America in the afternoon.

Mauritius additionally fulfils Human Resources needs, as our vacancies are either filled with local talent or expatriates who are, among other points, attracted by Mauritius.

How do you convince expatriates to come to Mauritius and work for Aspen?

The virtue of Mauritius is the bilingual population and education system, which allows us to recruit expatriates from French and English backgrounds.

Not many arguments are needed to convince expatriates to come and work for us in Mauritius. We are one of the fastest growing companies in the world, set in the beautiful landscape of Mauritius; if potential expatriates are not attracted to this unique combination, they will not fit in our team.

A significant factor of attraction for senior administration and management candidates, is that we do not accept bureaucracy which complements our unique leadership style. Individuals that fill these vacancies are expected to make decisions on their own, which provides independence and is stimulating for experienced expatriates that are used to be constantly overshadowed.

As a team, everybody at Aspen lives a hands-on culture. There are days where I handle a multibillion dollar deal and discuss a parking or canteen issue right afterwards.

The fact that we treat the business as our own is how we differentiate ourselves in leadership; I have never felt like an employee of Aspen. This unique relationship to ‘work’, that distinguishes us from many other companies makes us the rapidly growing and successful company we are today. To live this ethos and succeed, however, a unique caliber of personality is required.

How important is Aspen Global Incorporated to the sustainable development of Mauritius?

We benefit the social development of Mauritius through many different channels; some direct and some indirect.

As we have been growing, our job openings have increased proportionally as has our popularity as an employer. We emphasize internal training to develop our employees and provide them with the right set of skills to succeed in a global operation, with all the complexity that comes with cross-continents transactions. We helped in repatriating some Mauritians back to Mauritius, which is in line with the Government efforts to get their talents back from abroad.

We are the successful prototype of foreign direct investment in Mauritius and thus have become a role-model for other companies. That, and our presence in Mauritius provides additional confidence for foreign investors.

As a well-established multinational company in Mauritius, what is your message to other multinationals from the pharmaceutical sector that consider investing in Mauritius?

We are the largest pharmaceutical company in Mauritius and as such, I would like to encourage the global pharmaceutical sector to invest in Mauritius. Mauritius offers unique incentives that

encourage investment in a politically liberal context.

Competition can provide benefits for the whole sector, one being that the local talent will be further developed. It is important however that every company that makes this decision does so with an open mind as the initial phase can be challenging.

What is the future you foresee for Mauritius and Africa?

My personal background is humble, the beginnings of Aspen were humble, the African continent is humble in the grand scheme of the developed world. These parallels enable me to believe that without doubt the world will change. Some will seize the opportunities resulting from this change and ride the wave; some will be hit by it.

A new world map is in the making!

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