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Shar Kurtishi, CEO of ASD-Group, IEDC MBA 2010 graduate (Kosovo)

»EVERYTHING DEPRECIATES EXCEPT AN INVESTMENT IN HUMAN CAPITAL».

Last time we spoke with Shar was about 10 years ago, when he was finishing his MBA studies and was at a crossroads what to do next. Move forward to this day: a father of three, runs his own consulting firm and deals with projects that take him to some very off the beaten track places like Zanzibar, Addis Ababa, Banjul, Kigali, Kano, Ashgabat and many more. Shar still lives in Prishtina, however, these days moves around the city on his electric bike - as it turns out, for very practical reasons. He might give an impression of a slightly reserved person at first, but once you start talking to him, you realise it's his experience that turned him into such a grounded and thoughtful person. He is definitely a good listener, which matters a lot in the line of work he does.



Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova

It is slightly hard to accept it's been almost 10 years since you enrolled into the Executive MBA at IEDC. At that time, I remember, your application stood out for a number of reasons, one of them, due to an unusual background and experience in international financial institutions such as the World Bank. Majority of candidates that enrol into an MBA program are typical mid- or senior managers from the business sector and have obvious career aspirations. Would you remember what was the reason you started considering doing an MBA and why in Slovenia and not somewhere else?

It feels like yesterday, I hardly believe it myself that it's been almost a decade and honestly, I look forward to celebrating in Bled our anniversary, with alumni

gathering next year.

The World Bank was a remarkable experience, while I was working there, I was also doing my studies. The reason I have enrolled in the IEDC Executive MBA was that it was a natural next step toward moving to the private sector consulting and a personal challenge to overcome, in order to equip myself with adequate skills for the private sector. I did consider other programs, apart from the IEDC, there were Durham University in Newcastle, the UK and Sheffield University, in Thessaloniki on my list. I chose Slovenia and the IEDC due to the alumni graduates' achievements and its reputation in Kosovo and felt that the programme would suit my career and future plans better.

How did your career develop

in the last decade after completing your studies? Where you considering opportunities of moving to another lines of work, other countries? Did anything from the studies in fact help you in taking decisions?

It worked out well, as planned, and within six months after completion of studies, I co-founded a consulting company that is still operating, providing consulting for private and public sectors. The aim was to go into the private sector, so I did that, however, the work done in the past keeps coming back as the demand for public finances is growing. Studying in Bled helped sharpen my personality, which I consider a great improvement that added value to my career. So, now instead of using ten phrases to explain something, MBA helped me do it in three.

In a sense, it helped me with communication, to be direct to the point and being able to better articulate things that I want to say. Overall, when I interact with clients, with people, when I get to do an elevator speech, it's the right message, and whatever tools and skills I've gained, I was able to utilize in practice well. Of course, it helped me build more confidence and credibility.

You used to work for the World Bank, so knowing how it works, how much of an impact, in your opinion, such an organization has on the ground? What did you deal with?

Well, the World Bank is a big organization and it deals with a lot of things at the same time. The biggest interventions that they do is improving governance in many states and that means they not only work in one domain, but in many: they are into improving public services, public finance, public health, social welfare - so different types of interventions, depending on the situation in each particular country.

I happened to work on a public finance domain and at that time, I was second to the ministry of finance, second to the ministry of education, for particular issues. In the area of finance I was dealing with the issue of how to finance different tiers of local governance, meaning, helping them figure out how much do they need in order to be able to render different services at a decent quality level to citizens. Each municipality, however, has their own needs different from others, so they would need to respect certain factors in their work to provide services to people living in that area. So, this is what I did initially for the WB, to ensure that all municipalities are given adequate funding and there is a proper equalizing mechanism behind the funding.

In the area of education my job was to figure out how to finance 1100 schools in the country to ensure the all the schools have

adequate staffing, adequate resources to allow also for teaching in multiple languages - Serbian, Albanian, Turkish, also that children's needs in education are adequately met. So, from what I did you probably already see how diverse is the work of the Bank. The third task that I had was working on healthcare, the primary healthcare - the backbone of the whole system, ensuring that this sector with all its clinics is functioning and is adequately financed. It's worth mentioning that the WB not only works in regions where these sectors are not working well, but all over the place, including rich countries. So what they do can be summarized to "improving systems".

To give you an example of situations where WB tries to intervene, for instance, austerity measures in Greece or austerity measures in the UK due to

respective country, of course, can either act on the recommendations of the WB, or similar multilateral organisations, but they will have to comply with certain criteria to benefit from the resources that the organisation offers or decide to do it their own way, meaning they will not be able to use available funding from these organisations.

How come you started working for the World Bank in the first place?

I happened to build the budget planning system, so entirely digitalizing the budget planning process - which is the first half of the budget, and then also the second part of the budget - which is the execution side, so the spending of the budget. So, states every year plan their own budget, during the year there a number of consulting hearings with all the tiers and levels of governing, so everything goes consolidated at



Brexit impact the economy of the country one way or another, which consequently impacts service delivery. It is a chain reaction, if you try to cut in one sector because of austerity measures, you need to understand how do you make cuts and where do you make cuts. It's like if you had to cut your fingers, it's a one-million-question, which finger will hurt the least. What we do is come up with an analysis to make sure that you are not hindering one sector at the expense of another sector. The government of each

some point and submitted to the respective authority, which in its turn checks whether that's feasible, whether that's in line with government priorities. Then if approved by the national assembly, it goes to the executive part, meaning the Treasury and gets being spent for various services. So, in short, I happened to "digitalize" the system that was functioning on separate Excel files and implement an MIS system. In fact, before entering finance, I was building management information systems, so that is

where my expertise lied. So, in 2003-2004 I built that system, in 2004 we started piloting it, in 2005 we scaled it up and in 2006 it was finally complete. Since then the whole government uses the same system for the planning, so all legislative bodies, executive bodies, agencies and local governments. Then, one thing led to another, so I learnt the whole in-and-out planning and execution, because I had to connect the system to tax administration, to the central payroll system, to the treasury, of course. The World Bank saw it and found it interesting - at that time it was a remarkable thing, so they asked me if I want to join them, so I did.

Why did you leave them?

Oh, good question. I did an MBA and I left them:) Just like that. On a serious note, the reason I did an MBA was that I wanted to get outside of the box, I wanted to challenge myself since it was also quite a long time that I did my work related to the government, so I wanted to have a taste of how is it to work for the private sector.

What exactly are you doing nowadays? Why is it important to you? What is your motivation?

I still do what I love and that is management consulting. I wear two hats now - the company is working for the private sector, so we consult some of the top 20 companies in the country. We do not have a lot of clients, that is also because the consulting sector is at the moment at an infantile level and we provide consulting to business owners. A company of 1000 people here is considered big, whereas in the UK it is falling into a category of a small enterprise. So, we have about 10 companies that we consult in Kosovo. It's also worth mentioning that it is a project or a task-based consulting that we get to work on. For instance, a company wants to test a business idea and would like to assess the market.

The second hat that I wear is

work for the public sector, where requests keep on coming still, as the demand for such work is in fact greater than in the private sector. So these are the projects in public finance, so basically I deal with improving systems and producing analysis and providing facts in order to take the right decision.

Consulting is my lifestyle and a professional career for two reasons: first of all, I want to make a change in peoples' lives through my work while at the same time expand my horizons by meeting interesting professionals and joining forces for the ultimate goal. Secondly, and that is very important for me: the work-life balance.

Consulting allows me to devote time needed for work as well as to have time for my family: for my supportive wife and my kids who still need my presence while they grow up.

It seems you had an opportunity to go to some extraordinary places. What are those? What do you like/dislike about travelling to those places?

Indeed, it's an intentional choice I have made in my career while working also to visit as many places as I can and enjoy that to the maximum extent. As a matter of fact, I just returned home after a mission in Turkmenistan. I am mesmerised by the extraordinary changes that an ex-soviet republic can overcome in such a short timeframe in terms of infrastructure development. I have been lucky in that sense as of 2012 I have done consulting work in more than 20 countries around the world, primarily in the Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. I had an opportunity to visit exciting places such as Zanzibar, Addis Ababa, Banjul, Kigali, Kano, Ashgabat and many more.

Belated congratulations for your birthday. You hit one of those milestones when many get to re-evaluate who they are and what really matters in life. How happy/satisfied are you with where you are?

Any middle-age crisis affected you? Porsche in the driveway, goals like summiting the mount Everest or visiting the North Pole? :)

Thank you, indeed a great milestone. I have been pleased to work with lovely people around me and that is great luck. Most probably, the next step for me is to seek for the next challenge, so I can spend my sweet forties doing something that keeps my excitement high.

Porsche is a little bit too much, but a Mercedes and, of course, Apple. Apple products nowadays have become part of the tools I use for work, however, I own an electric bike which I am proud of - it changed my lifestyle. This way I also intend to keep pollution level low, so I ride an electric bike - that is my contribution in fighting the climate change. One of the goals that I also set for myself is to have worked in more than 100 countries around the globe before I turn 65.

Do you still keep in touch with any of your classmates from IEDC?

I do, we keep in touch and meet in person occasionally. But I look forward to next year's 10th anniversary in Bled, I am excited.

You've got a wonderful family at home. How easy is it to be a father of three? How do you manage to balance time between work and family? Is there something that your kids made you rethink in your life or do differently?

Yes, I have been blessed with a healthy family, a very supportive wife and three kids of both genders. Work and life balance are key to the success in all domains. I have been lucky in that department; I had the option of long- and short-term assignments. I choose to go for short term assignments and leave more time for the family and kids. Because of kids I opted for assignments that are carried in safe environments and less of emergency and distressed

countries. Even though I try not to do a lot of travelling these days, however, you cannot avoid it. You can either choose long-term steady job, like an office job 08.00 - 17.00, or you can choose consulting, which means more travelling, and of course it's a big difference to an office work. The latter one is pretty simple - you have A, B, C things to do and you have no other choice, whereas in consulting I have a choice - I take A and I take B, but I don't take C. That's a good thing about it, since I decide for myself what I want to do.

How much security is there in such a job? How do you deal with it? What are the tradeoffs?

That's a tradeoff, in consulting you are not sure how many days of work you'll do per year. On the other hand, in an office position you most probably earn a quarter of what you can get in consulting and you get fixed time for work, you get health insurance, you get to spend more time at home. I chose consulting, I like it because I try to see more places and I also enjoy working with different people, and that - around the world. It's remarkable. While doing my job, I can enjoy different cultures, different food, different mentality. I like that very much.



Moreover, I see and feel the differences in both developing and developed sites. When I come back home and hear a complaint about a small pension, I know there are many more people out there that are not getting even that much. That's in fact a comparison that I tend to make. We are all human beings and we strive for the better, however, if you have not seen what's worse, it's hard to compare. On top, there are many people around the world that do not go out of their country and see only what media serves them.

Probably you had opportunities to move to another country, why did not you do it?

For several reasons, Kosovo's convenient location close to Istanbul, as most of travels I make were to Africa, nowadays, I also go often to Asia. Secondly, my parents and relatives of my wife and everyone is in Kosovo. On top, having three kids, it's actually cheaper to raise them here, in Kosovo, than anywhere in Europe.

Right after finishing an MBA, I was offered a position in the WB in Washington, DC, however, at that time I was not ready to do it. I was at a crossroads and I wanted to try working in a private sector.

MEET SHAR IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The people that influenced me most in my life are... tech innovators from Uber, Facebook and alike while the person that influenced me the most is Michael Collins.

My favourite movie is Avatar.

The last book I read was the Paulo Coelho's Alchemist and it was because a friend referral.

The advice I would give to my kids is do not do something that you do not want to happen it to you.

When I get time to myself, I go on my e-bike exploring new routes, not taken before.

Things that inspire me are languages and cultures, movies, traveling, analytical software's and least but not the last artificial intelligence.