MULTINATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Eng. Maqbool Al Wahaibi, Chief Executive Officer, Oman Data Park is positioning the company as a professional service provider and exploring global markets for its next phase of growth. Excerpts from an interview with Mayank Singh

ODP has completed 10 years of its successful operations. What are your thoughts on the journey?

We have achieved a lot over the last decade but it is time to review, learn and chalk out the roadmap for the next 10 years. The success of Oman Data Park was purely due to the leadership of the company. The second success factor was employing the right team, we are selective while recruiting talent and see that our resources are a perfect fit. The third factor is customer centricity, we are loyal and close to our clients and this gives us a chance to understand the market better. The fourth was the support which we got from our shareholders and how we delivered on their expectations as everything which we do needs to make economic sense. We need business and profits to look after our customers better and to deliver on shareholder expectations. These four factors were the key elements which account for Oman Data Park's successful journey. Overall, it was all about prioritising our objectives and we did it well.

When Oman Data Park started in 2013, there was no Cloud business in Oman and we had to create awareness and a market. Initially, we focussed on the financial sector as we found that banks and financial institutions were at the forefront of digitalisation, understood its benefits and hence it became easier to communicate. Moreover, they understood numbers and could ascertain the economic benefits which they would derive on the total cost of ownership over a five to ten year period. The beauty of Cloud is that it sells itself as it is cheaper compared to other options. Our first client was Bank Nizwa and its success encouraged others and I am pleased to share that today Oman Data Park has 12 banks as clients.

We followed this up with forays into the utility sector, oil and gas and others. We serve 600 clients today with multiple Cloud components and products such as - infrastructure as a service, software as a service, platform as a service plus co-location services.

How has Oman Data Park contributed to Oman›s larger goal of digitalisation in line with Vision 2040?

At Oman Data Park we look beyond the company as we are serving the end goal of the country. The idea is to Cloud enable every single entity in the Sultanate. Oman's Vision 2040 has a clear vision for digitalisation and we are executing it. The digitalisation road map has very clear components. For example Cloud is the first component in the fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and then there are others such as the Internet of Things, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning Analysis and more. Each one of these has a lot potential and we just need to focus on them and Oman Data Park is currently focused on Cloud.

What are you plans for Oman Data Park's next stage of growth and what can customers expect from the company?

We are looking at multiple growth avenues over the next decade. Moving ahead, we will face a challenge from hyper scalers such as Google Cloud, Amazon Cloud, and Alibaba Cloud as they are or will be entering the Oman market. As a company we were aware that once they saw us growing they would become interested in Oman's market. Their entry is welcome as it is good for enterprise and customers, but we need to be prepared as it is going to impact us.

Oman Data Park is looking at ways to collaborate with them to enrich the market rather than against them and we have developed a deep rooted relationship with them over the last three years and can position ourselves as a professional service provider. While hyper scalers have good hardware, products and solutions they would still need on ground expertise and people to help companies migrate to their solutions and this where we see a business opportunity for us. We understand the market, have good skills on the Cloud, are respected in the market and based on these strengths we will help hyper scalers in the market

Thus Oman Data Park's next phase of growth will come from adding value through our products and by offering professional services to hyper scalers to further enrich the market. This approach is driven by our customer centric philosophy as we understand that clients would want to explore the value that hyper scalers bring to the table and we do not want to block them from deriving that value as that would be selfish of us, but to offer our professional service experts. This would add tremendous value to hyper scalers and customers.

Over the next decade, Oman Data Park will be providing professional services not only in Oman but across the globe. The beauty of professional services is that it is resource based and these resources could be based anywhere in the world. If there is a client who is interested in migrating to a platform provided by hyper scalers across the globe, we could help with the design, consultancy etc. for the same. We could do the migration online or even by flying in people to the client's site if needed.

Our vision is to elevate Oman Data Park as a global multinational company. We need to internationalise Oman Data Park as we can add great value from the experience which we have developed over the last 10 years in other countries, either by working with local entities in those markets or going there directly.

Thus the focus areas for Oman Data Park are going to be working with hyper scalers and the internationalisation of Oman Data Park. The good news is that we ended our 10 year journey by taking formidable steps towards internationalisation by serving the East African market. Oman Data Park signed a contract in Zanzibar and entered Tanzania in 2022. In Zanzibar we signed one of our biggest contracts to serve East Africa with a SAAS application, which will automate the government's entire e-procurement cycle. The tender board and government entities across Zanzibar are using our application for procurement which has enabled them to make substantial savings apart from other benefits.

We are looking at spreading Oman Data Park's footprint in Africa. Our ambition and goal is to become one of the top 10 Cloud Service Providers (CSPs) globally over the next ten years. It would be a dream come true to see an Omani technology company being among the top 10 companies internationally.

How do you foresee Oman's economic prospects for 2023?

Oman's economy is moving in the right direction. It was under pressure during Covid-19 and prior to it as there were substantial debts on the country's balance sheets. The government has addressed these issues by paying off loans and other prudent measures. As a result the Sultanate's financial position is healthy and this augurs well for the future. The cost cutting and rationalisation measures have put pressure on companies, but the good news is that this is transitory, but the long term benefits will be extraordinary.

The near normalisation of the country's balance sheet along with the thrust on diversification is expected to bring in tremendous value over the next decade. Financial year 2023 will be a good year from an economical perspective, as the year-on-year increase in Oman's GDP is expected to be strong.

Covid-19 led pressures has led to the opening up and development of new sectors such as logistics, mining, fisheries and tourism which are growing steadily. The beauty of these diversified businesses is that they require technology and their growth will in turn lead to the growth of technology companies like Oman Data Park.

I would also like to point out that there has been a lot of stress on cloudification and digitalisation of government entities and would like to Thank the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology for publishing the Cloud first strategy. Similarly our gratitude to the Central Bank of Oman for coming up with a Cloud First strategy for the financial sector. While a lot of progress has been made, we require faster decision making from government entities as this will enable them to minimise their expenditure by almost 45 per cent in terms of data centres, hardware etc. The processing time has improved but it can still be better.