



# The business case for investing in women's employment in Jordan

## CASE STUDY

### Amin Kawar and Sons (AKS)

Reaping the benefits of family-friendly policies



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# FOREWORD BY THE WORLD BANK GROUP

The International Finance Corporation and the World Bank are partnering with int@j and the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) to remove barriers to women's participation in Jordanian workplaces and build a community of companies that are dedicated to hiring, retaining, and promoting women.

Even before the pandemic, there was an urgent need to level the playing field for working women in Jordan. Despite gains in recent years, only 14 percent of Jordanian women are in the labor market, compared to 64 percent of men. That is one of the widest gaps in the world – and it has deep social and economic implications. We at the World Bank Group recognize that access to economic opportunities is essential for both men and women to live dignified lives and become active social agents.

Attracting, retaining, and promoting women is also good for companies. It allows them to harness talent, making them more productive and competitive. In the bigger picture, raising female employment also contributes to economic growth and supports poverty reduction. Our recently published State of the Mashreq Women Flagship Report found that if Jordan raised its female labor force participation rate to 24 percent, from the current 14 percent, its annual economic growth rate would increase by 2.5 percentage points. Amid the ravages of COVID-19, boosting female employment would act as a catalyst for Jordan's economy, making it stronger and more inclusive.

As difficult as the pandemic has been in Jordan, it has allowed us to re-imagine workplaces and to reflect on what those mean for Jordan's women. We have been inspired to see the agility of some Jordanian companies, many shifting to more flexible, healthy, and thereby inclusive work models that are responsive to the needs of women.

Under a platform created with int@j and the JNCW, we have launched the series of case studies to showcase Jordanian companies that have created more gender responsive workplaces that support women and men. The case studies feature companies that are promoting greater inclusion of women in their workforce in three thematic areas:

- supporting women in non-traditional sectors, as Estarta Solutions is doing;
- promoting anti-harassment policies at the workplace, based on UMNIAH's experience; and
- fostering family-friendly policies in the workplace as exemplified by the Kawar Group.

We hope that these case studies will inspire other businesses in Jordan to develop and test similar solutions to more gender-aware environments, based on insights into the models that work.

Our utmost gratitude goes to int@j and the JNCW for championing this important agenda, to the three companies that participated in this project for generously sharing their data and good practices, and to the governments of Canada and Norway for supporting the Mashreq Gender Facility. This is a five-year initiative under which we are launching these case studies with the governments of Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan to increase female labor force participation.



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# FOREWORD BY THE PARTNERS:

## The Information and Communications Technology Association of Jordan (int@j), and The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW)

As we write this foreword, we cannot help but think about how exceptionally challenging this year has been for businesses, employees and particularly for women in Jordan. It is with a strong sense of urgency - but also with much optimism and hope - that int@j and the Jordanian National Commission for Women have come together to address challenges to women's participation in the workplace, while aiming to also reverse the recent set-backs that working women in Jordan have experienced as a result of the COVID19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, only fourteen percent of Jordan's working-age women were actively participating in the workforce, compared to 64 percent of Jordan's men. What holds women back in the workplace - here in Jordan as elsewhere in the world - is widely known. It is among many factors; the burden of domestic care, elderly and childcare, lack of inappropriate transportation, a lack of workplace security and socially constructed stereotypes about the types of jobs and sector women can work and advance in. The ongoing pandemic has exacerbated some of these challenges for women and is further holding them back or even forcing them out. It is with this understanding that int@j and the Jordanian National Commission for Women have come together to work hand in hand on raising the currently low labor force participation of women in Jordan. This is so very critical to Jordan's economic growth path. If Jordan raised its female labor force participation from currently 14 to 24 percent, as the government has committed itself to in 2019, Jordan's annual economic growth would be increased 2.5 points.

Despite our different mandates, we recognize that our organizations are bound together by a common strategic interest. We both know that harnessing the untapped talent pool of the many well-educated women in Jordan is a critical contributor to boosting the competitiveness and productivity of Jordanian companies and to Jordan's long-term economic growth. Equally, getting and keeping more women in jobs creates career and income opportunities for them and thereby enhances their agency and decision-making.

As such, we at int@j and the Jordanian National Commission for Women have joined forces with the International Finance Corporation to regularly convene, engage and thereby build a community of companies that is committed to hiring, retaining, and promoting women.

It is under that initiative that we have launched a series of case studies, that profile Jordanian companies who are committed to advancing women in their company's workforce. The case studies feature two int@j member companies, and one company from JNCW's network of companies, that are promoting greater inclusion of women in their workforce in three thematic areas: (1) Supporting women in non-traditional roles , as Estarta Solutions is doing ; (2) Anti-Harassment Policies at the Workplace as

UMNIAH and (3) Family Friendly Policies at the Workplace as Amin Kawar and Sons is doing.

Our aim is that these case studies will reach many businesses in Jordan and help them better understand the business benefits of employing women, get insights into the approaches that work, and learn from each other's experiences while replicating solutions.

On behalf of JNCW and int@j, we would like to thank the three companies that participated in this project and generously shared their data and good practices. We at int@j and JNCW are committed to continuing our partnership to work with businesses in Jordan towards creating equal employment opportunities, decent working conditions, and lucrative career paths for women, and we will continue to do more.



**Dr. Salma El Nims**  
Secretary General – Jordanian National  
Commission for Women (JNCW)<sup>1</sup>



**Dr. Nidal Bitar**  
CEO, int@j<sup>2</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) is a semi-governmental organization which advocates and promotes for gender equality and women's rights. It was established by a cabinet decision in 1992 and has since gained recognition as the authority on women's affairs in Jordan's public sector while it also represents the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan at regional and international levels in matters pertaining to women. JNCW's mission is to support the mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas and to narrow the gap between formal acknowledgement of women's rights as detailed by legislation and the actual societal attitudes towards women.
  - <sup>2</sup> The Information and Communications Technology Association in Jordan (Int@j) is a membership-based information and communication technology (ICT) and IT Enabled Services industry advocacy, support and networking association whose purpose is to serve as the collective voice of the industry, advocating on behalf of stakeholders and seeks to maximize the contribution of the ICT sector towards the national economy. We aim to provide our members with the tools required to ensure continued growth and expansion.

# The business case for investing in women's employment in Jordan

## Amin Kawar and Sons (AKS): Reaping the benefits of family-friendly policies

### FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORK IN JORDAN

Family-friendly working arrangements and policies represent a win-win situation for both companies and their employees. Extensive research by IFC and others demonstrates how instituting family-friendly measures such as flexible hours, remote work and childcare solutions can reduce staff turnover, improve productivity, and help to attract investment, alongside many other benefits (see IFC, 2017; UNICEF, 2019). Many of these advantages have been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as employers have necessarily pivoted towards more flexible working arrangements, and experienced gains in terms of productivity, business continuity and employee engagement.

In Jordan, family responsibilities play a major role in shaping women's choices about paid employment, given strong cultural norms that women assume primary responsibility for family care and household duties. According to a recent World Bank study, an overwhelming majority of Jordanians support women working outside the home (World Bank, 2019); however, it is widely expected that they continue to maintain their unpaid family responsibilities and return home every day by 5 pm (World Bank, 2020). These expectations, combined with a lack of access to affordable and convenient childcare and reliable public transport, are a major reason many Jordanian women choose to leave or disengage from the workforce. This contributes to one of the lowest levels of female labor force participation in the world – just 14 percent in Jordan, compared to 18 percent across the Arab States and 47 percent globally (ILO, 2020).

Family-friendly working arrangements are key to attracting Jordanian women into the workforce, maintaining their participation, and enabling their career advancement. In turn, this ensures that Jordanian employers do not miss out on the

## Workforce profile - December 2020



Shipping & Transportation  
**AMIN KAWAR & SONS**  
Part of Kawar Group

### Women comprise:

- 33% of employees
- 50% of senior management staff (including general managers) 52% of managers
- 40% of middle management
- 58% of Amman workforce
- 16% of Aqaba workforce

### Summary of key initiatives:

- Opportunities for flexible working hours and remote work Leadership training
- Training and guidance for parents
- Childcare support

### Summary of business benefits:

- Reduced staff turnover and greater workforce stability
- Enhanced productivity
- Attracting high-quality candidates through a strong employee value proposition

benefits associated with higher levels of gender diversity, which range from better access to talent and skills to higher profits and greater innovation (see, e.g., Peterson Institute, 2016; McKinsey, 2018). Nevertheless, whilst recognizing that women are most likely to reap the benefits of such arrangements, it is important that policies and practices to ensure family friendly working conditions are available to women and men alike.

Recognizing that the Jordanian workforce – in particular women – face diverse needs and responsibilities outside the workplace, the Government of Jordan has introduced new by-laws to promote greater work-life balance. These include a requirement for employers to consider employee requests for flexible working (including part-time work, remote working and flexible hours), and an amendment regarding employers' obligation to provide or subsidize childcare for its workforce: this is now based on the number of children of all employees (minimum 15), rather than on the number of female employees (as previously). There are promising signs that these amendments, together with the changes to working practices adopted by companies in response to COVID-19, may precipitate a more permanent shift, as employers realize the business gains to be won from supporting family-friendly working practices.

## COMPANY BACKGROUND

Amin Kawar and Sons (AKS) is a Jordanian shipping and international transportation company as well as the parent company of the Kawar Group – a family-owned group of companies spanning diverse industries, including energy, technology and healthcare.

Headquartered in Amman, AKS was founded in 1955 and played a significant role in the establishment of Aqaba Port as an international trading hub. The company now processes around 300 vessels and handles 30,000 containers per year, working with diverse customers, including companies importing and exporting construction materials, agricultural products and oil and gas. AKS aims to provide a “one-stop-shop” which incorporates logistics, maritime shipping, freight-forwarding, cargo surveys and other services into one customized package. The company also has a ship brokerage division.



AKS has a workforce of 67 – 33 percent of whom are women. The workforce is split nearly equally between Aqaba and Amman, fulfilling a broad range of functions. In Aqaba, most employees are engaged as port staff – loading and unloading cargo and providing ship maintenance services. At the Amman headquarters, the company employs desk-based staff to handle services such as customer relations, administration and insurance.

This case study explores AKS's measures to enable family-friendly working, including flexible and remote working arrangements, training for new parents and discounted childcare fees.

## THE BUSINESS CONTEXT FOR SUPPORTING FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKING PRACTICES

Jordan is an important regional and international transport hub, due to its location on one of the world's busiest shipping routes, its ongoing investment in infrastructure, and relative political stability in a region that faces ongoing political turmoil and conflict. Overall, the transportation and logistics sector plays a major role in Jordan's economy, contributing more than 8 percent of GDP (JIC, 2017), and growing at an annual rate of around 6 percent (JIC, 2017). More than 6.2 percent of employed Jordanians are engaged in the transportation and storage sector (DOS, 2020) – primarily in companies with less than 50 employees.

Globally, the shipping, transportation and logistics industry is

3 Workforce data used in this case study (provided by the company) reflects the composition of the workforce at the end of 2020. For further information about the company, see: <http://www.kawarshipping.com/>  
4 AKS shares some HR and other policies with the rest of the Kawar Group, but Kawar Group companies operate independently for the most part. The policies and practices outlined in this case study reflect the family-friendly working offer of AKS rather than the whole group.

vulnerable to political instability and economic shocks, such as the disruption to global trade and supply chains precipitated by COVID-19. This context, according to Nadia Shahin, AKS's General Manager, makes it an ongoing challenge for companies like AKS to plan for the long term. The pandemic made this even more difficult, but the company used the slowdown in global trade as an opportunity for training and development to address skills gaps in the workforce, rather than downsize. Shahin believes that this kind of focus on nurturing a skilled, diverse and stable workforce has helped AKS to succeed in a challenging environment, and to fulfil the reputation it has built through its long-established presence and central role in Jordan's transportation and logistics sector.

In the traditionally male-dominated commercial shipping industry, AKS stands out as a pioneer of women's leadership and employment: while just 3.7 percent of the workforce of Jordan's transportation and storage sector is made up of women (DOS, 2020), 33 percent of AKS's employees are women. Shahin, who took on the top role at AKS in 2010, has been instrumental in this drive, assisted by the progressive leadership of the AKS family. Shaped by her own experiences (see IFC, 2019b), Shahin became General Manager with a determination to enable women to juggle demanding roles at AKS with family responsibilities. Shahin knew that talented women were either dropping out of AKS's workforce once they got married and had children or were staying on and struggling to find the right work-life balance. As a mother, she was keenly aware of the challenges, and wanted to create a family-friendly environment where AKS could support and retain talented female employees.



## HOW AKS SUPPORTS FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORK

AKS's approach to family-friendly working arrangements is based on an understanding that each employee has their own unique set of circumstances and challenges, which management and HR aim to accommodate where possible, subject to the needs of the business. Robust HR management systems, including a comprehensive policy framework, help to embed and formalize this approach, whilst still allowing flexibility for individual circumstances. The company's commitment to family-friendly working arrangements is underpinned by a broader commitment to diversity, set out in its Gender Diversity and Inclusion Policy, which states AKS's zero-tolerance approach to discrimination of any kind. Though AKS has had family-friendly working arrangements in place for many years, the company was able to accelerate and institutionalize this approach through targeted advice and assistance from the GIZ EconoWin program in 2018.

### Flexible working hours

In 2019, AKS strengthened its flexible working offer to employees – which was previously informal and implemented on a case-by-case basis – by introducing an official policy. This was based on feedback from employees in yearly satisfaction surveys, as well as a desire on the part of management and HR to ensure the sustainability of AKS's support for family-friendly working as the company grows, and to guarantee consistency in decision-making in order to mitigate any perception of unfairness or favorable treatment towards individual employees.

Subject to the needs of the business, AKS's flexible working policy provides for:

- Flexible start and finish times. In most departments, employees work an eight-hour day, and can choose to begin between 7.30 and 8.30am. In practice, many employees benefit from even greater flexibility, on the basis of agreement with their team or line manager, and individual need.
- Up to nine hours of "personal leave" per month. In addition to annual leave (24-14 days, depending on length of service), all AKS staff are permitted to take up to nine hours per month (with a maximum of three hours taken on any one day) as "personal leave", for which they do not have to provide a reason.



- Formal commitment to consideration of individual needs and circumstances. The policy states that the company is willing to consider additional requests for flexibility to accommodate the specific needs of individual employees, in accordance with its longstanding but previously ad hoc approach. Such requests must be made through the employee's line manager and will be considered by the HR Department before final sign-off by the General Manager.

**“Taking time off to care for relatives is easy because the company places huge value on family life. If time off is needed, it is granted freely as long as business is not compromised”**

Female employee

AKS is also moving towards a performance management system for employees that shifts greater focus on to individual effectiveness and productivity - as measured by defined outputs and key performance indicators (KPIs) – rather than hours worked. KPIs have formed part of AKS's performance management system since 2010, but the emphasis continues to shift further to rewarding employees for the quality of their outputs, rather than the length of time spent at work. According to HR, this system provides greater flexibility for employees to work according to the pattern that best suits them, and can also improve time management and reduce “presenteeism”, whereby staff are at their desks at set hours but distracted or unproductive.

### Remote working

The remote working policy – which all employees can use – is also a key part of the company's support for employees with family responsibilities, especially when used in conjunction with flexible working. AKS was open to requests for remote working long before the onset of COVID-19-, when this was still very unusual in Jordan: one female department manager has been working from home since 2005, for example. However, there is now a formal remote working policy with clear guidelines on what is expected from employees in terms of deliverables and communication while working from home, as well as the assistance that is available, such as provision of necessary equipment. The policy also sets out

the eligibility criteria for homeworking; that is, employees who “do not need direct interaction with customers, and who are working on specific projects that can be completed at home”. In practice, this means that certain staff can work from home as often as needed. To enable employees working in departments where some staff presence is required on-site to benefit from the flexible working policy too, teams operate on a rotational basis, with special provision made for employees with family responsibilities where feasible. At the beginning of the pandemic, for example, parents and caregivers in these teams were prioritized for home working.



### Training and guidance

In 2019, AKS implemented training sessions to provide guidance to staff facing diverse challenges presented by balancing work and family. These did not run in 2020 as it was not possible to hold in-person sessions due to COVID-19, but based on the positive feedback of participants, the company hopes to roll them out to more employees in the future. The training sessions include:

- “Parents to be” training. AKS held a one-day session for first-time parents – men, women and couples – to provide guidance on facilitating work-life balance and managing common challenges. Delivered by an external trainer, with members of the HR team present, the session covered topics including benefits to early childhood development of fathers playing an active role.
- Time management training. The objective of this training, in which 16 employees (nearly a quarter of the company), nine of whom were women, participated was to help working parents balance their professional and personal goals. According to HR, the training has helped management better

understand how to assist staff balancing work with family commitments.

- Certified life coach training. This training – delivered by an external trainer over a total of 15 hours - was designed to enable three women at management level (including the General Manager) to mentor first-time mothers and female employees facing challenges in relation to work-life balance.



## Support for childcare

All AKS staff based in Amman who have children between the ages of 18 months and six years benefit from discounted fees (10 to 35 percent, depending on the provider) to three kindergartens and nurseries within four kilometers of the company's headquarters. The HR team undertook extensive research of the local market and personally visited shortlisted facilities to ensure they were of sufficient quality. Given the lack of affordable and high-quality providers of early childhood care in Jordan, employees appreciate this support - especially the convenience of being able to drop off and pick up their children nearby on their way to and from work. Though the company would like to offer this benefit to employees based in Aqaba too, the small number of employees with young children mean it is not feasible for local childcare providers to offer a group discount, as in Amman.

Recognizing the importance of supporting fathers to take on

caring responsibilities too, AKS introduced paternity leave at the beginning of 2014 – four and a half years before this became a legal requirement in Jordan – and actively encourages men to take it. AKS's maternity and nursing leave provisions are in line with national law, though where feasible the company accommodates requests for additional parental leave from both men and women, based on individual needs.

**“When my son was born premature, the company went above and beyond ... not only did they give me extra time off, they also helped me and my wife to access insurance coverage”**

Male employee

Support for childcare responsibilities is reinforced by the flexible working policy and a company culture of flexibility and openness, meaning that any parents facing specific challenges or requiring additional assistance are encouraged to ask for it, and the company strives to do all it can to support employees in such circumstances.

The company is set up to support flexibility and the diverse needs and responsibilities of its staff – especially women. With home and flexible working already in place in some teams, the shift to remote working with the onset of COVID-19 did not present a problem for the company. Management believes that this practice will be adopted more widely going forward, and that a more embedded flexible working culture will encourage women with children to stay. Employees appreciate the extra time to spend with their families and the increased flexibility to manage their family responsibilities, and noted that support and understanding from managers has been critical to making this transition successful.

Estarta's standard working week (Monday to Friday) differs from that of most other Jordanian companies (Sunday to Thursday). This can be difficult for parents – especially women – as Friday is typically considered a family day. The company considers this one of the key reasons why supporting women into senior management remains a challenge, and acknowledges that there is no easy solution. However, management observes that over time, women - and men - are becoming more willing to make this compromise. This

is attributed to Estarta's ongoing efforts to create a supportive, positive and inclusive working environment for women.

## BUSINESS BENEFITS OF AKS'S INVESTMENTS IN FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKING CONDITIONS

### Maintaining a stable and experienced workforce

Senior management is convinced that offering family-friendly working arrangements is a key reason why no women with children have left the company for the past two years, and over the past four years, only one female AKS employee (and no men) who left the company cited family responsibilities as the reason – despite this being the main reason Jordanian women leave the labor force in general. Personal testimony from staff affirms this

**“We would have lost many talented people with knowledge and experience if we didn't offer this support.”**

Nadia Shahin, General Manager

view: “After 26 years, I'm still so passionate about my job, but there's no way I could have stayed here this long without the support I received from the company while I was raising my kids” says Ghada Qandah, Market Analysis Manager.

Minimizing staff turnover brings substantial cost savings. Taking into account the costs associated with recruitment, training and reduced productivity of new hires, it is estimated that replacing an AKS employee costs the company at least 30 percent of their annual wage – and as much as 190 percent of the annual wage for more technical roles in which it takes several years to reach full productivity. As an example of the significant cost this incurs for a small company like AKS, an employee earning JOD 11,000 (US \$15,515) per year, would cost between JOD 3,300 (US \$ 4655) and JOD 20,900 (US \$29,478) to replace on top of their annual salary, with the precise figure depending on the skill level.

The retention of employee experience and expertise is also critical to the company's overall success in less quantifiable – but potentially

even more valuable – ways: longstanding employees with deep knowledge and understanding of the business are better able to anticipate clients' needs, devise solutions to complex issues and help the company to overcome challenges. Maintaining a stable and experienced workforce also helps to cultivate a loyal customer base, which has a direct impact on AKS's ability to compete in a challenging business environment. Moreover, it also helps AKS to maintain its excellent reputation in Jordan more widely – which enables the company to attract new customers, and investment.

The experience of other companies in Jordan corroborates AKS's views on the links between family-friendly working practices and reduced staff turnover (particularly of women). Since the Government of Jordan introduced a law to requiring companies to support flexible working in 2017, 60 percent of participating firms have reported increased retention (as well as overall employment) of women in their companies (World Bank, 2020). Across the Jordanian labor force, women are disproportionately represented among those working flexibly (though women comprise less than 15 percent of the total workforce, they account for 45 percent of all flexible working contracts). This indicates that the new regulation mainly benefits women and enables them to remain in the workforce, despite other demands on their time related to unpaid and care work (World Bank, 2020).



### Increased productivity

AKS's management draws a direct line between a range of family-friendly working arrangements and high levels of productivity, and attributes this to a number of factors. Providing employees with flexibility regarding hours and location means they can fit their work around other responsibilities and are less likely to be distracted during working hours, according to management and staff alike. This is validated by wider research in Jordan which found that 95

percent of organizations that have introduced flexible working practices consider that it has positively affected the workplace, with 70 percent of those reporting a positive impact on productivity of both male and female employees (World Bank, 2020). AKS's training initiatives designed to improve the productivity of working parents have also been effective. The "Parents to be" training, for example, was introduced specifically to help tackle fatigue and low productivity among new parents, and both management and staff who participated in the training attest that productivity has since improved. "After this training, I felt more organized and better able to achieve at work, while also dealing with my son better", said one female participant.

is an essential contributor to the high proportion of women in the workforce as compared to other Jordanian companies, especially those in the same sector. Such gender diversity in turn contributes to productivity as evidenced by international research which demonstrates that greater organizational gender diversity enables better decision-making and greater team cohesion, which contributes to enhanced productivity (HBR, 2019). This is borne out at AKS: according to Nadia Shahin, "There's no doubt that the diversity here is good for productivity, and we would not have achieved this diversity without establishing a family-friendly working model".

**"Management offered flexibility to employees throughout the pandemic and was very understanding – as a result, we feel even greater responsibility to do a good job."**

Female employee



AKS's consideration of employees' commitments outside work further contributes to high levels of productivity by helping to create a culture in which staff feel valued and respected, as evidenced by high levels of overall employee satisfaction (86 percent) reported in the company's most recent employee engagement survey. IT Department Manager Raed Malas has noticed a significant improvement in team dynamics and productivity since his department instituted a KPI-based performance management system in 2019: "There's a much better atmosphere now. Staff are more willing to give their best when they feel trusted". This view was shared by other employees in focus group discussions. International research shows that high levels of employee satisfaction can drive higher productivity: a study in the UK found that satisfied employees are up to 20 percent more productive than those dissatisfied with their job (SMF, 2015), while US research observed 18 percent lower productivity in organizations with low employee engagement scores than those with highly engaged employees (Forbes, 2017).

Finally, AKS's experience shows that family-friendly working arrangements help to reduce absenteeism, which can have a negative impact on productivity for many organizations. Globally, unmet childcare needs are one of the most common reasons for unplanned absenteeism: in the US for example, it is estimated that employee absences stemming from childcare crises cost businesses US \$3 billion per year (Forbes, 2017b). But at AKS, emergency childcare needs are not thought to be a significant contributor to unplanned absences, which HR attributes directly to the company's provision of additional leave days and discounted childcare fees to help employees to manage care responsibilities.

**"The workload is intense, but because we are afforded tremendous flexibility, we don't mind."**

Male employee

Moreover, the company's approach to family-friendly working

## Attracting high-quality candidates through a strong employee value proposition

Due to the demands of its business, AKS expects all employees to have good English and basic ICT skills. According to department managers, backed by wider research (EF EPI, 2020; World Bank & IBRD, 2020), these skills are sometimes in short supply, meaning that it is a business imperative to draw from the widest possible talent pool, by hiring women as well as men (especially as women make up the majority of Jordan's university graduates) (UNESCO, 2020). Given the social expectations women face, and the national policy context, AKS's management understands that the company's ability to hire women is dependent on its proactive support for family-friendly work.

Staff across the organization consider AKS to be an "employer of choice" in the sector. In focus group discussions, female employees were unanimous that the company's reputation was a major factor in their job applications, while male employees attributed their interest in AKS to its "diversity" and the fact that it is "known to care for its employees". These views are reflective of a wider

global trend in the sector: in a global study conducted by PWC, 15 percent of respondents cited "employer values" as the top reason for taking a job at a logistics company. The study also found that transportation and logistics companies offering remote working have a major advantage in recruitment (PWC, 2012).

AKS's management is proud of the company's reputation among potential employees, but knows the company must keep evolving, especially to attract younger employees, who have higher expectations of employers than previous generations. In this context, management and HR believe that the company's longstanding commitment to family-friendly working practices, including its responsiveness to individual needs, is a business priority. It also demonstrates the importance of ensuring that flexibility is available to all – women and men, as well as parents and non-parents. "Millennials are happy to move around between different jobs and sectors, and are often motivated by salary, but work-life balance is also really important to this generation, and that is definitely something that sets AKS apart", says Ashraf Aljafari, Integrated Shipping Manager.



## LESSONS LEARNED

Based on its experience, AKS's management is certain that gender diversity is good for business, and that offering family-friendly working arrangements is critical to achieving this. As a small company within a larger corporate group, AKS's experience holds lessons for both smaller and larger companies in Jordan:

- There is no "magical formula". Companies must devise the solutions that make most sense for their business and workforce – based on the feedback and engagement of employees, especially women. It is also important to recognize that there may be a spectrum of needs and priorities within the company itself – for example, the expectations and needs of workforces in different locations may vary considerably.

- Start small and see what works – and listen to employees. When AKS started introducing family-friendly working practices, it was not easy to find examples from other companies in the market. Instead, the company attributes the success of its family-friendly policies and initiatives to the fact that they were introduced gradually, and developed over time, taking feedback and requests from employees into account.
- Examine your options. AKS's management was initially determined to establish an on-site kindergarten for the children of its employees, but after careful research and consideration, decided that it would not be feasible to do so, based on an analysis of the number of employees at the company with children under school age. Instead, the company made arrangements with local kindergartens to offer discounted fees to AKS employees.
- Effective communication – and monitoring – are critical to ensure buy-in. AKS has faced resistance to its family-friendly working policies from both managers – mainly concerned about a reduction in productivity – and staff who perceive that their colleagues are benefitting from special treatment. According to HR, the latter concern has been mitigated by formalizing policies, monitoring the impact of their implementation, and improving internal communication to ensure all staff – male and female parents and non-parents alike – know how they can benefit personally. In response to opposition from managers, highlighting specific success stories has helped to demonstrate that family-friendly working arrangements are good for business.
- Family-friendly working does not have to be costly. Some measures to support family-friendly working – such as flexible and remote working policies – can be implemented with minimal upfront cost to the company. Senior and departmental managers at AKS all agree that the cost of any measures to enable family-friendly working is outweighed by the significant financial gains from related improvements in staff retention and productivity.
- Realize that change is inevitable, and there are benefits in being an early adopter. By introducing measures to support family-friendly working ahead of both government regulations and the widespread shift to remote working in response to COVID-19, AKS has maintained its position as a leading and socially responsible employer, including to younger candidates, proved resilient in the face of unpredictable change, and minimized the risk of costs related to non-compliance with changing legislation.

## CONCLUSION

AKS's experience shows that supporting family-friendly working is a prerequisite for recruiting and retaining female employees – with wide-ranging positive implications for women and their families as well as businesses and the economy more broadly. Proactive support for family-friendly working arrangements does not have to be cost-intensive and is most effective when tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the workforce and company, and includes all employees. Changes to working practices brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have helped to change mindsets, presenting an opportunity for forward-thinking businesses to institute family-friendly working on a permanent basis.



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