

Distinctiveness

An Interview with Rima Assi, Senior Partner and Managing Partner, Abu Dhabi, McKinsey & Company

EDITORS' NOTE Rima Assi is the global coleader of McKinsey's work within the social and public sector, as well as healthcare. She also leads the Abu Dhabi office in the UAE. Assi advises leaders, policymakers, and governments on wide-scale transformations with specific focus on fiscal management and investment programs, enabling sustainable economic growth. An active advocate of gender diversity, Assi has led McKinsey's diversity and inclusion efforts in the Middle East for the past ten years. She has published frequently on women's empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa and is a frequent participant in and speaker at diversity awareness events. Assi is also a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum and was recognized by Forbes in the top 50 most powerful businesswomen in the Middle East in 2022 and 2023. Prior to joining McKinsey, she was a banker working in the risk control department of a multinational investment bank and financial services company in France. She is fluent in Arabic, English, and French and has an MA degree in management from Hautes Études Commerciales.



Rima Assi

FIRM BRIEF McKinsey & Company ([mckinsey.com](https://www.mckinsey.com)) is a global management consulting firm committed to helping organizations accelerate sustainable and inclusive growth. It works with clients across the private, public, and social sectors to solve complex problems and create positive change for all its stakeholders. The firm combines bold strategies and transformative technologies to help organizations innovate more sustainably, achieve lasting gains in performance, and build workforces that will thrive for this generation and the next.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I think of my career as a journey with many phases and different moments in time with different objectives. At first, it was all about soaking up as much as I possibly could – the more I learned, the more I realized there was to learn. That's what people who join McKinsey expect to do – being exposed to a wide variety of industries and the hardest problems CEOs face. I found that this was critical to building a strong foundation and helped me appreciate the various challenges that different sectors and industries face.

I've been with McKinsey for 19 years now, and what a ride it has been. I had some experience in the banking sector and started out doing work with our financial institutions practice to help banks grow and serve their customers better. As I became more familiar with the region's corporate landscape, it became clear to me that governments and the public sector play a critical role. The Middle East is on a transformation journey that is unparalleled. And the way it is transforming is visible to all of us in our lifetime. It inspired me to want to become part of that journey.

One particular event that stands out is the financial crisis of 2008, where we witnessed the collapse of parts of the financial sector, and the role governments had to play to stabilize and reform the sector. I was in the thick of it, and it was also the time when I realized the impact I could leave by working with the public sector. It's a privilege to be given the opportunity to be part of that story. Therefore, much of my work is anchored around the expertise I have built up around financial stewardship, investments, and transforming organizations. But getting the technicalities right alone is not enough for a successful transformation. For transformations to stick, everything has to come together. You can't just ask what are the right investments and what is the right financial bet, but also need to consider the people and their ability to

really deliver on that transformation. It's why, at this stage of my career, I'm spending more and more time on transformations, people, and how to bring them along in the change journey.

In my global role, I've also been privileged enough to be exporting some of the innovations to other parts of the world. We've historically, in the past in this region, looked outside to learn the best practices from others. We're always keen and curious, and that's great. But more and more, we're not just looking at others, but we're exporting insights and capabilities because the speed at which the region is changing – the bets, the risk, and the ambition – is hard to find elsewhere in the world. Some of the innovations that are happening within the public institutions are unparalleled.

And I would be remiss not to mention AI, of course. The potential for the region, and in particular countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is enormous. Generative AI use cases could generate between \$21 and \$35 billion a year, on top of the \$150 billion other AI technologies could deliver. To put that into perspective, gen AI could be worth 1.7 to 2.8 percent of annual non-oil GDP in the GCC economies today.

As you can see, the journey of a McKinsey consultant is varied, and few of our days resemble the previous one.

Will you highlight your role and areas of focus?

I am a global coleader of McKinsey's social, healthcare, and public entities practice. I

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am also the managing partner of our Abu Dhabi office. Over the last decade or so, my focus has shifted to be more people-centric, with the primary focus of my work being to develop and grow my people, my clients, and make a difference in society at large. I’m particularly proud of some of our social empowerment programs in the Middle East. Two in particular – Qiyada and Forward – have made a tangible impact on our communities in the Middle East.

Our Qiyada Emerging Leaders program is a yearlong program aimed at empowering young leaders in the United Arab Emirates to achieve their full leadership potential through forums, one-on-one coaching, and assessments. Forward is a free online program available in more than 100 countries aimed at equipping individuals at different stages of their working life with practical skills to succeed in the future of work. I’m proud to say that these programs have reached more than 560,000 learners combined. We’re also seeing real impact – 75 percent of Forward learners experienced career growth within two months of completing the program.

In addition, over the last several years, I have spent a significant amount of time working with governments and public institutions, primarily on financial stewardship and government transformation projects. This work has been important to me as I am committed to making a difference in my region through my work in the public sector.

On reflection, my role is one that has changed significantly over the years, and it is one that requires me to constantly adapt to new and different situations.

How do you describe McKinsey’s culture and values?

I have learned a lot in my time at McKinsey, much of which reflects the firm’s deep-seated culture of learning, apprenticeship, and the value of working across sectors and industries. One of the most important lessons is that success requires continuous learning and innovation. This means understanding the value drivers in each industry, as well as keeping up with best practices in various sectors, functions, and regions. I have also learned that diversity and inclusion are critical to the success of a

business. McKinsey has made significant progress in terms of gender balance and is committed to continuing to improve. While I am proud of this progress, I know we can do more. In particular, I appreciate McKinsey’s efforts to create an environment where everyone can thrive. This includes the role mentorship plays in the firm. I have been fortunate to have a number of mentors who have helped me develop my career, and I try to do the same for others.

What have been the keys to McKinsey’s industry leadership?

If I were to sum it up in one word: distinctiveness – in everything that we do. Clients come to us with their hardest problems. Therefore, it’s very important to know in each industry what the value drivers are. We identify those sharply and quickly, and are really distinctive at those in order to come up with the best solutions for our clients. Though, in all of these, we remind ourselves to have the openness and awareness to learn and re-learn because the world is continuously changing.

How critical is innovation for McKinsey and where is innovation taking place in the firm?

Innovation is paramount for any firm, and even more so for a consulting firm. We’ve been around for nearly 100 years now, and plan to be the leading consulting firm for 100 more. We’re continuously learning how innovation is affecting our clients and how they can benefit from latest developments, whether that is in tech or elsewhere. More importantly, how do we innovate in delivering our consulting services? One example that I’m particularly proud of is how we’ve launched Lilli, our very own generative AI solution for McKinsey colleagues providing a streamlined access and synthesis of our internal insights. Lilli is trained on McKinsey’s intellectual property spanning more than 100,000 documents, among other sources like expert interviews. Our colleagues can now simply type in a prompt and scan our entire landscape of knowledge, identify relevant pieces of content, and synthesize initial insights. Workstreams that used to take days and weeks are shortened significantly. Technology was the easy part of building an AI tool. Building Lilli took a team

of over 70 experts, including our colleagues from legal, cyber security, risk management, and talent development, to ensure our gen AI solution was thought through comprehensively and would work throughout our 45,000-strong firm. In a way, this was very much how we would approach problems for our clients.

We’re always chasing that next breakthrough that could transform how we serve our clients. And we believe this is the beginning of the journey, not the end of it. We’re continuing to relook and review how AI is changing the professional services industry, and our clients’ industries, and we want to play a leading role in that.

Also a fun fact – Lilli is named after a former colleague, Lillian Dombrowski, the first professional woman hired by McKinsey in 1945, who went on to become the controller and corporate secretary for the firm. She’s an inspiration to us all and I’m proud to see that’s now honored in our colleagues’ lives every day.

How important is it for McKinsey to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?

Over the years, we’ve made significant progress in achieving a more balanced gender representation. When I joined the firm, I remember there being only three women in a 60-70 person office. Today, our recruitment ratio is almost 50-50, a testament to the strides we’ve made. I’ve been an advocate of environments that are both diverse and inclusive. Diversity cuts across so many dimensions. The most natural one that people think about is gender, but there is also value in diversity in nationalities, cultures, technical expertise, and backgrounds. To serve our clients in the most effective way possible, you need to have a data scientist working hand-in-glove with somebody who’s a coach to actually drive people to change, and all these individuals that think and speak differently.

At the core of it, we want to create an environment where everyone can thrive. So, it’s extremely important we are on this journey. We have made good progress on the recruiting front where our classes are now gender balanced.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning the careers?

It’s important for any young person to have a network of support made up of people you respect professionally. I would advise everyone, especially young women, to always seek mentors. Surround yourselves with mentors, both men and women, because they actually will add to your development and apprenticeship. They will help you, they will boost your confidence, they will balance and moderate your views, and they will be able to offer you different points of views whenever you’re faced with a tough situation. Besides mentors, focus too on building your networks of peers and friends. It’s always helpful to also have peers that aren’t necessarily your mentors, and friends who have your best interests at heart to encourage you on in the difficult times. You will find the diversity of thought from these groups useful as you navigate the early stages of your career. I know I’ve certainly benefited from them. ●