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“Extreme Temperatures”¹



Brian R Heath *MBA Macq*

¹ <http://www.mgsm.edu.au>

Alumni Profile: Brian Heath - Extreme Temperatures

Brian Heath graduated with an MBA in 2003 with a focus on course work and extensive analysis of real businesses both strategically and operationally.

Brian is currently working in Baghdad, Iraq as the Director, Business Program Management for Orascom Telecom, Iraqna. His role focuses on the programs' office and culture and uses a Total Quality Management framework to guide process, reporting, quality, and knowledge.

Brian recently took the time to respond to MGSM Magazine about his current role, experiences and perspectives.

MGSM Magazine (MM): Why does your email signature tag-line read "Any day above ground is a good day"?

Brian Heath (BH): There is a lot of black / gallows humour here (which I'll go into further down) both from expats and locals.

It's from the James Reyne (ex Australian Crawl) song. It's a very dangerous place here. I thought it was very apt for the situation here where death and mindless misguided violence is so prevalent and random. Our local staff could get killed at any-time and we could get unlucky and get hit by a mortar or stray bullet (I know of 2 people injured in our street by stray bullets).

MM: What is the reality on the ground from your perspective?

BH: After Iraqna launched nearly 3 years ago expat staff actually went to restaurants and drove around in normal cars with a few basic precautions. The situation has deteriorated significantly in the last 16 months from a relatively safe Baghdad to a city infiltrated with insurgents, criminals, kidnappers, militias and religious death squads with violence and bombings going unchecked and often with involvement or sanction of rouge elements in the police, Iraqi Security Forces or Ministry of Interior. Expats can't go anywhere without an armoured car and security convoy now. There isn't separation between church and state here which doesn't help.

Baghdad is being increasingly divided into Sunnis west of the Tigris and Shi'ites to the East.

Iraqna and the two other GSM telco's are really the only really successful private re-construction ventures and provide significant revenues to the government. Billions of dollars of US aid dollars have amounted to very little to show for it from an infrastructure perspective. In Baghdad there is less power, water, security or hope than before the invasion.

Corruption is rife at all levels and this can make conducting business frustrating to say the least.

MM: Interested in your perspectives about work, management and culture in Iraq...

BH: Culturally I think coming from the Western world to the Arab culture must have to be the hardest of any cultural assignment as things are just so different in terms of business and social practices. We are just poles apart (work ethic, accountability, output) and because of the situation we don't live a normal existence. But having said that once you sit down and talk to various people - (it's a bit of a league of nations here at Iraqna: Egyptians, Lebanese, Greek, Iraqis, Poms, Yanks, Romanians, Kenyans, Pakistani, Malawians, Poles, I'm the only Australian, some Arab Christians & other Muslims of various degrees) especially the locals - you get a different insight into things than you may have been conditioned too by the media or otherwise. Some staff wear hijabs, some only at religious times (Ramadan), some only because they are in Iraq, some Christians so they don't get hassled.

The biggest cultural issue for me is my Australian Queensland accent - most locals really struggle with it - takes my team about 3 months to understand me properly. English is the official language. You pick up quite a bit of Arabic by default and you can understand quite a lot - especially as many GSM words don't translate.

"Deer Balek" means be careful, I understand, quite a useful one. "Yani" meaningis another good one.

Inshallah - God Willing can be frustrating, if you assume it like, manana in Mexico, which means never, instead of ...yes with luck it will go well and according to plan by the grace of God.

Most Iraqis I have met have the same hopes, dreams and fears as us - they are just in the middle of an awful mess.

My staff have done some really wonderful things for me, getting a Xmas tree when a few of us spent Xmas here last year, putting on lunches, buying presents and souvenirs.

MM: Why is it like no other place to conduct business?

BH: First of all you just have to get used to all the weaponry around, after a while you don't worry about it. Instead of stowing your briefcase and umbrella when you get to work, you are stowing your body armour. Can you imagine sitting in an executive meeting and there are attendees with weapons (security manager). Arguments don't tend to get too heated. You are a lot more attuned to sounds (shooting, bombs) after a while. You can tell what sort, how close. It's always good for the new arrivals to hear or feel their first bomb, though you know someone has probably been killed or injured. They get a little less jumpy after that.



Brian Heath (right): The monument in the background is the famous parade ground of Saddam's in the Green Zone. It's also a war memorial from the Iraq/Iran war.

From a business perspective there is a lot more work to do. As an expat you need to guide the local staff and mentor them. They are used to a command and control regime. They are intelligent and really eager to learn but just haven't had proper commercial exposure to private enterprise let alone a GSM telco and they have the added pressure of the situation here. Many of my staff don't often have power or water at night, so they can't catch up on reading etc.

A lot of the issues we discuss just don't apply anywhere else because of the situation here, i.e. security issues, corruption. But, unlike corruption elsewhere, here everyone has a gun, you don't know who you can trust - especially the politicians who change every time there has been an interim or proper election and then they put all their mates into jobs and they can make life difficult for us.

Sometimes we have to cut our losses on things and just flag it or evacuate buildings from certain areas and basically write off the investment.

The government goes out of its way to fleece expats and the company of money for bogus "blood tests" we have to have each time we leave the country, for entry and exit permits, for visas...you name it, if there's a way to generate some money, (bribe) they'll try it.

There is no rule of law here currently.

Everyone is doing their best here in a very difficult situation with an understaffed outfit (as hard to recruit expats) and generally, surprisingly, tempers hardly flare at all. Overall, we all get along reasonably well, although we do get frustrated with each other at times.

Iraq runs on rumours and at work it's the same; it's unbelievable some of the rumours that get around.

MM: Why is it truly unique?

BH: It starts from the flight in (after you've been to Cairo to get a visa, you come in via Jordan) and they do a spiral descent from directly above BIAP (Baghdad International Airport) in a commercial airliner - that's an eye opener and you can see the military traffic below you. That first trip down the airport road and suburbs was a bit nerve wracking - although it's not as dangerous as it used to be, it is still dangerous nevertheless.

I don't think there'd be too many places where a 500 million dollar cellphone company is running their business out of residential villas and embassies that have been converted to offices, with Blackhawk and Apache attack helicopters regularly flying over at very low altitudes, (we are on flight path from green zone to airport; we also get

the odd F16/F18 fighter/s when they are doing raids) where we have car bombs and IED's being exploded regularly sometimes between 200-500 metres away in the adjacent streets and the shock waves rattling the windows (before I came to Iraq & they barricaded the streets, insurgents blew up a TV station and a few embassies and some of our offices were damaged), where there is fairly regular gunfire in the vicinity (one villa I was in got hit a few times by stray bullets), where the power goes off about every 2 hours (we have our own generators), where you have a personal bodyguard go everywhere with you.

The day I arrived I was meeting the CEO and insurgents attacked the Emirates Embassy about half a mile away. Two Apaches were pounding a house with 50 calibre. The CEO got a phone call and the US were asking us to evacuate our nearby shop so they could blow the house up with rockets. Half an hour later they did. The CEO said it took a bit to organise that welcome for me.

I remember sitting on my balcony playing "The Times Are a Changing" on my guitar on election day as local Iraqi walked up our street to vote. That was a unique moment.

There are some other good stories but I just can't tell them while I'm still working in Iraq or until the situation improves.

The British Embassy Bar is called "Incoming".

MM: Why is it challenging?

BH: When you get SMS death threats (even if in Arabic – some of the insurgents aren't the brightest).

When some of our ex-security employees are behind threats and attacks.

When our towers are being blown up or our guards threatened and our gear and fuel stolen. This is no place to be a hero. If you're lucky enough to get a 15 minute warning not to be somewhere, you don't be there! We put em up, they knock em down, sometimes right after we put it up again.

It's a huge challenge when you have to wonder whether your staff will come to work alive every day; some of mine have had a few close calls; other depts have had staff or relatives killed.



BPM Team's Academic Profile (as at 31/08/06 - Brian Heath sitting): Vet/Sculptor, an Anaesthetist, Chemical Engineer, Civil Engineer, Telecommunications Engineer, couple of English Language Degree graduates, couple of IT degree graduates, Astronomer/Physicist. Iraqna only employs locals with degrees.

When your staff come crying to you that their spouse is on the phone saying the "MOI" is raiding their work place and taking people away (most people taken by "MOI" are never seen alive again) and can you help.

Going over to the ANZAC ceremony at the Aussie Embassy a few days after Jake Kovco was killed.

When your colleagues get kidnapped and are still missing.

There are curfews at short notice if an incident happens: we had one emergency evacuation in the middle of the night, slept at Baghdad Airport departure lounge and flew out for 9 days, and have made a few dashes to the safe room.

That many of our staff have had to flee the country because of threats or their friends have been killed. They often can't go to the morgue or even the cemetery because it's too dangerous. When rumours circulate that insurgents will kill any woman seen wearing sunglasses or jeans or any man wearing shorts.

We have no life and we can't really go anywhere (hairdresser or doctor comes to us), though a few of us get over to the green zone occasionally to the embassy for a beer or our big treat, Burger King from the PX. That's the standing protocol, if you manage to get to a US PX you bring back burgers, popcorn or any other kind of junk food we can't usually get for the boys. We can get DVD's and beer (Fosters surprisingly is cheapest) but it's getting harder, they have blown up the DVD shop and both the local beer "shops".

When I saw my first body at close range I was telling my team and the first thing they said was "Was it whole or in pieces" - they were so acclimatised to seeing bodies.

I'm fairly laid back and easy going but I have gotten a lot more stressed out than I thought I would; a combination of frustration getting things done, stress of the situation, local bugs and tummy upsets and cultural differences.

MM: How does your current role contribute to "...providing state of the art mobile technology in a region that is in need for such vital services. And helping "...Iraqi people in these difficult times, so that they could move on to a new era of economic development and prosperity." ²

BH: I'm trying to empower staff and help them understand and be self-directed, deliver as a team and department as delegation and accountability aren't the greatest here. Improve project planning and execution, improve processes, quality and knowledge by linking this all together as the big picture isn't used a lot here either.

When you're boss says he's not a fan of strategic planning you know it's going to be an uphill battle.

Iraqna effectively provides hope and a lifeline to people in Iraq. Because of the lack of fixed line communication, cellphones are the only means of communication. With curfew in effect from 9pm to dawn (and sometimes earlier) this is how people have a social life, date and meet potential partners. This is a big problem here. Because of the situation a whole generation of young people are missing the opportunity to meet a partner, check where their loved ones are, advise loved ones they are staying over because roads are closed or there's a security lock down, call emergency services, report suspicious activity.

Unfortunately the insurgents also use them to plan attacks and they also wire up cellphones with our SIMS to detonate IED's and car bombs. We have been threatened for not putting up towers and for putting towers up.

"The situation here is tearing the country apart along ethnic divides and with many intermarried ethnic divisions here this is destroying traditional Iraqi life, all the Oil wealth that is here currently does not matter, anyone who can get out of the country is gone or leaving especially the much needed intellectual talent.. this will take a generation to recover"

The situation as portrayed on CNN, FOX or BBC is often made to look worse than it is or doesn't show the relativity in context.

Anything you do here that contributes or helps in some small way does make a huge difference. And it's about making a difference and having probably the business and personal challenge of a lifetime - the reasons that many of us expats are here, not just because of the money.

We recently held a strategic workshop to do the vision, mission and values. This was interesting as we had to tailor it to Iraq and the future we think might happen.

Make a game / life plan and stick to it as much as possible in terms of the goal. I decided about 5 years ago, before I did my MBA, to try and get a full-time expat role in any location. I had several near misses for various reasons and went to Mexico and volunteered and worked pro-bono just to show I would go anywhere and try anything – this helped me eventually to get the job in Iraq. But I also took matters into my own hands as recruiters weren't getting me into the right places or interviews in a timeframe I needed. So, I got on a plane from the UK (when I was nearly broke) and lobbed up at Orascom HQ in Cairo and said, "Here I am" - did a personal interview, not a phone interview, and it got me the job. My MBA was part of it as well.

MM: Specifically, how has your MGSM MBA in 2003 influenced your life professionally and personally?

BH: I think the greatest impact has been to my self-esteem. I never had a degree, having left school at 15. I felt proud of my achievement and didn't feel I had to prove anything to anybody ever again, MBA MGSM said that.

It's given me the confidence to do or start planning to do some things (business and personal) that I never would have thought about doing before.

I owe a lot of this to my peers and the lecturers on my course. I think you realise once you've finished what you actually got out of it. Sometimes I wish I had more time to contribute more - as the more you put in the more you get out; that's definitely true.

² *From the media release: "Launch of Iraqna in the Southern Region of Iraq" 10/11/2004