

Global knowledge

Shams Rahman's many experiences makes him the 'real McCoy' when it comes to global supply chain people. **David Doherty** writes

Educator and researcher Shams Rahman is no stranger to the significant impact of globalisation on the way business is conducted. The Professor of Supply Chain has an unusual history that has taken him on an international journey culminating in his role as Head of Logistics and Supply Chain at RMIT University in Melbourne.

Born in Bangladesh, Rahman won a scholarship at age 18 to study in the previous Soviet Union. Arriving in Belarus, Minsk, he lived on campus for the next six years to gain a degree in automobile engineering.

"It was a fascinating, challenging and happy time with people from over 100 countries it proved to be a great learning experience in embracing cultural diversity," Rahman says.

Although students learned the Russian language over a six-month semester, the campus language was English. Life generally was non-threatening and Rahman took opportunities to travel in east and west Europe.

Following a brief return to his home country, at 24-years-old Rahman again received a government scholarship to take a Masters Degree in industrial engineering at the International Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. A stint as a Research Fellow ensued before once more returning to Bangladesh.

As a 26-year-old, he commenced teaching, specialising in operations research, management, quality management, and supply chain. Marriage and fatherhood suggested the young Rahman's wanderlust may be at an end.

His wife however had other plans. She took up an opportunity to pursue a PhD at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Rahman dutifully also decided to pursue a PhD in the UK at the University of Exeter. Long weekend trips

from Exeter to Birmingham ensured the family stayed intact.

The Rahmans eventually returned to Bangladesh only to find that several of their contemporaries had migrated to Australia. So without much ado, they headed off to our great country.

Rahman took a teaching post in the Graduate School of Management at the University of Western Australia, and six years later moved to head up the new logistics program at the University of Sydney.

"If you don't know where you are going, you might not get there." — Yogi Berra

Rahman is frequently called upon to make presentations for professional bodies and senior executives on issues such as reverse logistics, the environment, cold logistics, six-sigma and quality management and theory of constraints. He has published widely and sits on the editorial boards for 12 international logistics and supply chain journals.

He also proudly tells me of his recent appointment as a visiting scholar at a prestigious university.

Now a professor at RMIT, Rahman's educational and experiential journey gives him an undisputed right to claim he has an 'international' experience.

Given his vast experience and knowledge, I am interested to know what he sees as the critical future issues and/or challenges for supply chain management.

Rahman says: "Skills development and relevant education are the keys to meeting the demands of industry and the aspirations of practitioners. Functional elements are generally covered adequately but strategic supply chain issues often do not get on the agenda. After all supply chain is above all a strategic way of doing business."

Rahman believes there is real need to improve course offerings as well as finding ways to make the offerings more attractive to potential participants.

"People are the essential ingredient in logistics and supply chains," he says. "There are great opportunities to build rewarding careers but we are still struggling to attract high caliber candidates. Talent management, partnering and teamwork issues, leadership, strategic inventory management and global orientation are all important."

Rahman remains passionate about the potential for supply chain management, suggesting performance has improved markedly in Australia over the past 20 years. However he cautions there is still opportunity for further development.

"It is important for practitioners to utilise all they have learned, such as techniques, tools and experience to manage effectively," he says.

In regard to universities Rahman argues they are, to a significant extent, still working in silos.

"In future they must build legitimate multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning," he says.

As to the next generation of students and practitioners, he is adamant about the fundamental importance of nurturing the ability to 'see the big picture' of business as well as eliminating the prevalent attitude of being constrained by the currently available tools and techniques. □

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