

Dear Emirates Woman of the Year Award Committee,

It is an honour and with great pleasure I would like to nominate my mother-in-law Mrs. Asma Bajawa for consideration for the Emirates Woman of the Year Achiever Award which is in recognition of her outstanding leadership, and her personal and professional achievements throughout her 30 year career and personal life.

The reason I'm nominating my mother-in-law for this award is because I feel she embodies the standards expected from a winner of the prestigious Emirates Woman of the Year Achiever Award. What is an Achiever? The simple dictionary definition says an achiever, [uh-cheev- er], is "someone who is successful because they are determined and work hard." This modest statement couldn't describe Asma Bajawa better.

Many women have several roles: wife, mother, daughter, colleague, business owner. Asma is all of these however, Asma has fulfilled each of these roles under some exceptional, unforeseen circumstances which is what I believe stands her apart and why I would like to nominate her for Woman of the Year Achiever award.

The challenge begun over twenty years ago when my father-in-law suffered a back injury which resulted in major surgery. Unfortunately the surgery was mishandled and sadly this left him unable to work and in need of a high degree of care. At the young age of 30 and with 2 young children, Asma was devastated by this life changing situation. However Asma, who is a true fighter, decided that she would not let this tragedy beat her and let this affect the rest of her life and the lives of her 2 children Mohsin and Safinaz. She was not prepared to become a victim of the situation and decided to take control of her own destiny and her future beyond anyone's expectations. Her motivation was not only to provide for her 2 children and care for her husband but to remain focused on her own career, personal development and the future of her children.

This was just the beginning of a remarkable journey of a woman who took control of her life when the 'chips were down'. Asma turned her life around to such an extent that she is now seen as an inspiration by everyone that knows her.

Asma comes from a very traditional, humble family background and she did what was expected of her from a very young age. She didn't go to university, but instead, married at the young age of 19 and was a mother at the age of 20. Focusing on providing for her family as her priority, Asma poured all her efforts and energy into her work. Her career started right at the bottom rung of the ladder with British Airways where she worked for 22 years. She started off in a call centre and then moved to Heathrow Airport as a check in agent where she sometimes worked 16 hours a day just to pay the bills.

Her commitment and hard work paid off, and she was successful in slowly growing in her career by moving through the ranks of supervision and then to junior management. Asma soon realised that there was a 'glass ceiling' above her and that if she wanted to excel, the first thing she would have to do, was go back to school and study so that she could compete for more senior roles. When her children were studying for their GCSE and A Levels, Asma decided to join them and embarked on a Diploma in Management Studies. Passing with flying colours, Asma then went on to achieve her Master's in Business Administration at the age of 40; all of this while she was caring for her husband and holding down a full time job.

On top of all this, Asma played an active role in her local community and worked voluntarily for a Community Welfare Association. Through this channel, Asma worked with many young people in the community helping them to deal with day to day youth and family related issues. Asma, became a well-respected member of her community and in her own time, she trained formally to become a Youth Counsellor offering support to youngsters in her society.

Somehow, Asma still managed to find time for her passion and love – fashion. Her creative side took charge and despite her work commitments and challenges of her personal life, Asma launched her own fashion label called "Safi's Collection" which she affectionately named after her daughter. She would travel by herself to her ancestral home – Pakistan – and have the clothes meticulously stitched as per her designs. Asma's entrepreneurial spirit helped her to create a demand for her clothing line which she marketed through fashion shows and exhibitions which she organized from beginning to end. From venue, invitations, lighting, music, and models, appealing to the large Pakistani-British community in London. The shows were such a success that audiences reached up to 600+ people at some events. All of this, starting as a hobby and developing into a fruitful and successful business.

During this time unfortunately, the family pressures became more challenging when her husband's health deteriorated further which meant she had to spend more time caring for him and give up her passion.

Fourteen years later in 2005 there was a ray of sunshine. Asma's husband made a slow but steady recovery and decided to move to Dubai where he was offered a job in real estate.

In support of her husband and his return to work, Asma left the UK and moved to the UAE with him, however she did this without having a job or any idea what she was going to do. Asma packed her bags with only her commitment, experience and desire to achieve.

Once Asma arrived in Dubai she wasted no time and secured the role of EVP HR at Du Telecommunications where she set up the entire HR structure for Du. After successfully contributing to the launch of the telecoms company she moved to Abu Dhabi Airports Company (ADAC) where she successfully led the HR aspect of the privatisation of the Department of Civil Aviation to Abu Dhabi Airports Company (ADAC).

Asma then set her eyes on the ultimate goal of starting her own business. The 2008 financial crisis was her window of opportunity and while everyone else saw things collapsing around them – Asma took her chances. Her unwavering courage pushed her to resign from her role as Principal consultant and EVP HR at ADAC, and she embarked upon setting up her own HR consultancy in the middle of a recession!

I'm proud to say that today Asma is the Founder and Managing Director of a very successful HR Consultancy based in Dubai serving the GCC and Wider Middle East region; building the business from scratch Asma has created a company that is now one of the leading HR Consultancies in the region.

Her vision and mission is to share her skills and experience to help organisations across the GCC tap into their Human Capital and more importantly develop HR skills in the region. This is something I know Asma is very passionate about and her passion and commitment has contributed to building PeopleFirst as a strong, reputable brand that is the envy of, and admired by, many of her competitors. PeopleFirst was started with her own capital investment and is now a financially sound business that is looking to grow and develop across the region and internationally. Until February this year, PeopleFirst did not employ anyone in a sales or marketing capacity nor does any of its consultant have sales targets to achieve. Their focus is purely to provide unparalleled levels of service and technical expertise. What is even more amazing, is that this has been achieved without any marketing or business development activities; PeopleFirst has built a strong portfolio of clients across every industry including government, semi government and the private sector. Starting from scratch PeopleFirst has now partnered with and successfully competed against some of the well-known global consultancies including the big four.

The client list on the PeopleFirst website is impressive and it's for these clients that Asma has successfully lead large transformation projects by supporting organisations to manage people and change through an integrated HR approach. Her expertise in raising the HR profile in numerous organisations is testimony to her understanding of how HR really adds value to a business.

To stay at the top of her game, Asma studied for the CIPD certification and became a Fellow which is highest level of achievement for the CIPD which stands for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. This is a globally recognised professional body which has been setting professional standards for more than 100 years and provides know-how to drive the HR and L&D professions forward.

As you can imagine Asma's drive, hard work and commitment will not stop there. Her dream of building a future for her children is being realised and in June 2016, her son Mohsin who now has 8 years' HR experience with various multinationals, will be joining Asma's business to support its growth and development across the region.

Asma has certainly worked hard and remained committed to her goals. Her academic achievements include:

- Fellow - Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (FCIPD) – age 51*
- MBA - Masters in Business Administration – age 40*
- DMS - Diploma in Management studies – age 38*

Her professional / career achievements include:

- *Founder and Managing Director PeopleFirst*
- *Executive Vice President HR – Abu Dhabi Aircraft Technologies*
- *Principal Consultant - Abu Dhabi Airports Company*
- *Executive Director Organisation Planning, HR and acting EVP – Du Telecoms*
- *Senior Manager People Development - British Airways*
- *Training Manager UK Airports - British Airways*

In addition to the academic and career achievements Asma has also managed to achieve the following accolades:

- *UK Diversity Champion for British Airways*
- *Voted as one of the top 100 Asian female role models by Gender Equality and Racial Inclusion Council - GERI*
- *Youth Counsellor*
- *Chairperson of local Social welfare association*
- *Chief sponsor of Punjab Education Foundation*
- *Personal financial sponsor for 3 children studying in an underdeveloped country*
- *Subject of a BBC TV programme for schools and colleges highlighting benefits of arranged marriages*
- *Mentor and coach*

Through her work and personal life Asma has gained the respect and admiration of everybody that knows her. She has established herself as a well-respected professional in the region albeit being a woman from an Asian background. She has built up strong professional relationships and networks with senior executive and Board members in the government and private sector across the region up to and including Ministerial level.

Asma strives to utilize every available platform in her efforts to drive the success of her business and achieve. She has presented at conferences and several public events across the region including SHRM which is an international HR body. In addition, she gives her time to coach others including her own team and people across her network.

Asma's dedication to providing for her family is one of her most valuable assets and a quality I greatly admire in her. What is astounding to me is how the efforts of one person, just one particular person, can support and provide for an immediate family consisting of a non-working husband, son and daughter and her work family of 15 employees at PeopleFirst.

Asma has already won the respect and gratitude from so many business associates, her team at PeopleFirst, previous employers and employees and even admiration from those outside the business environment whom she serves, her community, her friends and most of all her family. Because of these achievements I highly recommend Asma without reservation to be the recipient of the Emirates Woman of the Year Achiever Award
Sincerely,

Amal Akbar