

developer.***The Independent Magazine for Software Professionals**

The Global Development Series Installment 2: Saudi Arabia, with Turki Al-Aseeri

Interview by Daniel Read

Answers by Turki Al-Aseeri

Introduction

The **developer.*** Global Development Series is a collection of interviews with software developers living and working in different countries around the world. The purpose of the Global Development Series is to bring software professionals separated by political and geographic boundaries closer together in a spirit of knowledge sharing and professional solidarity. Just as scientists strive to share research across borders and athletes do their best to set aside geopolitical tensions to compete in the International Olympic Games, software professionals collaborate every day on code that knows no boundaries.

This interview with Turki Al-Aseeri is the second in the Global Development Series. Mr. Al-Aseeri works in the software development industry in Saudi Arabia, and was recently named a Microsoft Most Valuable Professional (MVP) in the .NET technologies. He is also the founder and editor in-chief of the Arabian Developer Network (Dev4Arabs.com). He will tell us more about himself and software development in Saudi Arabia in the interview, so keep reading.

The Interview

Daniel Read: Where exactly do you live and what is the native language?

Turki Al-Aseeri: I live in the Eastern province in Saudi Arabia in a city called Dhahran, which is 440 km from the capital Riyadh. Arabic is my mother tongue language.

DR: What is the software development industry like there? Are there a lot of jobs? A lot of schools where software development is taught?

TA: Unfortunately, we are still considered as software consumers, not producers. The majority of people (especially home users) are still beginners and barely know how to use their PCs. Most of them still use their PC's for entertainment. Few get real benefits from them.

From a business perspective, big corporations and the majority of mid-size business import and use software from abroad. They still don't trust the Saudi software development companies. Native programmers are used to support or maintain current systems, not to produce new ones from scratch.

However, I can tell that opportunities are good here for web-site or small database-oriented system developers.

DR: Are a lot of developers working on a freelance or contract basis then? Are people starting software companies to build and sell these smaller systems?

TA: It depends on the strategy of the company. Some build their own systems in-house, while others other contract out to independent developers or companies. Most small companies use independent developers on a contract basis.

DR: What technologies, platforms, and languages are popular in your country? Is there a lot of competition?

TA: I'm not sure about this but I believe more than 90% of people here use Microsoft technologies regularly. As for other brands, you may see Oracle in many companies as the engine for their database systems.

Regarding the competition, well, the quality of Arabic software is very bad. Unfortunately, the professional developers prefer to immigrate or look for a job abroad in countries like the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Europe.

DR: Are there people or companies in your country who specialize in selling components, tools, or programs especially targeted for people in your part of the world?

TA: There is but not that much. In fact, these kind of companies build such components because of contracts with other companies, and in those cases building components is not their primary business.

DR: Is there a lot of written material about software development in books, magazines, and web sites in your native language?

TA: Unfortunately, not that much. You may be surprised if I tell you that many Arabic developers prefer reading English books. This because we face a lot of problems with Arabic books because they are translated from English books. As an Arabic developer and reader, reading a translated book is a nightmare. The publishers translate them literally (even the jokes!) which isn't understandable.

What about Arabic authors? Why don't they do what they are supposed to do? Well, as an Arabic author, our biggest problem is: there isn't good support for us!

I did write two books, and I couldn't pay my bills with what I got in return!

DR: I think that's a universal problem for authors—not just in Saudi Arabia. Only the most successful books bring in real money. The best reason to write a book is because you can't help yourself. 😊What were the two books you wrote?

TA: So I'm not alone! Publishers should work on this issue and be better supportive. If they lost authors, who would write books?!

My first book was about Visual Basic 6. Arabic developers were bored the beginner-level books. They needed a real advanced book on VB6. They liked my book very much (according to their comments on Arabic sites and the emails sent to me). Then, I published it electronically and made it free for downloading. Tell you the truth, I felt very happy for helping them and introducing new techniques they hadn't dream of. It was my first experience and test of my writing abilities. I didn't anticipate any return.

My second experience was different. I wrote the first Arabic book on the .NET technology, but was disappointed with the publishers. I rejected all of their bad offers and published

the book myself. This was a mistake I'll never forget. I later made that an electronic book for free download also.

It may seem strange, and a bad decision, to give away my book,. but I believe that knowledge should be distributed for all who need it. Giving it away is better than letting it sit on my PC. And there's no money in either case anyway.

DR: Are English-language technical books readily available in bookstores? Are these the same editions that are for sale in the US, UK, etc?

TA: Yes, a lot of books are available, but they arrived here very late. Serious developers go to Amazon.com or other book selling sites and buy them directly. I'm not sure how commercial books are published here, but when I was in college (in which teaching was in English) all books were labeled "International Edition" on their cover pages.

DR: Are university programs in computer science and software engineering common?

TA: Education is an ongoing discussion here in Arab countries. After spending seven years in universities here what I can say that the educational materials (some of which come from the US) aren't bad, but the educational process is really stupid! I'm sure that Arabs who read this know what I mean.

DR: Has the Open Source movement had an impact in your country? Are a lot of people using Open Source tools?

TA: Yes. Many private companies and institutions use open source technologies here, but open source is not really an interest for me personally.

DR: How much of the population in your country has internet access?

TA: I'm not sure, but I guess something around 3 Million out of about 20 million people.

DR: Is it common for people to learn English in school?

TA: Yes. English is considered the second language here in Saudi Arabia. Street signs are printed in both Arabic and English. Everywhere you go you can find English texts and speakers. Most people speak English or are learning it. There are English courses in the public schools. But the issue of the poor education process comes up again.

DR: In your experience do Arabic developers typically use English or Arabic for variable names and comments?

TA: Most developers use English. I always developers not to use Arabic letters in code. No one wants to see something like this:

```
Dim الكائن As New فئة
Dim ص As Integer

If 23 = الكائن.خاصيته Then
    ص = الكائن.خاصيته / 2
End If

(الكائن.كائن_مخزون.طريقة (ص, 20))
```

DR: What programming languages and technologies do you personally use on a daily basis?

TA: I have been using Microsoft technologies for more than 15 years. Currently, I'm digging on Microsoft .NET.

DR: Is .NET becoming popular in Saudi Arabia? Are a lot of businesses using Java?

TA: Yes, but many developers are afraid of moving on and upgrading their abilities. Microsoft Arabia (the Microsoft official local agent here in Saudi Arabia) is moving forward this issue. Java is still preferred in many organizations, but many are upgrading their systems to .NET. I've never heard of any company switching their systems from .NET to Java.

DR: What kind of applications do you develop?

TA: Many kinds of them ranging from personal and home users to business-oriented applications.

DR: Do you work for a single company or work for a variety of clients?

TA: I work for a variety of clients, but it's not worth it. I'm really thinking of going abroad for better chances. Currently, I'm looking very seriously for job outside this country.

DR: Can you tell us about your Arabic-language "Dev For Arabs" web site?

TA: It was a try to build a huge community for Arabian developers around the globe. It's not doing too bad. We are doing our best. The problem we face is that we need more professional Arabic developers to contribute. But, as I mentioned before, these professionals prefer the first-class English-language sites.

DR: Thank you for your time, Turki. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

TA: Just to thank you, Dan, for this interview and for your **developer.*** site. Its contents are like diamonds from real experiences that no other sites offer. We all know how write code, but few (very few) know how to write software. You know what I mean!

Editor's note: We would like to thank Mr. Al-Aseeri for his time, and we are honored to feature him in the **developer.*** Global Development Series. To suggest a country you would like to read about, or if you'd like to volunteer or suggest someone to be interviewed, please write to dan@developerdotstar.com.

Resources

- Arabian Developer Network (Arabic language): www.dev4arabs.com
- Microsoft MVP Web Site: www.microsoft.com/communities/mvp/mvp.msp

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