

Synopsis of Interview

Mark Ridgway

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Worked at main campus for fifteen years before coming to Texas A&M Qatar. Came to Qatar as Lead Network Engineer. Currently, Senior Lead Network Engineer.

Arrived on Aug. 31 or Sep. 1, 2003. Stepped off the plane, thought "Toto, we ain't in Kansas anymore." Very hot, muggy, the airport was crazy. No parking lot in front, just dirt, the entrance was very small and had probably 500 or 600 people. Tim Chester had gotten stuck in traffic, so called the hotel to pick up at airport. [Mark] didn't know what to do: didn't have any Qatar money, no phone, no contact information. Two men came in, asked for Mr. Mark, grabbed his suitcase, and drove him away.

Next day, Tim Chester let him sleep til noon, came to with Chris Thompson, to pick up Mark for lunch. Said "I'm going to take you somewhere exotic", turned out to be lunch at Chile's. Then, went to work.

Had to build everything before classes started, for instance, all the staff and faculty going to the library to help put books on the shelves. Came over as temporary situation. Chris Thompson had come over to build the email server. Had advised that Qatar was exciting, asked Mark to come over for 3-6 months to help.

The whole concept of Education City is amazing. Interview on 60 minutes with Ed Bradley interviewing HH The Emir and Sheikha Mozah. Sheikha Mozah impressed [Mark] with her directness and honesty, about making changes. Wanted to be a part of it. Have changed, have realized that the world is bigger than Texas. Have learned to adapt. When forced to be in a different environment, must think differently, must present oneself, must communicate differently.

Work as evolved. Networking is a living work of art, must constantly evolve to meet needs. Have been able to create technical solutions in Qatar, that probably wouldn't ever have a chance to do elsewhere. The TAMUQ network is his baby, the next guy will have an easy time coming in if it's done well.

In early days, working 80 hours a week, now perhaps only 60 hours a week. Loves his work.

Difficulties

Learning how to get around in Qatar. One of first experiences was buying a VCR. Found the Mall on the Marhaba map. But map didn't show all the roundabouts that had been torn up. Ended up on Salwa Road. After an hour and a half, in Doha traffic, finally found the Mall. Cannot find any store selling electronics. Go back to Education City, takes another hour. Find out needed to go to City Center Mall. Took five and half hours to buy a VCR. A twenty minute errand (in the US). Got very frustrated. A typical experience to show a new expat how different things are in Doha. Must learn to adapt, plan ahead.

In the beginning, Qatar seems very exotic: different sights and smells. Then you realize the difficulty of the differentness. After the initial love affair, have to cope with the irritation. Then finally realize how funny it all is. Its where the term 'Doha Flexible' comes from. Just have to hit the point where you get past the bubble. So now its home. Now, say to family and friends, "Nice seeing y'all, but it's time to go home now."

The challenge of getting it all started

Had nothing to start with, meant had to acquire everything. Had no tools, no parts, no pieces. The first solid year, were going down to the souqs constantly to buy everything. Had to go look and find everything, no way to name or describe, had to poke through the jumble of the shops. John Gardner and Khalid [Farzat] went down one evening looking for light bulbs that didn't blow up. Were down in a very narrow alley, smelling the small cooking shop, big mix of stuff going on, Khalid was the bargainer – he was inside bargaining. Felt like an Indiana Jones movie, like had just stepped into the 1930's or 1940's.

Knowing how to get things accomplished, now have been in Qatar long enough to build a database of sources: businesses and people in the community, who can do a lot that used to be a struggle. Now know a company that has power strips, that delivers! Makes a huge difference in how business is done, don't have to go out and do everything.

Walt Magneson, Head of Telecommunications (in CS), needed a power adaptor. Wanted to take Mark's. Refused to give him, but offered to help him find one. Tried to find Computer Arabic over on Salwa Road, which was open at 4:30pm. Got there at 4:45, but place was closed. Were advised to 'go over there', went to another computer store, which doesn't have the part. Advised to go to another store. Did this about 3 or 4 times, it's been 2 hours or more. Mark was driving, Walt was on the phone. Frustration point was very high, finally figured out that Ramada roundabout, was now an intersection. Walt gets off the phone and says, "Take me to the airport." Spent 3.5 or 4 hours trying to find a place to buy a very ordinary computer part.

Putting in the infrastructure

Told to plan on around 500 people. Had to have everything to communicate, hold classes, administrate the campus. Politically, there were concerns in the region (in 2003). First year was the big build-out time, weekend of spring break (2004), moved to the LAS building, which was not completely finished. Depending on who you talked to it was between 1/3 to 7/8 finished. Had to build computer labs, had to connect to STM1, had to coordinate how everything connected. Lot of fun.

Very few people get to build something from scratch. Very seldom to build from nothing to a vision. Really have to think long term. What new technology will be coming out. Takes a lot of planning to incorporate. Made all mistakes on the LAS building (and maybe the Cornell building.)

Miss from the early day

The first group was pretty tight. Most had been on main campus, but didn't necessarily know each other. Were very close, experiencing all the new stuff together. Spent all lot of [work] time together, long hours. The closeness, the camaraderie, having the single vision. Wanted to see it succeed. Makes you focus on what is happening in order to make it all happen. Lot of people willing to do things outside the box to make it happen, attitude: "What needs to be done?" Used to have staff meetings around a single table – probably 12-20 people. Now it's 236 faculty and staff.

The barbeque

Had a barbeque for 450 of our closest friends. Same weekend as the Cornell building inauguration, same as the TAMUQ convocation. October 2004. Had to wear a suit and tie in 85 degree, nighttime weather. It was the weekend of the opera. The opera: Being from Texas, 'we're not very cultured... in opera things.' Got invited (told) to be there. In the middle of the opera, fifty minute break. The Emir and the Sheikha got in their car and split. Sit through the whole thing, get home about midnight. Lived

at Valley Rose, only three families in entire compound, the guards checked their license plate everytime they went in, went and changed, got together and tried to figure out what the whole opera was about.

The next day was the convocation, the barbeque was that night. Had three flags, Texas A&M flags, Qatar flag, wanted to put the flags outside. Lallah Howard came and said, "I need flagpoles for tomorrow." Where would you find a flagpole? Went to Carrefour, to try to find something. Found shower curtain rods. Greg [Klein?] and Mark thought "We don't have shower poles [at home]." As far as is known, three flagpoles are still holding up shower curtains over at Valley Rose.

The future

Hope the students are being affected, in that they are seeing us as people in a different light. Anyone can teach engineering, but the whole Aggie spirit, the whole Texas A&M culture is not all about the classroom. It's about bringing people together in a common goal. Hopes that's the connection that's kept with the students. Felt so proud of the students at graduation. Students (some of them) came in very quiet, very timid kids that took quite a chance on A&M. A&M was an unknown. To see the student grow and develop into young, confident engineers – it's quite touching.

The organization has matured and changed, too. It continues to be a wonderful experience, thought it would be different and fun, has grown to love it. The day it quits being fun, will move on.

Biggest accomplishment

The network stayed up. From a work standpoint, the network was built, and it works. No major outages, no major problems. Strive for 5 9s. 99.999% uptime is the goal, means only 26 minutes per year of downtime. Almost there – have reached 99.9%. Even students knew how important it was. Bashir Hassna used to ask [Mark] "How's your baby today?" Students have been pretty well behaved, pretty busy, don't have time. Block CMU-Q students from getting into the network.

Getting back to the barbeque

Found somebody to barbeque beef brisket. Found someone at the Diplomatic Club, but couldn't find barbeque sauce in Qatar. No barbeque sauce. Had 45 people coming from CS as the delegation for convocation. As they were getting on the plane, each were handed 2 bottles of barbeque sauce to carry, and when they got off in Qatar, someone collected the barbeque sauce from them.

They did a live feed over satellite to CS for the March, very long difficult day. Asked Lallah what he should do at the barbeque, was told to be the greeter – say "Howdy" to everyone. Some ambassador drove up, went over to shake hands, told the ambassador to go in and get something to eat. Lallah came out, to chastise for the greeting. If an ambassador drives up take them into introduce them to Jr. Holste. Just standing out saying "Howdy". Syrian ambassador drove up, with flags on the car, gets out, shakes hands, takes him into to introduce. Later, group of friends, Tim Chester, Dennis Busch, and Mark Bell laughing. "What's so funny?" You looked like the Marlboro Man shaking hands with the Syrian ambassador. Later, was nominated as "Unofficial ambassador to Syria."