

Arab News

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Knowledge Economy Enlightens Delegates

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JEDDAH — Presentations done, Day 2 of the first Arab Knowledge Economy conference saw delegates divided into interests groups and brainstorming ideas in various workshops. Highly focused groups, led by acknowledged experts, formulated, discussed and criticized options for the implementation of procedures to create an environment for the development of a knowledge economy.

Fundamental to the development of a knowledge economy was the topic of education. Notably, a session to “discover new ways of promoting and shaping innovation and entrepreneurship” produced some lively interaction between the attendees.

Richard Bendis, president and CEO of the US-based Bendis Investment Group, a global financial intermediary firm, is a successful entrepreneur, corporate executive, venture capitalist, investment banker and consultant in technology and health care industries. Bendis built the Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation (KTEC) into a globally recognized model for technology-based economic development.

“Without the development of vision,” he contended, “you cannot develop education. You have to set your benchmark at being the best in the field and not just at the best in the Middle East.”

During group discussions, Bendis argued that to develop an education system that would feed into the knowledge economy productively, educators should adopt models that have been proven to work effectively, be willing to take on new ideas and update syllabi to match the demands of the new style economy.

Bendis said that he had been pleasantly surprised at the progress that the Arabian Knowledge Economy Association (AKEA) had made. “One of the most impressive things is that they admitted that they did not know everything and went round the world to study and draw on the best practices,” he said. “Any change of economy or paradigm is going to take leadership and people who are willing to stick their neck out.”

He noted that Aramco and the vision of Abdullah Al-Subyani, president of AKEA, was going to be the major transformation piece that the Kingdom would need to meet its targets.

Delegates brainstormed to produce what they believed were essential ingredients for change. Ideas ranged from free-form think tanks where ideas, whether practical or contentious, could be freely discussed and evaluated to the teaching of thinking as a skill. The session quickly turned into a lively temporary think tank, where ideas — traditional and eccentric — were tabled and discussed by extremely well-informed attendees.

During the discussions, a query was raised as to why the conference was being held in English. A straw poll divided delegates evenly into categories of those who wanted the discussion to be in English and those who wanted it to be in Arabic. The question was settled when people were asked to raise their hands if they did not understand English — only one delegate raised her hand.

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Husein Zivali, operations evaluation officer at the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank, capitalized on the schism by suggesting that the learning of English should start early in schools as it is one of the three essential elements to operate in a global economy.

"English as a medium of communication, knowledge of IT and basic computing skills and programs, and the willingness to react to and adopt useful innovations are vital to survival," he said. "If this does not happen, you are socially disabled, much the same as not having a driving license in a country with no pub-

lic transport." To make the knowledge economy work, the government should, said many of the delegates, encourage public and private partnerships that can access government resources but function independently as a private business. Signs that this potential move could be realized lies in the government's establishment of a sixth fundamental platform — the knowledge economy — to five already established platforms for the Kingdom's development.

Commenting on that addition, Bendis said: "That acknowledgment within this government at this time is itself a major success for AKEA."

Al-Subyani said that AKEA's vision,

already published in the Eighth Development Plan (Article Eight) two years ago, was to transform the Kingdom into a knowledge-based society. "As a nonprofit organization we want to assist in achieving that goal by creating private sector initiatives that would support the government vision as visions can stay as only visions." He added that through awards to industry and continuous high profiling of the knowledge economy, the target was to change the thinking of the industry and educators.

Al-Subyani said that the conference was a success. "The message is out and we have achieved results on Day 1." The message, he thought, was not simply for

entrepreneurs to invest and develop the knowledge economy but that there be a healthy and innovative education system to underpin the whole structure.

"We need more learning than just books," he said. "We need to infuse international talent and practice into the region. We would like to build on what others have done; we are not starting from scratch. It is, however, the mother of all industries."

Delegates generally concluded that the government should be enablers and provide incentives and the environment to encourage the development of innovation in education and allow the private sector to take leadership in doing so.