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Securing a vision

Emirati businessman develops homegrown solutions to address cybersecurity shortfalls

By LOW SHI PING
in Abu Dhabi, UAE
For China Daily Asia Weekly

In the Middle East, businesses in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are known for their focus on sectors like energy, property and retail.

DarkMatter bucks the trend, however.

Run by Emirati entrepreneur Faisal Al Bannai, DarkMatter offers a comprehensive suite of cybersecurity products and services.

Its headquarters is in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which together with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman constitutes the six-member GCC — a regional political and economic alliance.

As DarkMatter's founder and CEO, Al Bannai is well aware that this is an unconventional business in the region. But listen to him speak and you quickly become convinced that he is on the right track.

"Organizations globally are spending close to $100 billion on cybersecurity, but the number of breaches and attacks is still increasing exponentially. It is clear something is not right," Al Bannai said, speaking at his office on the 15th floor of the Aldar headquarters — an iconic circular building in Abu Dhabi.

"On the other hand, in the GCC, we are spending millions on building smart cities and digitizing the economy. Technology and digitization are critical parts of our future," he said.

"In the UAE, we used to be focused on infrastructure and services. Now, we are all about being a knowledge-based economy."

It was his realization of these macro trends that drove Al Bannai, 45, to look for cybersecurity solutions. At the same time, he noticed how his own business, Axiom Telecom, had begun to increase spending on cybersecurity.

Axiom was not alone. Its government clients too were upping their budgets in this area.

"I found myself asking my customers how they could buy cybersecurity technology without any assurance. They then asked me where the local company supplying these products and services was.

"I asked that if I could give them the right talent and product, would they buy from me? They said if it is equivalent to the best in the market, they would."

Cybersecurity service providers typically come from Europe and the United States, meaning that the best resources are not within easy reach in the GCC.

What also motivated Al Bannai, back in 2014, was that Axiom was already 17 years old — so he was ready to start a new venture.

He had established the telecom company in 1997 to trade and distribute mobile devices and accessories.

Today, it is the largest retailer and distributor in the Middle East, with more than 2,500 employees and annual turnover of over $2.5 billion.

"I (decided) to start DarkMatter in the UAE and (like Axiom) be the anchor in the region. At the same time, I could leverage all the digital initiatives the government was rolling out, and use these as a springboard to be an international player."

Touching on the significance of the company's name, he pointed to the scientific definition of the invisible material that holds the universe together.

"Security too should be invisible and not in your way, so that it is convenient," he said. "In the same way that dark matter holds the universe together, we are everywhere, protecting organizations without being in their face."

His first challenge: Hiring the right people. With minimal knowledge of the industry, Al Bannai's solution was to staff the business with experts in the sector.

Thus, he started by tapping his own network, asking to be introduced to "serious players in the field".

Al Bannai would then fly them and their families to Abu Dhabi, condition-free, to experience the city and deliver his sales pitch.

Among the selling points — an existing customer base, the opportunity to start afresh on a completely blank slate they could mold and shape, and the chance to work on large-scale solutions, such as transforming a city into a smart, secure one.

"In the early days, we needed more of the believers," he explained.

"We went from a team of one — myself — to 650 today. But to reach this number, I had to interview thousands of people.

"Many of them were not living next door, but in countries around the world. It took a lot to convince them to leave their companies to join a startup in the UAE."

Al Bannai said that for many of the early team members whom he was recruiting from well-established companies for senior management roles, the swing factors were their belief in his story, the opportunity to create something baggage-free, and the temptation to be part of an ecosystem of diverse, talented individuals from different backgrounds.

To say that it was incredibly stressful to shoulder all that responsibility is an understatement, Al Bannai noted.

This is why he always tries his best to deliver on promises made during his sales pitch.

"I told them boredom would never be theirs for years to come. But I can't promise they won't fall down with fatigue. I make sure they are given challenges every day."

Today, his team consists of 57 different nationalities, with an equal mix of men and women.

Some 80 percent sit in Abu Dhabi, with the remainder spread across development centers in China, Finland and Canada.

"It was always my intention to build an international team. I don't think any nation has all the (cybersecurity) knowledge.

"It also mirrors the international mind-set that the UAE has. We are friendly with the world and a neutral player on the global stage."

Positioned as an end-to-end, one-stop cybersecurity provider, DarkMatter offers everything from strategic advisory to threat intelligence, cyber architecture and engineering, and managed security services — network security services outsourced to a service provider.

The company launched its managed security services facility in November. Located within its headquarters, it offers remote network monitoring and mitigation, if necessary, for its clients on a 24/7 basis. This allows a proactive prevention approach to cyberattacks.

Another of DarkMatter's compelling differentiators is its focus on transparency. "We welcome our clients to do a source-code review of any product they buy from us," Al Bannai said.

"This gives them 100 percent visibility on the product we have created. We have nothing to hide."

This was something Al Bannai decided on after he entered the cybersecurity industry and noticed its shortfalls.

"There is a lot of distrust in the ecosystem. How are we going to make things secure, convenient and transparent? We need to look at security holistically to protect it," he said.

This is not the only thing on his mind.

In February, DarkMatter published a report on the need for an urgent transformation to remain effective in a hyper-connected world.

It called for the industry to foster a level of cybersecurity resilience to remain sustainable.

The future appears bright for DarkMatter, especially in light of the fact that it turned a profit last year.

Al Bannai now aims to expand the business across other GCC countries by the end of 2019.

He also has his sights trained on the rest of the world. This is a key reason behind his investment in skill sets in different regions, including China.

In 2015, it opened Pegasus, a DarkMatter company, in Beijing.

It is working on engineering platforms that ingest data to do analyses. For instance, it is working on analytics to handle technologies in smart cities.

On a strategic level, the Beijing office is also an opportunity for DarkMatter to attract Chinese talent. "We see it as a conduit to establish relationships with people in China; for instance, in the developer community," Al Bannai said.

According to Al Bannai, DarkMatter is the first technology company from the UAE to establish an office in China. No surprise then that the company's Abu Dhabi office also employs Chinese nationals.

While it might initially come as a surprise to Chinese clients — or others from around the world — that Al Bannai and his business hails from the GCC, you can almost be certain he will have no problems in convincing them to work with DarkMatter.

MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Bio

Faisal Al Bannai
Founder and CEO, DarkMatter

Education:

1997: Master's in shipping trade and finance; City, University of London; United Kingdom

1995: Bachelor's in finance, Boston University, United States

Career milestones:

2014: Founder and CEO, DarkMatter

1997: Founder, Axiom Telecom

Awards:

2018: Top 100 Most Powerful Arabs, *Gulf Business*

2017: Technology Personality of the Year, Gulf Business Awards

2012: Dubai Quality Award, Government of Dubai

2011: Takreem Arab Achievement Award, Lebanon

2005: Entrepreneur of the Year, *Arabian Business*

2005: Lifetime Achievement Award, government of the United Arab Emirates

Quick takes:

What is the weakest cybersecurity link of any organization?
People, because they don't listen. Tell them not to click on a link, and they will do it. Tell them not to set their password as "12345", and they will do it. The challenge for professionals like us is how to make the technology extremely secure but easy and convenient for people to use.

How do you move past the stereotype that the Middle East is not known for cybersecurity?
By being completely transparent. Our clients are welcomed to take apart our products and review their source codes. We will even do it for them. If they have any questions, we make it a point to answer all of them. We have nothing to hide.

Does DarkMatter sell offensive products or services?
No. We made a commercial decision not to do so because we want to abide by the laws of the countries we operate in, or have clients in. Our role is to offer products and services to fight and protect against cybersecurity attacks.

Year of birth: 1973