INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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FRIEDMAN: This interview is with Mr. Shadi Baki, thank you so much for speaking to me.

BAKI: *You're welcome.*

FRIEDMAN: Mr. Baki if you could please describe the position that you hold here.

BAKI: *Right now I am the Director for HRMIS (Human Resource Management Information System), that is a directory within the civil service agency. It covers the automation of the HRM system and it stretches all across the various ministries and agencies. So wherever there is an HR department within any ministry or agency there will be HRMIS software placed. We're kind of automating the system. So wherever that system is, I will be in control of it and, under that, there is the electronic record keeping as well as a biometric system that I run to uniquely identify civil servants. So basically that's it.*

FRIEDMAN: Could you say a word about previous jobs that you've held?

BAKI: *Well before, I held jobs in a manufacturing company in Ghana, a plastics manufacturing company. I was an IT (information technology) manager. Within that job, besides IT, I did a lot of things: accounting, handling the stock, over-seeing sales, sales reporting. It was a pretty big manufacturing company with almost 150 huge plastic machines. I handled all the raw material, the ordering and planning and usage of the raw materials connecting it with all the products that were made and the advertising.*

FRIEDMAN: The whole business, pretty much.

BAKI: *The HR system as well. I was pretty much stretched across the entire organization of that manufacturing company. There were a group of manufacturing companies, that was just one of them. I was the IT head for all the manufacturing companies in that group. Prior to that, I was an IT head administrator at a company that was a wholesaler, also in Ghana. They were the manufacturing representatives and they were the wholesalers, as well, for many products like Goodyear tires and all these kinds of things. Before that I worked with the government of Liberia.*

              When I was 19 or 20 years old, I worked with the government of Liberia in the electronic data processing department of the Ministry of Finance. That was just before the war. I left because of the war. In that place I was a junior analyst. There was a system there that was created by, I think, a Canadian group. They did a payroll system and they had it in a language called COBOL. We were just two in the entire ministry that had the knowledge of COBOL and we were the ones that could program that system, change tax tables, introduce new tax deductions and all of that, besides run the payroll, as well.

              That was basically what I was doing over there. Prior to that, I worked in the university that I attended. I was the head of the system administrator and head of the IT lab and head of the network that we had. Basically that's it.

FRIEDMAN: What university?

BAKI: *It is now a university but it was a college at that time; it was called African American Episcopal Zion Community College, AME Zion Community College.*

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FRIEDMAN: That's here in Liberia?

BAKI: *That's here in Liberia. Now it is AME Zion University. So that's basically it.*

FRIEDMAN: So when did you take over this position?

BAKI: *I started with the CSA (Civil Service Agency) in 2008. The title that I was being paid for was Information and Records Management Specialist under the SES (Senior Executive Service) program. The Senior Executive Service is where specialists, people who have done well in their field and who have gone far in their field, are brought into the civil service, as part of the reform process, to try to introduce IT within their area. For me, I came in to help redesign the information records management part of the Civil Service Agency. I'm paid through the UNDP (United Nations Development Program). We have about a hundred SES personnel all over the government and I am one of them.*

But after I got in, after five or six months, I was given also, the title for records and research and biometric identification. The civil service went through a reform period. We did management function reviews. We did the entire reform stuff. Then new positions were drawn up for the new structure, and moving into the new structure, I was elevated into the position of director for HRMIS. The previous director is now an assistant director in the new one. All the director positions are now assistant director positions. All principal heads or principal directors are now directors. So that is how the new structure is right now.

FRIEDMAN: So what was on your agenda when you took over this position.

BAKI: *On my agenda, I came in to set the information and records management policies of the Civil Service Agency. I came to make sure we had a direction for automating the HR management system at the Civil Service Agency. So that was my primary task.*

FRIEDMAN: Was the biometric ID card program already in development?

BAKI: *Originally when I came, they had already started the biometric program because they had acquired a consultant who conducted a bidding process for a supplier to bring in biometric equipment. So that was what I was in charge of overseeing when I came. So as soon as I got there, we got the Biometric Center. The supplier for the biometric equipment and the software also came in. I started dealing with the biometric supplier and set it up basically with the supplier. That's what I came to meet.*

The original intention was to take whoever was on the government of Liberia payroll, those names, and use the biometric software to find out whether there were people who were duplicates in there. But when I came in, together with our World Bank colleagues, we kind of agreed that it was better to build the employee files first and then biometric would be at the end of that chain. So we had to redesign our plan. From then on, we decided to put all of our efforts in building the employee files first, because there was nothing, since during the war we lost everything. So there was nothing at the Civil Service Agency, it had old rusted files from the '80s and '70s which were not representative of what the civil service was at that time, two years ago. Everything relied on listings that were coming from the ministries and agencies. We didn't know the accuracy of those listings. The rest was from the Ministry of Finance's database where you would find that there were just a few pieces of information on an employee, last name, first name, not even the date of birth, instead of the last name, first name, where

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you worked, your job title and information on your pay. So we decided to build up the entire dossier for an employee, personnel, academic history, professional history in government, the current place of work, other places in government the employee had worked, as well as work outside of government. We included information on the employees' dependents with supporting documents to back up the claim that, you are who you say you are, because a lot of people were impersonating.

So that's why we have vetting processes and all of that where people are able to bring in all their supporting documents for the information and we cross check the information before going into biometric enrollment, fingerprint enrollment. We have two types of layers in there, which is facial recognition and then fingerprinting, all ten fingers.

FRIEDMAN: So how do you verify the information?

BAKI: *Well, let me take you all the way down the chain. First of all, our exercise or methodology was to send three colored sets of forms out to the HR head. The HR head sends them down through the supervisor down to the employee. The employee fills out all three, with photos on all three. At the back of the photo, he signs and puts his name on that, fills out the three identical forms. The blue form, the green form, and the black form, all those then, the supervisor signs to say "I know this guy" and he signs the form as well, saying, "I am aware of all the information on this form, and it is true". So that filters back up to the HR head. The HR head takes a look at it and says, " Okay, the supervisor has signed, the person has signed".*

Next we have a vetting officer, an assigned liaison and vetting officer assigned to the ministry, vet it.

FRIEDMAN: Is this someone in the ministry or someone at CSA?

BAKI: *At that particular time, we are having assigned people at those ministries be there for the vetting process. The one form remaining, the black one, is sent back down to the employee. The green form remains with the ministry, the blue form comes to us. We vet it once more. If we are satisfied, we enter data and at a certain point in time we the employee in with the black form and cross check that and when we show that those two forms match, the black and the blue that we have, we biometrically enroll them. We keep the black form. So what happens is that the ministry or agency has a manual system with all forms in there.*

Before they did not have this, so now they at least have forms there for each employee that is a complete employee file, even though it is manual. The black form we have as a backup. At the biometric center, we keep the blue. We send copies of all the forms to the CSA headquarters so we have a set of identical forms at the CSA headquarters. So in case anything happens at the biometric center, we still have the same identical forms at the CSA headquarters.

We enter this information into the computer, scan all the supporting documents, enroll the fingerprints, cross check to see if there are any duplicates in the system. We open case files for the duplicates and we pursue those cases and alert the proper authorities to take the appropriate actions on that.

FRIEDMAN: When you say they would come in with the black forms and you would compare them, would they come to the central office here?

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BAKI: *They come to the biometric center with their black form.*

FRIEDMAN: All the civil servants?

BAKI: *Yes, we have schedules for them to come in.*

FRIEDMAN: Even from the counties?

BAKI: *For the counties, we broke up our implementation in a couple of phases. In fact there are two major phases. One is in Monrovia. We had a pilot phase in which we just did a few ministries, agencies, small ones, that did not have more than one or two persons outside of Monrovia. 99 to 100% of the employee population was in Monrovia for that ministry or agency. We had the Monrovia phase where we collected people's information from Monrovia. Now we have the outstation phase that is all counties, besides Montserrado County, or everywhere outside of Monrovia city. We have three teams that have gone out. There are 36 people, twelve in each team. Each team is going to tackle four counties.*

                             Prior to that, we did two other counties in a little pilot project so we are not going to handle them, until we do a mop up. But mainly the teams are going out for four counties each, twelve counties. They are going for 45 days. They will go in there and do all the vetting, form filling, enrollment, biometric enrollment and come back into Monrovia. Then we will do our final analysis and enter data, take action and that's it.

FRIEDMAN: So they'll be spending about fifteen days in a county?

BAKI: *Yes. They will go simultaneously into four counties each. So one team has four counties, they spend a couple of days in each county until the four counties are completed, plus mop up time. But what happens, there are some counties that have a little bit larger population of employees than others so they will take two weeks; smaller counties will take one week. So it is set up like that. Then they come back in. Now all of this is being done so that we can clean up the database. We will have a database with clean information. We update into the new IFMIS, the Integrated Financial Management Information System. We work together with the Ministry of Finance on that. We have the civil service management module in our system and that is where we are going to take this information. That is the process we started last week. We are now starting our migration process. All that clean information that we have is going to be put into the civil service management system, an integrated system. Any ministry or agency will be able to use the employee self-service parts of the civil service management system. HR heads can also have their say in appraisals, work the appraisal systems and all of that.*

FRIEDMAN: Can we go back a bit to 2008 to the change in strategy, issuing biometric ID cards at the beginning to the end of the process.

BAKI: *Basically when taking a look at it, it's taking people's biometric data for a one-time shot. It is like taking a picture of what the population is at one time with no other plans on how to maintain that information. Then the Ministry of Finance will continue doing what they do to maintain that information. So we said, "Hey, this is not how it should be. We should build a proper employee file and have a system we can maintain or carry on the HR management lifecycle process using software".*

FRIEDMAN: So at the time, what exactly did the Ministry of Finance want to do? Did they want to create a system with the information they already had?

BAKI: *The Ministry of Finance just wanted to continue maintaining the payroll. Whoever is going to be added to the payroll, they do the adding. Whoever is going to be removed, they do the removing. Whoever is going to be raised up or down, they do. With a system like that, you can have so many leakages. Fraud can come into that kind of system and because we are the HR arm of government, we don't control it. Things can happen in that system that can be outside of our knowledge. So the problem is that we wanted to have control as we were mandated to have control.*

               So the first step was to build a file, introduce an integrated HRMIS system and payroll system with a single database that we share, but we would be the gatekeepers. We allow people in. We move people around and we take people out. All they do is carry out their deductions, print checks and that's it.

FRIEDMAN: So initially the biometric ID cards were going to be issued to who ever was already on the payroll.

BAKI: *Now, what would happen is that after we clean a particular ministry, after we do all of the vetting, everything, we call it clean. We declare it clean and that's when we print the ID cards and distribute the ID cards.*

FRIEDMAN: So how many ministries are clean at this point?

BAKI: *About eleven, so far. My team has gone out, as I said, into the outstations. I don't have enough staff to continue the cleaning for the 45 days. As soon as they come back, that exercise will continue. The eleven will grow to the rest of the ministries that we have.*

FRIEDMAN: What is your target date to have all the ministries cleaned?

BAKI: *March 31, 2011.*

FRIEDMAN: So have you started dispensing the cards themselves?

BAKI: *Yes. We dispensed the cards already to the first eleven ministries. They have their cards. We will do it in phases, batches. As soon as those guys come back, we are going to continue our vetting and data entry and all these things and we are going to clean the information for the new ministries that we have not done. Once we are satisfied, we will print the biometric ID cards. By March, we should have cleaned the information, by the first of July—the cards should be printed. July is when we will have migrated to the civil service management system module of IFMIS. We should be part of the integrated system. We should be part of the common network that we're putting together. In fact, interestingly, this trying to get control of the payroll, of the HR system for Liberia, automating it, has brought in a new dimension.*

               In the beginning, IFMIS was software that was going to take care of all the financial parts of what was going on at the Ministry of Finance. We were going to have our own HRMIS, but then we decided that we would come together. There is a very good IT person there as well. Together, with the World Bank, we shared a common vision on this. So we decided there was no need to have two databases. " Let's have one database". So coming together, we had to have a

platform, a place that can be shared and we can use a system to share the software. So that's when we decided to have a little network.

That grew a little bit, because we said, " Okay, we have a financial management system, we have the HRMIS system, but in order to track expenditures and revenues, central bank has to be involved. GAC, the auditing commission, has to be part of that, because they want to have access to the financial management HR system, so they can carry on their audits in a better manner than they are. At least they can have audits that are more efficient than is going on now, because everything will be automated". So then we decided to also include GSA (General Service Agency) the asset management arm of the government. GSA was interested.

On the revenue side, you had Customs that is part of the Ministry of Finance. They were interested, as well, because they were interested in this common platform. One of our options for redundancy was putting in a WiMAX (Wireless Network) option. That WiMAX solution was going to stretch all the way to the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia, a revenue point, the RIA, Roberts International Airport, which is our international airport. The only problem is up between Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Liberia. We are not stretching there yet, but we do have plans.

So these people opted in. Our little network between two ministries has now turned into a national network for government, for intergovernment system integration. We decided, if there's going to be a common infrastructure network, we have to get UPSA, better power, generators, power coming in there.

So we said, " Okay, we have the LIBTELCO, the Liberian Telecommunications Corporation, and they have a little datacenter there, fully equipped. Hey, if these guys have 24- hour electricity, they have UPSA's power backup because they're running their own phone network system, mobile phone, CDMA (Cellcom 2000 1X-EVDO). So let's see if we can hitch a ride on that".

So we discussed it with them and they were happy for us to come on board. They also had planned to have fiber-optic connectivity in the first phase, between the customers that they could muster. The second phase was around Monrovia, the third phase was the whole of Liberia with an internet sub-C cable to come into Liberia for a high-speed internet. In fact, with our funding, we came as the first customers, the Civil Service Agency and the Ministry of Finance.

FRIEDMAN: You could help their company grow.

BAKI: _Yes, so we came as the first customer. We struck a deal. We told them that we were here, we could provide. We were the first customers for the first phase and because of that, it kicked off and they were able to get funding for the second phase and have the Ace Cable come into Liberia. First it was just the data center, but now we are going to call it the national data center because all the ministries and agencies will eventually plug into that. That's how far we have grown with that. We just had the need to have a payroll and an HRMIS system, to have a single database where we were the gate-keeper. That now has grown into a national data network for government systems._

 FRIEDMAN: When did the idea come about to create the single database, the single network?

BAKI: _What happened is when we decided, okay, there was funding available for getting HRMIS and we said, " Okay, how can we have a system separate? We_

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have a database that we have to synchronize manually with those guys. Every time something passes through us we have to ensure it is the same thing reflected over there. It is pretty much going to be the same thing happening".

FRIEDMAN: So was this your recommendation or suggestion?

BAKI: *Yes, it was my recommendation. We had sessions with the World Bank, our World Bank technical team. When they came in, we had common discussions on that because we had funding separately for an HRMIS solution. They had this IFMIS (Integrated Financial Management Information System) solution. They wished the ministries and agencies would also use the IFMIS solution as well as the financial management. So if you're in your ministry, once you have access, you can use the financial module.*

                But the primary thing at that time was having a single database where we can control the civil servants or employees on the government payroll. That was the primary issue and from there, we grew into this integration and this network that we're building.

FRIEDMAN: So how do you view that because the Ministry of Finance, I guess before this program, had more control in a sense, over the civil servants?

BAKI: *Yes. I would say in terms of the payroll they had more control. They added people. They were able to add people onto the payroll. It should have been from our audits. But I don't know, in a system like that there is a whole lot of room for people to add people onto the payroll without our consent. As the Civil Service Agency, that was something that we had to look into and make sure that that stops. That was the solution that we came to, that we should have a single database.*

FRIEDMAN: Has there been any resistance from the Ministry of Finance about centralizing this authority in the Civil Service Agency?

BAKI: *No, there was no resistance. I think the only thing was getting the political heads to try to understand we are trying to use cutting edge technology. Coming out of the war, most people have not heard or seen something like this, so convincing people that this is not a huge monster that we are trying to create, but this is something that will work to our benefit. If we have systems that are integrated, we will not have problems with reconciliations and output from one system manually being inputted into another system. These things will work seamlessly.*

                So it took some time to convince them. It took some time for them to really see the benefits of where we're going in just a little time, I would say a couple of months. Then one or two big guys started to come in. From the get-go you had one or two people, like for example C. William Allen, Director General of the Civil Service Agency. He was on board from the get-go and from there we were able to get people onboard. Now it is an elaborate plan. It is not just planning for something big where you have people in every area of the planning and the implementation. You have people working and results are being seen. I think people are seeing it from inside the country and outside of the country. Our partners are seeing it. People are now showing up on our doorstep to see what they can do to help. Id like to be able to show you the mini data center at the Ministry of Finance, our infrastructure in the building at CSA headquarters, at the annex that we're building, the national data center, the backup disaster recovery site further down on 18th Street. You would see how far we've come.

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FRIEDMAN: One last question before we stop. IFMIS has been attempted in other countries I understand. And there are biometric ID programs. Has it been merged in other countries as you've done here?

BAKI: *Well, I don't know much. I know that when we started, we heard that Ghana had started something but it fell through. It didn't work. That was a national biometric identification system. I think civil service biometric was attempted, but I don't think that went through. I know that our World Bank team, the technical team that was advising us, has done something, I think, in Botswana. They have started something in Botswana or Zimbabwe, one of those countries and then they just started something in Gambia, I think.*

               So it is two countries. Our methodology, our project charter, and all these project components were just right for the African environment. They are now also trying to roll these things out in other places, helping other people who want to have what we're doing.

FRIEDMAN: Do you know why the initiatives in Ghana had trouble?

BAKI: *I think mostly these things are kind of political. When they reach a certain point, then they get stuck because of the lack of political will. Sometimes when there is change in government, you probably have one government saying, " Okay, all these things were ordered and you had all this. It is just another way of getting rich on this project" or something like that. There is some suspicion somewhere, sometime. So I think that was scrapped in Ghana. I heard they had a lot of cars and equipment that they bought and they opened up a little investigation to find out what was going on in the project and they just hung in limbo because of that.*

FRIEDMAN: So here, those few months where you got the political support—that was key.

BAKI: *Yes, now everybody is on board. It is amazing. You have top to bottom. The thing about us, in our government, I don't want to pat ourselves on the back, but we have the vision to move this country as fast as possible and project it into something and catch up with what we lost and go further than that. So you don't find too many people throwing too many roadblocks in your way. Once you get to convince them about the benefit and what is going to happen, everyone's mind is open. Then it doesn't take much to take it from there.*

FRIEDMAN: Was C. William Allen's political support key?

BAKI: *That was key. From the get-go, he was the key component of this. Reforms and all these new age technology introductions and integration of systems, Dr. Allen is all for it. Once you brief him on what you want to do, show him your plans, he is very quick to see the benefits. He is also very quick to come back to you and tell you what you're doing wrong or right and how it should be done. So he has been a great help.*

FRIEDMAN: Did he help you get the Ministry of Finance on board?

BAKI: *Yes, definitely. I think he is on the steering committee team of the IFMIS if I'm not mistaken, so he has some weight in there. He is an integral part of most of what we're doing.*

FRIEDMAN: Thank you Mr. Baki.

BAKI: *You're welcome.*