

## Affinity Insurance: Turning risk into brand value

### What it takes to be successful as a woman in the insurance industry in Middle East and North Africa

#### Interview with Rebecca Bleek, Marsh Affinity Leader – Middle East and North Africa

**Julia:** Hello everyone and welcome to the Marsh International Affinity podcast. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Julia Falekkos and I work within Marsh's international affinity team based in London. This is Marsh's Affinity Insurance: Turning Risk into Brand Value podcast. So in today's episode, we're going to be looking into the topic of females within the financial services industry. So the finance sector is, of course, heavily male dominated. A report by Deloitte shows that the proportion of women in leadership roles within financial services firms was at 24% by the end of 2021. However, this is expected to grow to 28% by 2030. So we are heading in the right direction. We thought it would be interesting to catch up with some of our female leaders within Marsh Affinity to discuss their career paths and their professional experiences. Thank you for listening and we hope you find the interviews interesting.

**Shahana:** Hello, everyone. My name is Shahana Vibisnaa. I'm a graduate project manager with international affinity team. We are in discussion with our female leader within the financial services industry. And today, I'm going to be interviewing Rebecca Bleek who is the Affinity leader for the Middle Eastern, North African region. Hi Rebecca, how are you doing?

**Rebecca:** Hi Shahana, very well, thank you, yourself?

**Shahana:** Good thanks. Alright, without any further ado, let's jump into a question. So firstly we would love to hear about your career path up until now.

**Rebecca:** Sure, so I guess you could say I've been the product of acquisitions, I started my insurance broking career in 2006 at HSBC insurance brokers in London as part of the brokers support team and then following the acquisition by Marsh in 2009, I was promoted to a motor fleet wholesale broker. It was a promotion that didn't come easily and my boss at the time considered females. Whether they could be successful or not, particularly in the auto specialty and the underwriting relationships were solely dependent on the ability to talk about football. So I'm pleased to say that we have crossed that bridge and then I joined the motor fleet wholesale broking team. And then in 2013, I fancied a change of scenery. I moved to Dubai with my husband and joined insure direct brokers as an AVP of a JV partnership with a semi government organization. And then in 2017, I was promoted to MD of the SME segment following the acquisition by JLT. And then came along the acquisition by Marsh in 2019, when I was appointed to CNC segment leader and most recently the MENA Affinity Leader.

**Shahana:** Perfect. What an interesting career path, thank you for sharing it with us. My next question for you would be on what has been your biggest challenge as a female leader of MENA?

**Rebecca:** I would say it's far easier being a female leader in MENA than being motor fleet, wholesale broker in London as a female and I'm proud to say that times have obviously changed significantly. I've obviously left the London market nine years ago now and I'm also proud to say that when joining Marsh UAE following the JLT acquisition, only 30% of the

*senior leadership team were female and now we're standing at 60% and so there's been a huge transition in the short time that I have been here in the UAE. That being said, I would say one of the biggest challenges for me as a leader and not just a female leader but a leader in general, is having a voice. Affinity is all about thinking outside of the box and challenging the status quo, so getting earlier doctors was critical. And recognizing the concept of affinity was new at Marsh MENA. I would say the most rewarding move I made was putting a shout out on LinkedIn as the New Girl on the block in the affinity space. And from there, Phil Hobson connected me with the international Affinity leadership team. And collectively, this group gave me the know-how, the resources and subsequently the voice that I needed to start breaking down barriers and get me there too think and do affinity.*

**Shahana:** *Thank you very much, because that is something we could all learn from. My next question is, in your opinion, what is the most important characteristic, trade or skill a leader should possess?*

**Rebecca:** *I would say a combination of resilience, adaptability and communication. I would say resilience because I think everybody has been in situations where you have been thrown a curveball and it completely throws you off. You can become distracted, disheartened, defeated. When this happens, it's important to regroup, evaluate what's happened, what the impact is, what needs to be done to rectify it and take the positives out of the negative, learn from it so you can contingency plan in the future. And then with the resilience comes adaptability, however, don't operate as a Lone Ranger having all of the answers to all of the problems. Involve your colleagues to add perspective to strap plan the most effective way to pivot to achieve your goal. And it is cliché, but change is the only constant, and so have the confidence to ask your team to challenge the current ways of working for continuous improvement. And then with that obviously comes communication. So again, don't be a Lone Ranger, constantly communicate with all levels of the organization. Classic example. The budget isn't a secret, share progress with your team, discuss those hurdles and how you're going to clear them together and most importantly, be approachable and supportive of your team when a problem does arrive and obviously discuss those and how you're going to tackle them together. So having free flowing communication I would say is critical to building mutual trust, respect, loyalty within the team.*

**Shahana:** *Thank you Rebecca, that is extremely insightful. My final question for today would be what advice do you have for women looking to grow within our company or industry?*

**Rebecca:** *I would say network and continued personal development. Again. This isn't advice exclusively for women, but for anyone looking to further themselves and their career. If you don't know how to do something, find someone that does and learn from them. Put yourself out there, exploit your internal and external network. And then personally, I didn't go to university at the conventional time. I started my insurance career at 20, and shortly afterwards I took a six month sabbatical to work in France and qualifies a ski instructor before returning to insurance. However, I reached a stage in my career in 2019 where I recognized I needed to upskill myself to be on a level playing field with my peers, and so I enrolled onto Manchester Business Schools Global MBA program and I graduate this year.*

**Shahana:** *Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that great advice. This brings us to the end of our interview. We truly appreciate your time and thank you for all the interesting advice and insight we have received from you today.*

**Rebecca:** *Thank you very much Shahana.*

**Julia:** *And that concludes this Marsh International Affinity Podcast episode a big thanks to our key speakers, as well as all of our listeners, keep your eyes peeled for our next podcast, which will be coming your way soon. Thank you.*

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