

## Why Afghanistan is a high-wage economy

Contributed by Financial Times

Fancy a job in Afghanistan? Saad Mohseni, the boss of Moby, a mini-media conglomerate in Kabul, will understand if you do not immediately jump at the offer.

“People see the stories about terrorism, bombs and kidnapping, and it is not surprising that they stay away,” says the man who started with just a radio station four years ago and has been growing rapidly ever since.

Now, Afghanistan’s answer to Rupert Murdoch also has two television stations and a magazine. He also has a record label, technology companies and has moved into the internet café business.

He spends his days dealing with the sort of management challenges that only a country such as Afghanistan can present.

The most recent is a row over the broadcast of a steamy Shakira concert that disgruntled some conservative-minded MPs and clerics.

But much of his time is taken up with the problem of recruiting good people. Despite the opportunities presented by the fast-growing company, the difficulty of attracting talent is constraining his business, he says.

A sprinkle of expats is a vital part of the mix of Moby’s 420 strong workforce. They bring with them expertise that is often simply unavailable in a country that is still painfully rebuilding itself.

“We don’t really have much choice but to look outside the country, particularly on the finance, marketing and technical side,” he says. Some of that expertise, it is hoped, then rubs off on local staff, who need all the training that they can get.

“After 30 years of war, Afghans don’t just lack skills — they haven’t even got much capacity to learn and develop themselves.

“A kid in high school in the west will have worked with computers almost all his life, but you can see the 21-year-olds who come to us have never seen them before, and so we have to spend time bringing them up to speed.”

Among his current crop of foreigners, he has an American doing business development, Indians in the IT department and some British journalists helping to sharpen the already respected output of Tolo, one of the television stations.

But a deteriorating security situation and a less-than-efficient visa system has made the problem of recruiting international staff hard for Mr Mohseni.

“In the early days, we had a lot of well-qualified people showing interest in working for us but the irony is that we were too small and didn’t need them.

“Now we are keen for them to come here but the people who approached us in 2003 are no longer interested in working in Afghanistan.”

Mr Mohseni, an Afghan-Australian businessman who worked as a stockbroker in Australia before coming to Kabul in 2002 to start a venture capital fund, says the trick is to get people to Kabul and show them that it’s not all that bad.

“We give people free trips to get them into the country to meet some people. We find it puts them at ease.

“They soon see that there is a good social life in Kabul, there are a couple of places to go out and it’s an exciting place to live.

“If we can get them to Kabul, we are pretty certain that they will want to stay.”

A social place it may be, but Mr Mohseni recognises that its attractions begin to lose their lustre after about two years.

“People are working long hours, seven days a week. They party hard, and that creates fatigue.”

Recruiting local workers is just as challenging. The international aid industry that swept into Afghanistan in 2001 has also made it harder for local businesses to hire the best people.

The United Nations and the scores of international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) now working in Kabul offer top-dollar salaries to well-qualified Afghans with good language skills.

Often some of the most highly-skilled Afghans end up doing fairly menial jobs, such as security.

In general, Mr Mohseni says, local broadcasters are careful not to try to pinch their rivals’ staff: “When we do it, we let the other stations know and are extremely apologetic about it.”

Not so the big, international broadcasters based in Kabul, he says.

“The BBC and Radio Free Europe are artificially sustained by government grants and they poach our staff members in a way that is disgraceful.

“They pay four times the rate for people whom we have spent years training. They should use their money to take in good people and train them up themselves.”

It all adds to the cost of business.

“Inflation, as far as HR is concerned, is unbelievable,” he says. “Someone who is only half qualified will charge five times what they would in India. Local staff tend to jump ship very quickly — people are pretty myopic and don’t invest in their careers.

“Although — frankly — when you consider the dire situation in the country, they don’t have much confidence in the future and you can’t really blame them for wanting to make as much money as possible.”