

Halah is Emirati and is 37 years old. She has a degree in Electrical engineering from * University. Her native tongue is Arabic, but she speaks fluent English and uses the latter for work purposes. Since her graduation, Halah has been employed as a graduate engineer by a government run company, for 12 years.

Halah has a series of 'firsts': "the first lady engineer to join" her department and also mentions that she "was the first lady engineer who goes to the site to work in the sub stations". She was also "the first lady engineer to travel to Japan for attending training I was the first lady engineer in * also to travel to Canada for inspection as well".

Halah is originally from Dubai in the UAE. She is married with two children "I have two kids, lovely kids I have a daughter she is 11 years old and a boy he is 8 years old"

Halah had an arranged marriage and her husband is Aircraft maintenance engineer. He knew Halah was an engineer when he proposed and she considers he is a very supportive and understanding person, though he would rather that she sit at home as this is the norm in his family.

When she goes home she totally isolates herself from work: "Whatever happens at work happens at work; at home, I am mom and the tricky thing which works out for me is that I am not available to my kids all the time. I have this few hours with them so I make sure that I give them the quality time. Time spent with her children is limited "they come home 3.30; 7.30- 8 o' clock they are in bed, so these 3 -4 hours I spend with them I give them the best time. If I was not doing the job which I am doing now I'd be free all the whole day, out living thinking miserable" She finds that her time with her children is focused because "I see my other friends who are free. They don't sit with their kids for homework. They don't go out with their kids for activities. Their kids they don't do any after school activities. They don't master certain skills, but my kids do. They are very talented, skilled; they do lots of activities; so I think because, because I am happy, I reflect happiness"

She does not consider herself to be kind of woman who could stay at home doing coffee mornings. "I don't have the head for that". She does have a social life, however, "I am socially very active, I love people; I love social work, but it is time framed" She enjoys afternoon coffee in an open air coffee shop, she feels she can't do it every day, but makes sure to do it once or twice a week. She will socialize with friends on the weekend and have a family gathering on Fridays "I make sure I attend all my kids. My kids go to bed by 8 o' clock. Then I am back, either I am going out with my husband; or I am invited out; or if I have some pending work to do; or if I just read the magazine read the book, then this is my time again"

Currently

Halah is head of the tendering and engineering department and has been for the last two years. She has 65 people reporting to her, the structure that there is a division called distribution, which is comprised of three sub divisions. She is a member of an engineering Institute, and attends and participates in all their activities. She is not officially a member in any other organization, but when any organizations extend an invitation to participate or take part or talk on stage she does not hesitate to do that; or any other events, such as social events

Family

Halah's father is a businessman who runs his own trading company "Import, export stuff like that". Her mother is a housewife. She is seventh in a big family of nine and has four sisters and four brothers. Halah considers her family "a very conventional family, Arabic family'. About early socialization, she says

“my brothers and sisters all of them are quite older than me there is a big gap in age, yeah. Actually when I was young all my sisters were married, so at home I was the girl, myself and the younger sister 7 years younger than me and when I was grade 3 all of my sisters were married so no girl at home except me and the boys. Yeah there was a gap. I had a good social life, but I was focused on my education as an objective” In her teenage years Halah was also involved in extracurricular activities: “Yeah I was member in Basketball team, I loved art so I had a good participation in some of the art exhibitions at school I was a very good writer so I published my own magazine at school, weekly magazine that consume lot of energy and time. All Halah’s siblings are working and all of them hold a university degree. They work in “different fields, different places; some of them work for the municipality, banks, some of them run their own business.”. Her youngest brother has followed her into engineering. Neither of her parents are graduates, but she believes that the influence for her and her siblings getting university degrees comes from both parents. Halah says that her parents believe in education coming from the family and “especially for woman, my mom was very keen to send the girls, the ladies, the woman to the best colleges, more than men, She says, men they can manage anything but every woman must have a degree even she can work later, she should be supported in Arabic we say her weapon” There does not seem to have been any influence towards engineering from the extended family.

Education

Halah’s early education was in local Government run schools in Dubai. Her school was a girls only school and she was taught mainly in Arabic but she learned English as well. “From early years, from grade 4, I believe we started learning English and in college everything comes in English, then our work, all of our correspondence is; English is the first language here” Even pre high school, pre-teen age years Halah “was just focused on education” On the matter of influence in her education, Halah says, “I have always been taught at home, my prime objective is to complete my education; this is this is my objective, this is my responsibility, they don’t want me at home to work and support. She says her parents “want me to put my head into it and get into that [independence], that’s the objective that’s the point. The second thing I think self-motivation, I knew that if I get a degree I can have [independence]. Especially for women, if you want to prove yourself, you should have a degree”

Halah was a very good student “I was always an A student even in college” She changed school every 3 years to 4 years as a part of the curriculum but still a single sex, public, state run school. Halah stayed focused on education “all the way to college”. Her favorite subject at school was English, but also “English, Math, physics, Arabic, I love all these subjects. Yeah, I enjoy History; I enjoy Arabic studies, poems actually, everything, everything” On getting into college at the age of 18, Halah chose to study engineering. She gives her reason for this as: “I choose engineering because it was the most challenging, let me say education available to me, the most challenging where I have to challenge myself. I don’t like anything related to medicine. I don’t like hospitals, medicine, anything come close doctors, hospitals so I didn’t want to go to study [medicine].” She also considered studying Law, but the subject was not available to her; “that was not available, not available everywhere. It was available only for men; in * university only for men I think, If I am not mistaken”. Further on this choice Halah says “I went to the college and met the advisor. Actually my family did not persuade me or influence me, they left it just it up to me to choose whatever, and I wanted something where I can use my brain; meet people; challenge my potential, so I thought engineering is a good choice”

Halah continued her education in Ajman University. She made this choice because at the time “I live in Dubai, the only option available to me was * university and I didn’t like to go stay there and, what they call it, boarding college and come back only one or two days a week” and “at that time there were no private colleges here in Dubai; no American University or Sharjah University or Higher College of

Technology. All of these things came later actually. And the first college private college that was available providing good education was Ajman University, so I joined there” Halah did a lot of reading in English because “I always wanted to excel in this language; speak like you Americans, I can’t though. I was quite ahead to the girls at my level and I love this language”

The course at Ajman was 5 Year course. College was difficult and Halah used to leave home every day at 7 o’ clock in the morning and be back home 8 o’ clock in the evening “I spend my whole day there in college between classes, labs and the library.” There was not really a lot of social activity in the college; it was very exhausting. Halah was an ‘A’ student “The problem is I want to be the best against any best out there, best of the best.” As with earlier schooling, classes at Ajman were separate for males and females; it was the college rule. However, all teaching was by males and Halah never had a female teacher in college. There was a support network among the females themselves. “Actually in private college everybody is busy running so you hardly have time to sit; and people enter their classes, leave their classes but I used to get lots of support from the senior students”

Career

On leaving university Hanna did 6 months’ work placement training in a car workshop, which she found “was a very interesting period of my life”. This was in a private company; it was similar to an internship and was unpaid. Reflecting upon this choice Halah says “After Graduation, I was thinking why did I study engineering? I am a female after all; I am soft, I don’t want to work with oil and field or whatever maybe that was not a good choice; and I was questioning my choice at that time after graduation”

Next, Halah “*accidentally*” got a job with a bank. This came about through having a conversation, whilst waiting in the bank for a friend who worked there, with the HR manager there who then offered her a job. This HR manager told Hanna “If you are good at engineering you’ll be good at anywhere” She worked in the bank for a year and a half and found the work very interesting, never regretting her decision “because working with professionals teaches you, starts your career with professionals, teaches you how to think like professionals. Later on you will complete life; respect your time; respect your job; respect the place.” Halah comments that this job “added a lot to my experience ... luckily I worked with very senior people so when you work with very senior people you get from them, you learn from them.” Halah was appointed in customer service in corporate banking and felt that “not anyone will be brought to run companies accounts, lots of risk and high training is required, so all the people there were very well trained very senior in position that they open accounts in millions not one million, but millions companies having high weight reputed companies, so I was lucky from that point of view and they wanted my help so they really were keen that I learn and I learned it right from the first time so I am not a burden, I am a help, am another hand”

However, Halah started missing all the engineering, work studies and began thinking “maybe it’s enough, maybe I should capitalize on this experience and concentrate on my real career in engineering.” So then she moved to DEWA and has been with them for 12 years. This was not an advertised job; Halah says “I just thought I am an electrical engineer so maybe DEWA is the best place for me so let me see what they can offer me and they offered me a job which I found very interesting at that time” Halah was employed in the * department, the major functions of which are supervisory control and data acquisition of the electrical substation. “We have networks, electrical networks expanded all over Dubai, How do you interconnect these substations together at the same time have them connected to the control center? you need some sort of communication protocol and software to govern this, so that was

the function of that department” Among the reasons for Halah accepting this job, is it involved a lot of site work and she likes “going outside, doing a job with my hands, wiring downloading software, uploading software; that’s interesting.” When she joined that department she was the only lady engineer not the section head; the section head of that department was welcoming but the team members were very conscious about having lady member in their team; they were raising obstacles because of the culture. For example, they would ask “how you are going to go with us in the same car to the site?” Halah would reply “I’ll sit in the same car, I don’t have problem to sit next to you in the car; if you don’t want me to be with you in DEWAs car, I’ll follow you in my own car.” They told her she should stay in the office do the admin job, because when they come back they need someone to enter the login to the system, or update the data, or program the computers for them. Halah’s response was: “No, I am an engineer and I’ll do exactly what you guys are doing. So I, I had to prove myself and make myself visible If you do it I can do it. If you can go to the substation, do it in the hot summer, I’ll do it; this is also my job”. Eventually, when she visited the substations, the people who went with her from her department were over the stage of having a lady with them in their team but “other people working in the same substation they used to look at me as if I am a zombie or something but finally I’ve been accepted”. However, Halah was pregnant with her first child and in the eighth month still used to go to the substations, but her manager eventually told her that “I can’t jeopardize your health please stop going to the site because I don’t feel comfortable sending you”. At that time there were 45 days maternity leave and a nursing hour “I remember I sacrificed my nursing hour because I felt it’s not right. I don’t know why I didn’t; I was thinking of work more than what’s good for my family or maybe I just wanted to send a statement, I just wanted to send a statement I am capable of doing it. Nowadays I don’t encourage this I advise all my co-workers, females, to enjoy their maternity leave”

Philosophy/views

Even though Engineering was a predominantly male dominated profession, Halah chose this route because “challenge; I don’t like to live an easy life, am very competitive by nature; I compete with myself yeah, so I feel more myself when I am in difficult situations I produce more. That’s funny” Halah believes “the problem [is] I don’t like to feel that there is something I cannot reach or I cannot accomplish or I cannot possess; I mean in terms of excelling, mastering; like there is a language and It’s an important language, I feel I have to master that. There is new software in the market which serves my job, I don’t like to just know about it I need to learn it, put my head into it and excel in that. So maybe this trait helped a lot in being where I am today. I think it is something you are born with; no one will teach you this” Furthermore Halah says, “ I don’t believe there is something out there I can’t achieve or I can’t do or called possible, Impossible. This really drives me”

Hanna finds it odd that “Girls graduate from college then they get married, then they live their house wife role” She thinks that her job was very demanding and had to juggle her family life; raising a baby; her husband; and at many stages was under pressure, especially from her husband, to quit, not to put herself under such pressure: “all this, like if I come home with a complaint from work or ‘this is what I faced today, this is what happened’, the answer would be ‘you’re putting yourself through all this, you know I can support you financially’ ” – “but this was not the aim of me working, not financial support; it’s much beyond that it’s like self-fuelling reason to live, to be productive, actively feel you are an achieving person.” Hanna’s parents are very supportive of her work and she says that they know that she is ‘addicted to this job’. “My job is the only thing I do for myself, all other things I do for others so that is the source of joy, happiness, energy. My job injects me with energy, with reason to live; to be bright, to look good, I can’t live a quiet life assuaged life or a life where I can have only social activities”

Halah really loves her job: “I love to come to the office meet my staff, interact with them; meet suppliers; solve problems. I face challenges; think out of the box; invent new procedures; introduce new structure, help other people to think right. See your thoughts and ideas come on the paper and you see them on the site, part of the network. So all these things bring happiness and joy to me and doing this helps me to be a good mom” – “when I go home I totally isolate myself from work. Whatever happens at work, happens at work; at home, I am mom and the tricky thing which works out for me is that am not available to my kids all the time, I have this few hours with them so I make sure that I give them the quality time”

Halah sees every day as a new challenge but does not consider challenges as negative. This does not mean that “I don’t go weak sometimes or I lose strength; It happens, but again I refuel myself positively either I divert my attention to new things or I get involved in different activities like to recharge my energy”

Halah feels touched by Sheikh Mohammed [bin Rashid Al Maktoum] as a role model; he is her ‘number one inspiration’. “every time I feel weak, I look at him I say: ‘He is running a country, he is running a city in the name of Dubai but he never feels tired, he never hesitates to wake up every morning attend his duties.’ How can I? And if I compare the challenges I face to the challenges he faces and his accomplishments, I feel I am ashamed”

Leadership has several meanings to Halah: “It’s how you inspire people to do what you want; this is one thing. Leadership to me is how to make every member in my team feel he is a leader and his voice can reach out to me and how can I make him see his achievements coming into reality. What else does leadership mean to me? It means to me, I was able to do this how to make this huge department run by itself even if I am not sitting on this chair. I don’t want this show to run because I am there; I want this show to run because there is a proper, solid system, dynamic system.” Halah believes it is important to integrate or have a proper, solid system in place that can run dynamically; not depending on people. “I like to address every aspects of the function I am running, this is leadership also means to me. Leadership means also to me, how to make people love their job, come every morning”

Halah considers herself to be a very demanding leader who has high expectations, and does not accept anything less than the best quality. “I beat myself very hard, but I don’t beat my employees hard If they are doing a good job, because I am giving them a clear guideline”, She also believes that when people are not doing a good job, it is often because of poor communication from a leader: “First question I ask myself is ‘Did I make myself clear? Did I choose the right person to do this job?’”

To Halah, leadership means that when she faces a problem at work, she doesn’t look for someone to blame. “I don’t say ‘who did this problem?’ I don’t do that here in my department. This is what happens unfortunately, everywhere - Who did this mistake? - It’s not about who did this mistake, it is ‘Why did this mistake happen?’ ” She believes this comes to system improvement; improving procedures; improving work instructions and guidelines. “Why was the system defeated? Where is the weak point? Where are the weaknesses? So Train people. People make mistakes out of negligence and this is why I will not look at people first. People make mistake because the system is not clear to them. If you fix the problem, this will not happen again”

On a more personal view, Halah considers that she spend more time at work that she does at home, and at home she is tired; exhausted. “If no one wants to speak to me I will kiss his hand. Yeah, I can’t tell my kids not to speak to me; I can’t tell my husband not to speak. But if they don’t want to speak to me, I will appreciate that”. Halah believes that since most of our energies are spent at work we should try to make

it a positive energy. We deal with humans who have different needs; different moods; problems outside work and we should understand the people who work with us are not machines. "They've been controlled by problems back home commitment; financial commitments; family commitments, most of them are foreigners. There are family demands. So, if they don't feel comfortable coming to work everyday and they don't feel that the management here understands their demands, they will not be able to perform." To this end, Halah tries to ensure that all employees feel comfortable at work. "You don't want an employee to come every day to work, hate the place where he spends most of his time and he will not be able to deliver". She gives an example of this: "I walk among the employees and if I see one of them has opened a magazine or opened the internet, I never say, 'Hey you what you doing?' All my employees have access to the internet; browsing the internet or checking personal e mails, that's fine if he wants to check his personal e mail" Her philosophy is that when employees feel comfortable they give their best; she doesn't have to tell them how to invest their time. They see how she works and she sets examples "they walk into my office they see me having my breakfast; in one hand I am holding the sandwich and with the other hand I am signing a paper and they say 'oh shall we come again' I say no, please come join me'. Sometimes I open a magazine just to put myself in different mood; forget myself from one mood or another, just flip through it for 10-15 minutes. If I, as a human, need this to support myself; to inject myself with energy, of course they need the same."