BANKABLE SOFTWARE

ICS Financial Systems (ICSFS) says it has the software to make Jordan's banks world class.

BY DINA AL-WAKEEL

Robert Hazboun, ICSFS Managing Director

Jordan's banking sector has undergone something of a revolution over recent years. Once-fusty banks now compete to see who can provide the latest and most sophisticated products and services to their customers. This has naturally required banks to adopt ever more sophisticated software systems, just like those developed by ICSFS for its global client base.

ICSFS Managing Director Robert Hazboun spoke to Venture about his company's operations in Jordan's financial sector, which is easily now one of the cornerstones of the Kingdom's economy.

What sets your ICS Banks software apart from similar systems?
It is an enterprise banking suite that includes different modules such as lending, treasury, trade, finance, investment, Internet banking, and

Islamic banking. The product is fully empowered by Oracle's latest technologies and products that furnish the system with the newest technology and infrastructure trends. We were the first in the whole region to move our system to Oracle 10g, then to Oracle 11g, and we recently moved to Oracle 12c, which is the latest. From a business side, the system is continuously enriched with new features and enhancements.

How much demand is there for your products here in Jordan?
We are present in 28 countries, in three continents, and our client base includes about 81 customers that are all running banks or financial institutions. More than 70 percent of our clients are in Asia, 21 percent in Africa, and 8 percent are in Europe. But business in Jordan is not as it's supposed to be. The problem is that

local banks prefer to work with system providers that are based abroad.

Why should a bank come to you instead of going to another company, or even just developing their software in-house?
For many reasons, the first of which is the product itself which is user-friendly. It is very comprehensive and includes most, if not all, of the banking activities. We consider ourselves to be excellent in support and we always guarantee a rapid implementation of the product. It doesn't take us years, but a maximum of 13 to 14 months to implement our systems for complex projects. We are on the same par as other international providers, but what sets us apart is that we are specialized in this region and emerging markets.
Some banks do their own

development in-house, but I don't think it's feasible. It makes more sense to outsource to a third-party supplier because if you do it in-house then you will always rely on one or two people who might resign or go on leave and that will create problems. The technology is also constantly evolving and is in need of continuous updating. In the near future, banks will move to cloud computing to having their own systems outdoors. So don't waste your time in system development and re-inventing the wheel, instead use your time to provide support, customer service, and banking business. At the end, they will cost you a lot.

How advanced do you think Jordanian banks are compared to their counterparts in the region?
They are really advanced and are always looking for new technologies. They are also difficult clients that are complicated and demanding. Our customers in Jordan include the Jordan Commercial Bank, Arab Jordan Investment Bank,

Jordan Dubai Islamic Bank, and more recently Jordan Kuwait Bank, as well as other financial companies. And we are eager to expand our client base.
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their systems must cover everything. If the bank still uses paper work this means the system has failed. Everything should be computerized by now and everything should be on the system. Training is also crucial.

In the last few years Islamic banking grew exponentially. How are you tapping into this key market?
In early 2000 we noticed that people were looking for Islamic banking so we started developing the system

from zero. We did not switch the conventional system to Islamic, and instead we did it from scratch using Islamic sharia. We currently have eight clients that offer Islamic banking, including Jordan Dubai Islamic Bank here. We are positive that in the future we will win more accounts.

What are some of the challenges that the ICSFS is facing?
The challenge is to always be on top of technology. There's nothing stable about this business. You cannot say: "I finished my job." So there's no rest at all. You cannot stop thinking and you have to keep moving, otherwise others will surpass you and take over. Today our system is running 24/7, so there's no stoppage. In the past you had to stop to create backup but now the backup takes place while the system is running. And in the end the most important thing is performance. To measure that, we did a benchmark for our system with IBM in France, and we got unmatched results.
You have to always be on top of things and have a vision that sets your path for the future, otherwise you will die. For instance, we have decided on our vision for the coming 10 years and how our services will look like.

What about your medium and long-term plans?
Adding new modules to our banking system tops the list of our plans. For example, we will add services that we never thought of introducing before, such as introducing the fingerprint to our system, which currently applies iris recognition only. We are also looking to create a complete workflow in the system. Our future plans also include penetrating new markets, especially Europe and Asia, like Malaysia and Indonesia.
It has been 33 years of non-stop effort. There is no rest for us. We have to keep our systems at an international level and stay on top of things.❷