

# IMAD GHANTOUS: THIS IS HOW YOU BECOME A THOUGHT LEADER

After successfully managing the delivery of several complicated projects in the Middle East, *Imad Ghantous*, Senior Vice President of Hill International, talks about Hill's endeavours in thought leadership in the construction industry.

So how important is this objective?

*by Tamim Al Hakim*



In an exclusive interview with Arabian Business, Imad Ghantous, Senior Vice President of Hill International, emphasizes his firm's goal to become a thought leader in construction industry having delivered some of the most complicated and challenging projects in the Middle East and North Africa.

Thought Leadership is an important topic that is, perhaps, not given its fair share of recognition in our industry.

It is about reaching a plateau of knowledge that makes your firm become the go to authority for information, technology and expertise related to a specific field in our Industry.

It is about possessing an inherent ability to contribute positively to the advancement of the Science of Project Management and also having the ability to speculate on what the market needs will be tomorrow.

Recognizing trends before they actually occur and applying that insight to improve the outcome is the hallmark of thought leadership.

Being on the cutting edge of technology and utilizing state of the art systems and processes in itself is not sufficient to become a thought leader, it is the added ability to influence and inspire our peers to implement them.

Constantly learning from an evolving industry is critical to ensure that thought leadership is always forward looking. Attaining such a status is not granted but earned through the successful delivery of projects that are challenging, critical to our clients, and to the development of the country they are in. Over the years Hill has contributed positively to its clients, the Industry, and the countries it operates in.

**To be more technical, how and when did thought leadership start for you?**

Thought leadership is a constantly evolving status. It really has to do with the industry as a whole. Getting to a point in your profession where you have executed and delivered successfully many projects and along the way contributing positively to the scientific and practical aspects of the industry, transforms you to become the go-to entity when difficult projects or complex projects come along.

The Palm in Dubai, the award winning Muscat Airport, the Bahrain Airport, the Abu Dhabi Airport, and King Abdullah Financial District in Saudi Arabia, all are large complex projects Hill has delivered successfully and we continue to do so. This is partly why we have become the go-to project management firm; it is about trust and credibility.

**Can we talk about how did you reach this level?**

Frankly, there are no specific metrics or threshold that trigger when you become a thought leader. Thought leadership is built over many years as people start gaining trust in your work and hence you begin to grow your credibility and your brand in the industry.

**4.4**

**4.4 billion dollars was the construction value of Muscat Airport that Hill participated in its development.**



This is how you become a thought leader, by contributing positively to the industry, looking at topics that are important to the industry and becoming a thought leader within those topics, contributing positively either through technical papers or seminars etc. and in various ways that you can help mentor the thought process.

It is not only about mentoring individuals but also mentoring and becoming custodians of new ideas and new thoughts, and implementing technology in its support. Really, it is about listening to what the market is telling you and then responding to the market positively with solutions not just theory. It is better to have deep knowledge in certain topics in our industry rather than spray across too many associated topics.

At Hill, we specialize in project management within our Industry with a long track record of successfully delivered challenging projects. We are thought leaders in our field.

**What is the benefit and gain from becoming the thought leader?**

Becoming a thought leader and attaining this status within the industry has several benefits, commercial and fulfills our social responsibility to the Industry and to society in general.

**30**

**30 years plus of experience. Hill International boards in the Middle East.**



**“We are currently working on the Riyadh Metro in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that will commence operations soon. We have also participated in the King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh”**

Commercially, there is obviously a benefit because when you become a thought leader you impose your status within the industry and you gain wallet share.

However, the other aspect, which in our minds is also very important, is our contribution to the industry. It is not always about taking, it is also about giving back. This is what we do. We give back to the industry, knowledge, experience, and leadership in our profession.

We particularly look at risks, and we try as much as we can to foresee risks and mitigate them before they impact the client's projects. The whole science of risk is a complicated one. We try as much as we possibly can to simplify that and try to find methods and tools that allow for practical solutions.

**Do you want to give examples on this particular topic of thought leadership?**

The fact that we get invited to participate in large complex projects, such as projects being advertised in KSA that are large and very complex (NEOM, Red Sea), in itself is a testimony.

The fact that clients want us to become the custodians of those transformational projects is indicative of our status in the market. There is nothing bigger than a certificate on the wall that says 'yes people believe in you, that's why they are inviting you'.

They believe that you are knowledgeable, that you are a thought leader in what you do, and they trust handing over their project to you. When the stakes are high and failure is not an option, you would see Hill in the lead.

**How would you differentiate Hill from another company in this industry? How do you compete? What makes you really stand out as the thought leader?**

Our credibility within the industry combines several ingredients: knowledge, experience, humility, honesty, leadership, and an insatiable quest to become the go to leaders in the industry.

Vanity is not in our vocabulary because once you believe you are the best that is a sure way to complacency.



We let our practice speak for itself.

Several of our competitors have project management as a bolt on to a basic design consultancy. We specialize in project management and this is why we have become thought leaders in Project Management. Does that differentiate us? Of course it does.

In addition, we pride ourselves on the ability to protect our clients, from the adverse effect of risk to their projects. Potential interaction with uncertainty could certainly be detrimental to a project's success. Our ability to work with our clients to mitigate the impact of these problems is what differentiates us in the industry.

**2014**  
2014 marked the commencement of work on the Riyadh Metro in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**Isn't that what project management is?**

That is part of what project management is. A part of the profession we particularly excel in. Nobody likes surprises. Our ability to foresee risks and mitigate them before they impact our client's interests gives us a clear edge over our competitors.

**Being an international company, does it help?**

Yes, of course it helps. We are basically an international company with the ability to deliver locally. Therefore, this aspect of our business, allows us to mobilize experience from around the world to the benefit of projects we deliver to our clients.

**How would you describe the performance of Hill international in the region?**

The interesting part of our profession is that the evidence of what we deliver is life size! You can see and you can experience it. All we need to do is just point to the projects that we have delivered. They, themselves, are a testament to our success. (Pointing at the palm: The palm is one of our projects). That was a unique project.

**“Imad Ghantous, Senior Vice President of Hill International emphasized that firm wants to become a thought leader in the construction industry.”**

**10**  
10 billion dollar in the approximate value of the King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh.

The client came to us because of our ability to deliver large complex projects.

The award winning Muscat Airport, a brand new green-field airport, is another testament to our ability as an international company to deliver locally.

In Saudi, we are working on the Riyadh metro which will soon be in service. We participated in the King Abdullah Financial District. That is a major achievement. There are several other examples that you can see and experience and it is a testament to what we have delivered locally and what we have contributed to the industry and to countries' respective economies.

**3rd quarter 2018 the company suffered a loss of 7.7 million dollars, what does that say about your performance?**

I do not believe that this is a true measure of the company's resiliency and long-term success.

The crux of the matter here is that Hill International is on an aggressive growth plan. Our CEO is committed to growing the firm and we as the senior officers of the firm are committed to supporting this plan.

We will grow the firm in accordance to a specific well-defined plan and strategy. When you look at the performance of the company, you should also look at the people that are leading it. Then you make up your mind about its well-being. When you have all the correct ingredients in place, you can only achieve success.

**What can we expect in 2019?**

What you can expect is a performance that will maximize our shareholders returns in accordance with a well-defined and executed strategy by a committed team of senior management lead by a visionary CEO.

**New or recent projects you are involved in?**

There are many projects in the pipeline particularly several mega projects in KSA. However, our approach is measured and well balanced. With large projects comes big revenue as well as large risks. You need to be careful in the way that you select the projects, careful in the way you select your partners and very careful in the way you select your clients.

**What are your views of KSA and UAE markets?**

Although it has been quiet in 2018 in the UAE, I think as we approach 2020, things are going to pick up in preparation for the expo

2020. However, there is a scale difference between the UAE and Saudi Arabia's markets. The Saudi market is spectacular, I have to say. The project typologies and the sectoral diversity is just amazing. We recognize that there is a big market out there. We want to bring our experience and expertise to assist Saudi Arabia in achieving its ambitious plans to transform its economy. We are committed to achieving this vision.

**Diversification, how to maintain that in your work?**

In terms of looking at any business, you always need a good mix of small, medium and large sized projects. The thought leadership that I talk about is not dependent on the size of the project. Thought leadership can apply to small project as much as it can apply to big project. The diversity in the project size is just to make sure that the business has a well-balanced cash flow. In addition, you need to maintain diversification across several sectors to ensure sectoral diversification and finally geographical diversity to guard against macro-economic and geopolitical risks.

**Where do you see yourselves in the years to come?**

We have a very clear mandate to grow the firm. We want to grow the firm responsibly, we want to grow it in a way that benefits our shareholders. We are not going for a shotgun approach, we want to continue being specialized in the field that we are in, and we want to continue being the magnet for the clients who look for a specialized consultant who they can trust.