

Women's network pays off in the Middle East

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2011

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Dr Michelle Webber of Brock University, left, and Erin Miller Rankin of Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer at the networking seminar.

Satish Kumar / The National

Sometimes a good idea has even greater unintended side effects.

When organisers launched a series of seminars in 2009 called Mena Women in Business, they expected only 20 people would attend. But about 80 showed up to listen to the inaugural panel discussion on issues affecting women professionals in the region.

And more than 115 asked to sit in during the most recent talk held earlier this week in the Capital Club Dubai.

"Having professional women's events was just something I missed when I moved to the Middle East," says Erin Miller Rankin, who established the series of seminars and is a senior associate at the Dubai office of Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, an international law firm.

But panel members were not the only ones to speak at the event. Many in the audience also used the opportunity to network with one another both before and after the panel discussion.

Given that past attendees have ranged from the ages of 14 to 64 and represented a variety of professions such as law, finance, engineering and education, some feel the seminars provide a rare networking opportunity for professional women in the Emirates.

"Looking back over my career, a lot of things happened as a result of networking," says Dr Alma Kadragic, who attended the event and is academic programme director for the University of Wollongong in Dubai. "I've never gotten a job through [passing a resume to] HR."

Dr Kadragic argues that networking is even more important in the UAE job market, where she says hiring managers tend to put more weight on making the right impression in person than through the particulars of their CV.

The only way you're going to get someone taking a chance on you is if you know them," says Dr Kadragic, "or they know about you."

While the concept of networking obviously is not new, experts argue its need has grown that much more important in light of the layoffs and company cutbacks of recent years.

In the US, the Greater Philadelphia Senior Executive Group, which helps members in senior-level executive positions exchange business contacts, says that half its members believe networking is either somewhat or very important in helping them accomplish their career goals.

And human resource executives in the US say networking is the best way to look for a job and more effective than targeting management recruitment firms, searching online job boards or cold-calling potential employers, according to a survey from Challenger, Gray & Christmas, a career placement firm.

Ama Derban, who works in the Dubai office of Barclays, says networking has helped her personally, by broadening her circle of friends, as well as professionally, by linking to others with similar workplace interests.

Another Barclays employee, Sophie, added that while she has never got a job through networking she has helped some peers in securing new positions.

Even the Mena Women in Business event itself has helped Freshfields with its own recruiting efforts: one Emirati woman who happened to attend a lecture last year later ended up being hired as part of a new internship programme at the law firm.

"We were very fortunate we met our last intern through this event," says Ms Rankin.

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