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## Lebanon well-positioned to become hub for IT services

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Lebanon is well-positioned to offer web development, digital marketing, and information technology services to local, regional and international clients, according to several owners and partners of companies in and around Beirut.

These experts agreed that Lebanon's global position for IT services, outsourcing and offshoring capabilities is unique, due to its geographical location, its multilingual talents, its cultural convergences between East and West, and its excellent technical education opportunities.

Marcel Farjallah, partner and chief programmer at Fluid Design & Media, said that "as a Lebanese business, for the rest of the world, we can usually provide the same or more expertise for lower prices when compared by with Western businesses."

Multilingual web-platforms are a hallmark of Lebanese quality, and an obvious advantage of contracting with a Lebanese firm. Joe Hage, CEO of eSharing, told *The Daily Star* that "almost every customer asks for translation services, and we have an entire team devoted to this."

"Quality is the advantage in Lebanon," said Nassib Haddad, managing director of nhgraphics. "It is quite impressive for a country that is so small and has such limited resources ... but look at what's coming out of Lebanon, and look at the many satisfied clients."

Lebanon's web sector is currently benefiting from the global financial crises in two ways. On the matter of the global

slowdown, Hage said, "In order to edge the competition, in the hard times, even in the United States, corporate decision makers believe [a downturn] to be a good time to optimize their business ... A downturn is a positive for us."

At the same time, the local Lebanese market has remained fairly insulated from the global problems, and in fact has prospered as foreign Lebanese nationals have transferred an enormous amount of capital to Lebanese banks. The pace of this new influx of money has quickened in tandem to an in-

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crease in political stability, and Haddad acknowledged that due to "good times in Lebanon," there are "bigger budgets for innovation and investment."

This combination of local stability, international recession, and Lebanese prosperity creates a favorable business environment for marketing professionals in general, and web development agencies in particular.

On the matter of local projects, Haddad, Hage and Farjallah were in agreement that the Lebanese market is both very competitive and open.

All griped about local "developers" with limited expertise who are a problem for "more capable, professional developers," as Farjallah put it. "As a result, for small web-design projects, there is a lot of competition and

the client rarely know the difference between good and bad ... agencies."

Haddad seconded this, saying that, "people who take a couple courses ... call themselves experts!"

This has increased a sense among the larger and more accomplished agencies that strong referral networks are the key to business development in the Mideast region. Reputation, portfolio, word of mouth and referral remain far more important than advertising for small-to-medium projects.

However, for larger, foreign projects, aggressive business development practices are still needed to guarantee a strong lead pipeline.

"Being a Lebanese company is a big plus when dealing with the Gulf, and a plus when dealing with the world," said Farjallah. "In the region, Lebanese are usually well regarded, as engineers and people with skills. We have also been more exposed to Western culture which can be argued to be the origin of the regional activities today."

On this, all were in agreement that an understanding of how to leverage Western business, marketing and cultural practices was important.

Though each company, eSharing, Fluid and nhgraphics, began differently in terms of whether their initial client base was Lebanese or Western, all agreed that their company's expertise and technical philosophies converged in Lebanon between Middle Eastern and American/European.

Above all else, all saw this as a tactical advantage.

economy when it protects the...? The authorities more than free these companies will seize any...ers the country papers showing...usive dealer of...ro said. spoke on community told *The* many officials at...industry are become merchants of cheap production. ers will use all to ensure that...ete with them...It's a pity. The companies are...an the government said.

