

# *Captaining a new Era*

Zurich International Life's new CEO,  
*Mufazzal Kajiji* outlines plans for the insurer  
with *Sandhya Divakaran*.





It has been said before, “The Show Must Go On.” Following the departure of former CEO Walter Jopp, Zurich International Life (Zurich) welcomed Mufazzal Kajiji as its leader. Mufi, as he is popularly known, is the new incumbent to the insurer’s leadership, and hails from a banking background. Having run bancassurance and wealth management divisions previously, he is no stranger to the financial services industry. Perhaps the choice is telling of the shift in times within the life insurance industry.

In keeping with the post-pandemic trend of digital transformation and insurtech within the insurance industry, Mufi is quite positive of its implementation within Zurich. His banking background comes in full capacity here. He said: “The banking industry, going by its nature, has a headstart. It is individualistic, connected, it’s almost a must-have. The digitalisation and digital initiatives have been far more pronounced in the banking world and I see that it’s now getting translated into the insurance world. I think it is a great time right now. We will see the next level of digital transformation in the insurance world shortly.

“At Zurich, at group level, we have several initiatives in play right from the phase of client experience to re-engineering our

products and making the customer journey more digital than they were before. We are also looking at partnering in affinities through a digital channel or contributor. Locally in the Middle East we have a digital studio which has recently been convened to take up all our digital initiatives. I think we are the only company that has the digital onboarding journey which all our partners use in order to onboard new customers. We are making it more feature-based and much more digital than it was. The adoption rate there has gone over 70 percent, when we started it used to be 10-15 percent.”

The BOD-49 regulations for life insurance implemented in the year 2020 had made a sweeping change for the sector, introducing much-needed transparency and protection to the policyholder. As one among the larger players in the market, Mufi is confident that this has already improved the business of life insurance. “A change in the regulation is only for the better of the industry. It has made products more efficient. While the regulations make the industry more robust than what it was, it controls a level of players that are serious enough to be in that distribution phase. It is more aligned to global practices. These regulatory changes may be hard to swallow for some when it began, but it’s been two years and you will



see that things are as before now. Distributors have accepted it and adopted it. Now you will see a smooth flow of business and a better qualitative business than before,” he affirmed.

While brokers have always had a prominent role in the life insurance industry, the new regulations saw many brokers departing from this course. Zurich has not changed its focus on other distribution partners such as independent financial advisors, banks and its own distribution network. In fact, the DIFC Employee Workplace Savings (DEWS) scheme that was launched in 2020 has acted as a very impactful and important distribution channel for Zurich, with more companies being onboarded and more employees becoming a part of the Zurich customer base.

“Since the mandate was launched in the DIFC, we have onboarded 95 percent of the total companies that have joined and are in the process of onboarding the remaining five percent. The government of Dubai has recently launched it for all government entities. And there are about 66 government entities that have onboarded on the DEWS platform with us and that is now underway. Now I see this as exponential growth as this is the logical flowthrough to the private sector at some stage. I personally feel this is a very healthy program that should exist in any mature economy. We just got the mandate, so there will be other free zones, the private sector. Overall, it will help for the government’s vision to retain capital and talent and have employees save for their future in time,” Mufi pointed out, while looking forward to further dialogue with other financial jurisdictions.

In a time when the pandemic was at its peak and the infection rate was high, the financial services industry was given a natural hand with people becoming more aware of the need for critical illness plans and the advantages of building a savings culture. This is far more pronounced in the corporate sectors where End of Service funds are treated like an emergency fund in a historically gratuity-centred workplace structure. A recent virtual roundtable by Zurich International Life Middle East shared findings based on two different surveys conducted on workplace savings and life insurance. According to the findings, about 47 percent of employers mentioned the lack of a separate end-of-service fund, while 53 percent did have one but did dip into these funds during periods of cash flow shortage.

“Pension as a program has not been mandated. The discipline does not exist. There are no guidelines or regulations that govern a fund like this. And so you see companies dipping into their End of Service fund, employers not saving enough for future liabilities on behalf of the employee. What you will see is a change over the next three to five years where this would become much more organised, structured. We have seen this in many other countries. So we are at the cusp of that happening,” Mufi commented.

So how is Zurich translating such insights into a focused financial wellness training for its corporate customers? Mufi explained: “Currently we run a lot of educational sessions with companies on a bespoke basis. That’s a continuous program. We even have DIFC participating. Our own teams handle the sessions, basically educating the human resources personnel in those companies. We also have our staff talking to employees directly on the need for savings. This is important and one must keep having these forums. Perhaps at some stage it could be government driven.”

As the new helmsman of the company, Mufi is focusing his background and knowledge in setting up a positive customer experience, a trend seen in the entire industry. “There are quite a few enhancements, solutions that will eventually bring the best-in-class customer experience, with the end goal of protecting the customer. These days it is more about providing an ecosystem of a solution. We are looking at other touch points and areas in which customers feel more connected and it makes more sense for them to get connected or for some other purpose.”

This enhanced customer experience will go a long way in reinforcing and retaining a customer base that has been known to be transient owing to a large number of expatriates, who are seeing the impact of high inflation and post-covid scenarios. “The penetration of life insurance has been extremely low. That itself and the awareness created because of the pandemic does incline people to thinking about protecting themselves. I would think this is more educative and awareness driving. We will continue in this area,” Mufi said. He believes the inflation is cyclic and is positive about the UAE government’s focus and vision in transforming the economy.

“It gives me great confidence here in saying any business, particularly Zurich, we see a huge future for us here,” he said. 