



## WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

### Interview with Amal Zdaik from the Moroccan Customs Administration



As part of the WCO Women in Customs series, we had the pleasure of sitting down with Amal Zdaik, Head of the Information Systems Division within the Moroccan Customs Administration. Read on to become more closely acquainted with someone who is disciplined and passionate about what she does, who keeps her feet on the ground while still aiming high, and who is purposeful yet open-minded, and to learn more about topics such as her career to date, her work-life balance struggles and her vision of leadership.

**WCO:** Amal, thank you for joining us today. Before we talk about your career, can you tell us how you came to work for the Customs Administration in the first place?

**Amal Zdaik:** I started working for the Customs Administration in January 1997, when I'd just turned 23. A few months prior to that, I'd completed my degree in IT engineering, specializing in software engineering. It was my first experience of a workplace, and I've stayed there ever since.

The Customs Administration was recruiting its first cohort of engineers from a range of different specializations at the time, with a particular focus on IT. There were lots of applicants for the jobs on offer, and we were called for interview in alphabetical order based on our surnames. That meant that my interview didn't happen until the very end of the day – it was nearly 7 p.m.! I can still remember how those hours crawled by.

When I was asked “What do you know about Customs?”, I answered “Not a huge amount, but I do know that it involves working alongside professionals from lots of different backgrounds, including tax officials, representatives of law enforcement and

many more, and so it's pretty much guaranteed to be a fascinating environment for a programmer." The recruitment panel seemed somewhat surprised, but I got the job.

**WCO:** So, you already knew a little bit about what a Customs official does?

**Amal Zdaik:** My parents worked for a bank, and their jobs involved handling the financing of international operations. This meant that imports and exports, the domiciliation of foreign exchange securities and currency transfers were frequent topics of daily conversation at home while I was growing up. I was familiar with what foreign trade involved.

What attracted me to the job of software engineer within the Customs Administration was the variety of the role. I had – and still have – an insatiable hunger to tackle challenges, and I knew that accepting a job within the Customs Administration would mean that I was never short of those! On top of that, I also wanted to give something back to my country in return for having been given the opportunity to get a good education.

To tell you the truth, I originally dreamed of becoming an airline pilot, but I failed the medical, so I switched to engineering because I loved maths so much. And that's how everything fell into place.

**WCO:** Can you tell me about your career and any experiences that stand out to you?

**Amal Zdaik:** Like all new recruits, I spent several months working through a comprehensive programme of training courses at the Customs Training Centre, which touched on all of the different aspects of the job. This theoretical component was backed up by a series of practical internships within a number of different operational services. It was only after that that I joined the Information System Division, known as the Computer Science Division at the time, as a designer/developer.

The Customs Administration was in the process of modernizing its information system, and so multiple different computerization projects were under way. I found it fascinating from the outset, and I still do. Given the varied nature of a career in Customs and the ever-changing nature of technology, there is never any shortage of obstacles to surmount or risks to mitigate!

Step by step, I then rose through the ranks. After two years, I was appointed Office Manager, and this was my first taste of responsibility. I felt obliged to demonstrate unflinching commitment to my role in return for the trust that my managers had placed in me, but it wasn't an easy task!

Further progress up the ladder meant submitting applications whenever calls for candidates were issued. Around 15 years ago, I became Head of Division, and, since then, I've managed a multidisciplinary team of around 60 engineers and technicians, both male and female.

All of the projects implemented within the Customs Administration have an IT component. Our role is to deliver innovative solutions that meet our users' needs in every respect while, at the same time, guaranteeing the best possible user experience within the wider context of the ongoing digital transformation.

A former Director General told us that we should dream big and never limit our horizons. It was his words that inspired us as we redesigned our information system, and they continue to inspire us as we implement various strategic projects within the Customs Administration.

The most challenging projects are the ones I find most interesting and the ones I remember best, because they are the ones that really push me to reach a whole new level in both my personal and professional endeavours. The projects that have involved working with other governmental and commercial entities have been particularly rewarding. For example, when we faced the task of computerizing all procedures with the aim of going paperless, some of our partners lacked the capacity to make this happen immediately, and we had to take the lead while putting in place ingenious stop-gap measures in order to ensure that progress continued to be made.

**WCO:** Has the fact that you are a woman had any impact during your lengthy career within the Customs Administration?

**Amal Zdaik:** I don't know what the ratio of men to women was back in 1997, but nowadays women account for 1,439 out of a total of 5,615 Customs officials, or in other words 26%, with 168 holding managerial positions, including three at a senior level.

I have to admit that I've never been in a situation where I felt that I would have been treated differently if I were a man. Equal treatment is a given, and promotions have always worked on the basis of merit. We work in an environment that fosters our development, regardless of whether we are male or female.

**WCO:** Have you found it hard to achieve a work-life balance?

**Amal Zdaik:** I have two children, and it's not always been easy to balance my responsibilities at work against those at home. I was lucky because my parents helped out a lot when my children were small.

Working in the Information Systems Division means that we not only have time frames for implementing our projects, but we must also keep the information system available, functional and secure at all times. We have to put an awful lot of time and energy into making sure that this is the case.

I've only been able to maintain harmony between home and work by achieving a good balance, by being disciplined with myself and by thinking carefully about ways I could be more organized. In my opinion at least, it's important to identify my personal and professional priorities, to set myself goals that are realistic and achievable, to accept that some things might be neither of those things, and, in particular, to improve my

time management skills by putting in place organizational strategies that maximize productivity.

Saying “no” to things that are impossible can sometimes be very difficult, and, for that reason alone, we risk getting bogged down in the details and losing sight of the wood for the trees.

I have to admit that it’s not easy to find time for everything, but I make every effort to spend quality time with my family, to exercise regularly, to travel and to set aside a couple of hours every day to read, early in the morning and sometimes late in the evening as well.

**WCO:** Do you have any advice for those at the start of their Customs careers? What skills or attributes should they be focusing on?

**Amal Zdaik:** I’ve got a wealth of advice for anyone who would like to embark on a career in Customs!

But, to keep it brief, the first thing I’d say is that you need to put yourself out there. Achievements are good, but people need to know about them and recognize them for what they’re worth.

The next thing I’d recommend is having the courage of your convictions – the courage to seize the initiative and take something that is “just an idea” from its incipient stages right through to its realization.

Another important piece of the equation is a willingness to take risks, since there’s a lot of truth in the saying, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Risks need to be carefully weighed up, of course, but then taken if necessary.

My final piece of advice would be never to give up, and to show up every day ready for a fresh challenge. This should be your motto, and it’s what will help you to stand out from the crowd.

If you want to manage a team or lead strategic projects, you’ll need to find a way of cultivating your leadership skills. These skills don’t come naturally – they’re gained through hard work and many years of experience.

Disrupting entrenched habits, pushing the boundaries of innovation and proposing totally novel solutions are far from trivial tasks. The only way you’ll succeed in managing a team is if you leverage your powers of persuasion, your assertiveness and your open-mindedness, starting from the premise that many hands make light work, and that teamwork – and team thinking – really does make the dream work.

I’ve had the immense good fortune to have had managers who have shared this vision, and to have been able to spend my career within a fast-moving department of a dynamic Customs Administration. The field of Customs is unparalleled when it comes

to amazing career opportunities, and it offers jobs that are not only stimulating but also meaningful. I certainly couldn't imagine a better career for myself.

**WCO:** Thank you for telling us about your life and your career.

**Amal Zdaik:** It's an honour to be included in the WCO Women in Customs series and to play my part in introducing readers to different careers in Customs. I hope that my story will inspire both women and men alike to embark on a career in Customs and to give something back to their country.