Diversity is 'competitive advantage' says GCHQ's Legal Director and Race Champion

Our new Director of Legal Affairs and International Relations shared his journey to GCHQ with the Asian Standard

"You can't be what you can't see." This is the message from Shehzad Charania MBE, who has recently joined GCHQ, the UK's intelligence,cyber and security agency, as their new Director of Legal Affairs and International Relations. He is one of just a handful of senior officials at GCHQ who can reveal their true identity, and as a second-generation Muslim immigrant, he says it is a "significant opportunity to inspire a diverse workforce". GCHQ works around the clock to protect the UK from those who wish to do us harm, including countering terrorists, hostile states and serious and organised criminal networks.

"I never thought that a career in government, particularly national security or international affairs, was for a second-generation Muslim immigrant like me, even though I was always fascinated by these areas from a young age," Shehzad said, recalling how as a child he used to stay up late to watch the 10 o'clock news with his father. " When I joined government there were very few people who looked like me, so now I hope to be a role model for others from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic backgrounds who want to protect their country and their communities."

Shehzad's father was born in India, and mum, the daughter of Indian immigrants, in Tanzania. They're proud of the work he does to protect national security. "We weren't well off as a family when my sister and I were younger. My parents came to this country with very little and worked really hard. They will always be my heroes because of the direction they gave us, and the sacrifices they made."

Through means-tested bursaries, scholarships and grants, Shehzad's education culminated in a Masters degrees in International Relations and International Law, both at the London School of Economics. His first job was for a law firm in the city working on tax finance, but after discovering that "it wasn't really for me," he joined Government and has since worked in the Treasury Solicitor's Department, now the Government Legal Department, Foreign Office, British Embassy in the Hague, the Attorney General's Office, and now his new role at GCHQ.

GCHQ has stations across the UK, including its headquarters at the iconic 'Doughnut' building in Cheltenham, as well as bases in London and Manchester. Shehzad, who is based in London, explained that GCHQ is at "the forefront not just of the most important events going on in the world today, but also grappling with the future challenges that will be facing my children and grandchildren."

GCHQ is the UK's intelligence, cyber and security agency, focusing on communications: how to access, analyse - and occasionally - disrupt the communications of the UK's most capable adversaries. "And it's all done under strict and world-leading legislation to ensure we're accountable and transparent," said Shehzad, noting that GCHQ has access to only a tiny percentage of global communications traffic. "People ask, 'are you reading my emails?' Let me assure you, it would be unlawful as well as physically impossible to read everyone's emails or listen to everyone's calls. That's not what we do."

In 2019, Shehzad was appointed national security race champion and says that "GCHQ's increasing openness and transparency" was a real attraction to joining the spy agency.

Shehzad said "it's important for me to do the work I do on equality, diversity and inclusion in the open rather than the shadows, as the national security community must reflect the society it seeks to serves. I was extremely fortunate to have people in my career looking out for me, guiding me, mentoring me, coaching me. I consider it an obligation to give back and repay the faith others have shown in me throughout my career and ensure people can succeed by design rather than chance."

"GCHQ will not be successful in protecting the country from an increasing range of threats", he said, "if it does not draw on the greatest mix of minds we have at our disposal. Diversity is not therefore just a nice to have. It's not just the right thing to do. It's also mission critical. And it's important for GCHQ's license to operate."

"GCHQ deals with some of the toughest problems imaginable, from seeing patterns in a sea of data to making a vital breakthrough to prevent a terror attack. The best, most diverse minds will also think the most creatively – and in an intelligence agency which is all about technology, our diversity will give us a competitive advantage, from developing our national cyber capabilities to helping the country respond to strategic challenges like the rise of China."

It has historically been difficult for GCHQ to de-mystify and translate its mission and values, particularly to those communities from an ethnic minority background. Shehzad says there is still more to do to make GCHQ a truly diverse and

inclusive place to work but one of the reasons he joined the agency was because “it is genuinely committed to improving, and I’m incredibly proud that improving equality, diversity and inclusion is one of the organisation’s strategic objectives.”

“The proportion of ethnic minority colleagues in the national security community is very low compared to the wider population. Not utilising all the talent in our society will put us at a strategic disadvantage for all the challenges we must face over the coming years and decades. This means not only more people from ethnic minority communities, and all underrepresented backgrounds, but also that it’s the most inclusive community we can build, where everyone can thrive, develop and progress, regardless of their background and life experience.”

Shehzad says the intelligence agency is making progress, with a thriving ethnic minority network, owned and led by people across the organisation to provide support, challenge and education. It is also reviewing its recruitment processes to explore what more they can do to better represent the communities they serve, including increasing the proportion of ethnic minority staff on interview panels.

GCHQ proudly states that it ‘never stops’ and operates a world-leading 24/7 operational centre, but Shehzad says the organisation has a very healthy flexible culture and working hours tailored to individual needs. “It’s important to me that I have a work life balance so that I can spend time with my family and friends. Work is an important part of my life, but not the only part. My family keeps me very busy and happy, but otherwise I love cooking (although nothing beats my mum’s cuisine) and travelling.”

“GCHQ is quite rightly more open about what it does more than it has ever been. Of course, some things remain secret – we are an intelligence agency after all. But we talk more about our work than ever before and this transparency is important in reaching out to people as a way to attract them to work here. We have careers in so many different, fascinating fields, from the law, HR, finance, tech, cyber, software development, languages, maths etc. There’s something for everyone.”

If you’re interested in finding out more about a career at GCHQ visit the Careers section of our website.

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