

Radio Zamaneh (RZ)

Q & A with Joris van Duijne, Programme Manager at RZ

What is Radio Zamaneh?

Radio Zamaneh¹ is a Persian language media organisation based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. It provides independent journalism, citizen reporting, e-learning, debate and knowledge to an audience in Iran and to the Persian speaking community around the world. It was started in 2005, when Press Now (now Free Press Unlimited) partnered up with a team of Iranian journalists, bloggers and dissidents to form Radio Zamaneh. Radio Zamaneh was formally established in 2006 as a non-profit organisation under Dutch law. It has no ties to any political, ethnic or social group inside or outside Iran.

The aim of RZ is to provide independent information to Iranians in Iran. It was initially established as an online radio station and has since grown into an online news medium providing podcasts, live stream radio, articles and videos. Over the past 10 years, RZ has successfully been the media outlet for many Persian speaking writers, political dissidents, minority groups and prominent personalities in the diaspora and within Iran. It gives a voice to the unheard: geographic, ethnic and sexual minorities, young Iranians, experts, writers, bloggers and independent academic thinkers. With its vast network of writers and producers from a wide spectrum of specialisations, RZ has become a dependable source of knowledge and information on world affairs, Iranian domestic politics, the Middle East, raising issues of human rights – gender, sexuality – and of immigration, culture and literature.

Tell me about RZ as an organisation

The organisation has grown considerably over the past ten years. We have about 18 staff members in total, with approximately half technical and half support staff. The business side is made up of the Executive Director, Finance and Programme Managers. This small team manages all the donor relations, labour issues in The Netherlands and finance management. The journalistic and editorial teams are 100% Iranian and they comprise an Editor-in-Chief and both staff and freelance journalists based in Holland, other European countries and in North America.

Over the years, RZ has received financial support from many different donors – The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Free Press Unlimited

¹ www.radiozamaneh.com

(FPU), the European Commission, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and many others. Due to the changing funding arrangements in The Netherlands, particularly since 2014, the funding allocated to RZ by FPU has been specifically dedicated to capacity development of the internal organisation, based on the needs and gaps we identified.

How do you see capacity development at RZ?

We see capacity development as anything we learn that will help us do our jobs better. There are two aspects to this: (i) Technical, which is about RZ becoming a better news organisation. This involves training citizens and professional journalists in and outside Iran to do their jobs better; (ii) Institutional, which relates to Human Resource Management, Fiscal Management, Administration and Resource Mobilisation. This is about building the internal capacity of RZ through strengthening staff skills, and creating and updating internal policies. Our vision is to construct a sustainable culture for years to come, regardless of which management or personnel are in place. Tailor-made internal policies and a positive and healthy organisational culture form a strong foundation on which to build.

What have been the main capacity development issues and how do you manage these?

Over the years, our staff has needed training and support on financial management, writing winning proposals, language training and staff wellness. The issue of **language** is ongoing. RZ staff members speak different languages and, in order to facilitate communication within the team, we offer staff language courses in Dutch or English. This is something that can be easily provided, especially for those based in The Netherlands. **Wellness** is really important as we struggle with staff sickness. Our core staff has experienced a lot of trauma and loss with deep psychosocial challenges. In many instances, their family members are far away and there is a lot of personal stress. Over the past couple of years, we have invested in developing a standard Human Resources policy. This was necessary because there was no consistent approach or policy. People benefit from having a structure and some regulations. This is now institutionalised. While long-term sickness remains a challenge, the trend of calling in sick for a couple of days has reduced significantly. We have also introduced other initiatives to promote staff health and welfare. Radio Zamaneh subscribes to a gym, which is good for our staff members' physical and mental wellbeing. Also, we have a fruit basket in the office once a week. We have also tried to provide psychological support to staff through the office but this didn't work out because of language. Individual staff members now make their own plans. **Financial Management** training – from basic to advanced – has been provided to a range of different staff members. RZ had to invest a lot in financial management systems in order to handle multiple donor projects. FPU has facilitated on-

the-job support instead of out-of-office training, which has proven to be very effective for RZ finance staff. This is supplemented and consolidated using freelance specialists who provide customised coaching.

What do you do to maintain staff morale?

Given the high-pressured nature of the job, we recognise the importance of staff needing time to have fun together. That's really important. We have team building sessions that incorporate fun, for example, photography or going out for a meal as a team. Team building activities contribute to motivated staff, better communication and a shared future vision for RZ.

How do you manage OD interventions like Strategic Planning and Fundraising?

We are fortunate enough to have those skills in-house. We have an annual meeting to discuss our strategies and also our resource mobilisation targets. Our funding base is expanding and now includes the EU, the Canadian Government and other donors. With over 12 million visits to our website in 2015 and over 400,000 followers on social media, we have good stories to tell and need to ensure these get reflected in our proposals. Our products and services cater for a niche market and donors are happy with our work and see the organisation as a professional and credible partner.

What are the main challenges of capacity development?

Our relationship with FPU has been very positive and they understand the need for RZ to be supported with core costs such as salaries and organisational development initiatives. For other donors, this is not so clear-cut. Most are interested in funding project activities and this is something easier to measure. For example, it's easier to say 'x' number of participants attended 'y' training. It's much more difficult to motivate for the bookkeeping capacity within the organisation to be strengthened.

What are your future capacity development plans?

As we have grown, so has our need for new systems and structures. It is important that we sustain these and keep adapting to new needs. We are a small and lean team and can react quickly to emerging needs. We are investing into diversifying our income stream by introducing and selling advertising space on our website, for example. This will help towards our core costs. Our fundraising target from selling advertising space over the next few years is to get to 5% from the present 1% of the total budget. We also recognise the need to grow a new breed of journalists who are more investigative in nature. As this happens, the internal infrastructure to support this will emerge and change. With these policies in place,

including managing absences, staff evaluations and the creation of a pension fund, the organisation is well on its way to improved formal systems. With these in place, we will have lower rates of sickness, and motivated and productive staff. We believe and are confident that we can collaborate with FPU and others as truly equal partners.