ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Kamel Ben Naceur: Dedication to Industry – a Lifetime of Learning and Sharing

2026

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Kamel Ben Naceur conducted by Joanna Dunlop on January 10, 2025. This interview is part of the AIME Oral History Program.

ABSTRACT

Kamel Ben Naceur was born in Gafsa, Tunisia, into a family of eight children. He grew up in the highly competitive Tunisian and French education systems. He was one of the few people to be accepted into and study simultaneously at the two most coveted French engineering schools, École Polytechnique and the École Normale Supérieure, earning both an engineering degree and an agrégation de mathématiques. After graduation, Ben Naceur began his remarkable career with Schlumberger, where he held positions in R&D, operations, and economics and led various R&D initiatives in 3D model development, acid fracturing, reservoir simulation, and CO2 capture and storage. He then moved to corporate positions in SLB, heading Marketing and Technology, before becoming SLB's group Chief Economist. In 2014, Ben Naceur became Tunisia's Minister for Industry, Energy, and Mines. The work done by the Tunisian government at this time earned the country the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. In 2015, Ben Naceur became the International Energy Agency's Director for Sustainability, Technology, and Outlooks, providing guidance for international climate change negotiations. Ben Naceur also created the startup DAMORPHE, which focuses on nanotechnology and sustainability. Additionally, he has found ample time to volunteer at member societies, becoming SPE President during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022. His work with SPE and AIME earned him the Distinguished Membership, Distinguished Service, Charles F. Rand Memorial Gold Medal Award, and the Sustainability and Stewardship in the Oil and Gas Industry Award. He is also the recipient of the Medal of Commandeur de l'ordre de la République of Tunisia and the Medaille d'Or of the city of Saint-Étienne.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

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00:00:10 Introduction

Dunlop:

Good afternoon. Today is January 10th, 2025, and we're here in Abu Dhabi, [United Arab Emirates], and Fontainebleau, France, for this interview. Indeed, it's a privilege and an honor to be here to interview Kamel Ben Naceur, 2022 SPE (Society of Petroleum Engineers) President and CEO of Nomadia and Chair of Damof Technology Startup, and a former colleague of mine. Someone for whom I have great admiration. So, I'm delighted to be here to interview you, Kamel.

My name is Johana Dunlop, and I'm the IOGP [International Association of Oil and Gas Producers] Head of Membership and the SPE TD [Technical Director] HSES [Safety, Environment & Sustainability] 2017 to 2020. This recording is part of AIME's (American Institute of Mining Engineers) Oral History Capture Program.

00:01:03 Childhood in a Tight-Knit Family – Following in the Footsteps of Inspiring Siblings

Dunlop:

So Kamel, where to start with someone who is of your stature and age? Let's start with where you grew up, which country, and what kind of context did you grow up in? What did your family, your parents, do for a living, and any aspects of your early start that you feel had a great influence on who you have become?

Ben Naceur:

So, Johanna, it's a great pleasure to be interviewed by you. You know how much esteem I have for you, and it's always a pleasure to be able to interact. I grew up in a small country, Tunisia, located in North Africa, in the southwest of the country, in a mining area which was mostly dealing with phosphates.

My father was a lawyer, and my mother was very busy taking care of [myself and my seven siblings]. That was the city of Gafsa. Then we moved to the capital city of Tunisia, where I went to primary and high school.

So, eight kids, I was number seven of the brotherhood, five brothers and three sisters. The first one was about 13 years older than the youngest one, so quite a big spread. But very, very tight-knit family where the older brothers and sisters set the pathway for the rest of the family, and that was really something that helped us all in terms of developing, growing up. And we kept through the many years this very strong family belonging.

Sadly, my parents left us very early, but it didn't mean that we moved apart. We meet all the time. So, very soon, the other brothers left home. They went to study overseas, but they kept teaching us, the younger ones, to excel in the educational system.

Dunlop:

You said they set a path for you, so were they also engineers or scientists?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, absolutely. So, my older brother was a very well-known physicist who got the state doctorate in physics, and then he became the professor in university. And also, he's known as the father of renewables in Tunisia.

Dunlop:

So, a sustainability thread.

Ben Naceur:

Yes, absolutely. And the second was my sister, who actually became the first woman to be a magistrate in the highest court in Tunisia. The first woman. And then the third one went to a very prestigious school in France called École Polytechnique, and so on and so forth. So, really, they put us to a very big challenge to try to compare to what they have done.

Dunlop:

So, hard work was part of the family ethic, by the sounds of things.

Ben Naceur:

Absolutely, but that came from the right combination of my father being really a figurehead as a lawyer and my mother being very social oriented and really a peacemaker in her time.

Dunlop:

Okay, can you expand a little bit when you say peacemaker?

Ben Naceur:

Well, peacemaker—actually, I still remember when I was young, our house was always full of people who were coming to her for advice on any kind of things, like family affairs and so on, and she would always find the right words.

Dunlop:

You had good life wisdom.

Ben Naceur:

Yes.

00:06:21 Exam Prep, Competition, and a Bizarre Choice for My Education

Dunlop:

Good. So, tell me, you went to primary school, you went to secondary school in Tunis, and then presumably you went overseas to continue your studies. Can you tell us a little bit about that journey, and where you went to school, and the choices that you made?

Ben Naceur:

So, I was privileged, actually, in Tunisia that the first president of the country really set the focus on education. He said, we don't need weapons, we don't need a strong army, we should invest in education. And I was privileged to have free education, very high quality, until the end of the high school, where the government selected, was selecting, every year, the top 20 students of the country and was sending them to France to be educated in the French engineering system.

So, I was privileged to have been selected among those top 20. And then I found myself, I was 17, heading to France to go to something called the classe préparatoire, which is a French system where for two years or three years you study like crazy, like 80 hours a week, to prepare for the national, state-wide exams to enter the engineering schools. And this would define which one you would go to, and obviously, the most reputed engineering schools would have very difficult exams to get in.

And so, that's how I found myself in France. And also, in France at that time, I was amazed by the high level of the other students, who were very well prepared for those exams.

Dunlop:

So, that must have been a bit of a shock to your system as well, suddenly, at 17 years old. Did you live with your brothers or sisters or on your own, or, you know, what was daily life like?

Ben Naceur:

No, I lived in a dorm in—I wouldn't call it a room, it was like almost a closet that was two meters by a meter and a half. So, that was for two years. I think it was so sparse that perhaps the objective is that you would do whatever you can to succeed in those exams so that you won't spend a single moment, an additional moment, in those conditions. But that was a very good souvenir.

Dunlop:

Really, really amazing. So, which school did you go to then, eventually, when you finished your classe préparatoire, and you did all the concours? Which school did you go to?

Ben Naceur:

So, actually, I was the first Tunisian to be admitted to the top two schools in France, which were the École Polytechnique and the École Normale Supérieure. So, we had a little bit of a situation because from the Tunisian state, we had very few students who were admitted to the École Normale Supérieure. I think I was the third one in history. They wanted me to go there for the prestige, but I also had a brother who did École Polytechnique, and I was also extremely interested by the engineering at École Polytechnique.

So, that was a problem. But then, I took the very bizarre choice, which was to do the two schools at the

same time, which I was advised that nobody had done it, but I was able to do it. That was really something. I'm very, very happy that happened.

Dunlop:

Fantastic. That's really phenomenal. Did the schools coordinate with each other, or did you have—was it really difficult to coordinate and ensure you...

Ben Naceur:

It was difficult. I mean, there were some funny stories that I would write in a book. But in the end, I think it worked out very well. I had, from the École Normale Supérieure, the training in very advanced scientific matters, and from École Polytechnique, the engineering education. So, the combination of the two was extremely helpful throughout my life.

00:12:13 From Student Life to Industry – My First Job Out of School

Dunlop:

So, you emerge from this phase extremely well qualified. So, what does a young man from Tunisia living in France do when they emerge into the world of work at this point?

Ben Naceur:

Well, first, the engineering schools in France have a certain atmosphere because you have all these young students who have spent two years preparing for those exams. Now they are going into engineering schools, and they don't have the competitive pressure anymore. So, there was lots of fun. We used to have student parties, and so there was a very nice part of the story, which was the social life in the engineering schools. I was in Paris in a place called Quartier Latin, which was also known for the very nice atmosphere. So, that was a very nice time.

I also was privileged to spend two years in the south of France on the Côte d'Azur in a place called Antibes, which was really another marvel. So, when I was through, then of course, you had to go to professional life. So, I contacted the Tunisian government at that time, and I was asked what I wanted to do, and I said I would be very keen, there is this thing called micro computing, which I don't think anyone—

Dunlop:

What year? Sorry to interrupt, Kamel. What year are we in at this stage?

Ben Naceur:

We are in 1980.

Dunlop:

1980. Okay.

Ben Naceur:

Actually, there were no portable computers, nothing. It was still very large computers, and I don't think that the business case was very clear. Then I got interviewed by Schlumberger at that time for a position in research and development in the French Centre, and that's the beginning of the story in energy.

Dunlop:

So, Schlumberger was your first employer.

Ben Naceur:

Absolutely. And really it was—

Dunlop:

How many years were you with Schlumberger?

Ben Naceur:

So, a total of 34 years in Schlumberger, which really was another great school in terms of professionalism, in terms of behavior, and in terms of also rigor in your work. So, I was very pleased to have spent those 34 years.

The Schlumberger system was also taking care not only of the employees but also of their families because, as employees, we would be required to move quite often, and some families would not be able to do it without external support.

So, that was those 34 years, which took me to many places around the world. So, I started that journey in France, to the US, and then the UK, then Algeria, followed by Venezuela and South America, the Middle East, Egypt, then the US again, the UK, Russia, then France, and then Brazil.

Dunlop:

The incredible diversity, and you had a somewhat borderless career as well.

00:16:48 The 1981 San Antonio Convention That Changed My Life

Dunlop:

If I remember well, you had a whole series of roles which were not necessarily logically connected to each other. So, can we talk about some of the highlights of those roles? First of all, your first role and then, you know, how did you go forward and what were the roles that really, you feel, meant you were able to mark Schlumberger and the industry but also grow yourself? What's most memorable for you?

Ben Naceur:

So, the first nine years. I spent them in research and development in Schlumberger, developing new technologies in the areas of well services, which include cementing, stimulation, fracturing, and cold tubing. So, these nine years were extremely intense. We had fantastic colleagues. The quality of the people in the research and development was exceptional. We had many, say, discoveries, breakthroughs, and this was put together from the top level who believed at that time about the technology.

Then those nine years, through three centers in France, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, then Cambridge, UK, were extremely useful because you start having publications, you start having patents, and you start also creating a very strong network through the industry. Part of that network was the Society of Petroleum Engineers.

Dunlop:

Yes, so when you started publishing papers, you were publishing them with the SPE (Society of Petroleum Engineers) and at SPE conferences, is that correct?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, so I actually started in December 1980, and the first paper where I was a co-author was published at the ATCE (Annual Technical Conference and Exhibition), the annual conference of the SPE in San Antonio in 1981, so less than a year after I had started. So, that was my first introduction to the SPE. I wasn't a member yet at that time.

And then I went to San Antonio. I said wow. What an industry. At that time, there were, I think, about 15,000 people attending that annual meeting in San Antonio. Extremely vibrant and really, that gave me a very strong desire to make that industry a long-term career.

Dunlop:

Interesting. Did you become a member after that first ATCE? What made you become, you know, move from being a consumer to a member of the SPE?

Ben Naceur:

So, actually, it wasn't immediately after that. I became an SPE member when I moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, because at that time, SPE was mostly about North American membership. Outside was not as developed as it is today. So, immediately when I went to the US, I wanted to thank, actually, the person who sponsored me, Carl Montgomery, for saying, you must be an SPE member. So, I'm still thanking him every time I see him.

Dunlop:

Well, funnily enough, let me share an anecdote because that's often, I think, what brings people into the SPE, is somebody says to them, you must become a member. And you were the person who said to me, you must become a member, and I haven't looked back. I thank you frequently for that.

Ben Naceur:

You are very welcome. I'm so happy that you accepted.

Dunlop:

It was quite a revelation.

00:21:25 Ahead of the Curve – R&D, Operations, and the World Wide Web at Schlumberger

Dunlop:

Okay, so we've moved. You've had nine years in R&D. When you moved to Tulsa, were you still with R&D?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, I was in R&D, and then I spent four years in Tulsa, and then I was moved to Cambridge.

Dunlop:

Okay.

Ben Naceur:

Which was the research center of one of the two—

Dunlop:

Cambridge in the UK?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, of the two research centers in Schlumberger. The other one is, it was in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

After a few months, actually, I got a call from the president of a company called Dowell, Schlumberger, who was actually asking me to move to a completely different role, which was to go to operations. This would be in Algeria, which, of course, you wonder. I mean, I was very happy in research and development, and now you're stepping into the unknown, which is operations. Then you have a very completely different way of working, a different lifestyle, and so on. But then I said, okay, this would be very interesting. This was my first big career move in the last 45 years.

So, of course, there is a very steep learning curve because you have to go to a very different type of

environment. You have to learn to carry very heavy pieces of metal in the field—

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

—in the operations, but I absolutely loved it. I especially loved the interaction with the customers—

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

—and their eagerness to try new technology, and that was in Algeria in 1990.

Dunlop:

Interesting. I'm always struck, actually, by the contrast in the oil and gas industry between the very manual, dirty dimensions and then the latest cutting-edge science. So, you paint quite a vivid picture there of your move to Algeria.

You know, Kamel, I want to just take a little sidebar because this is a history project as well. Something very significant happened in the world during that period that you were in R&D, which is the invention of the World Wide Web. Schlumberger was the first company to have a license, a browser, a Netscape license, and contracted ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network); in fact was the first commercial customer of ARPANET. So, could you just give a little sense of the difference that that made, particularly in the R&D function at the time, to have email, to have the World Wide Web available? What did that change in your daily life?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, so at that time, the biggest manufacturer of midframes was a company called Digital Equipment [Corporation], DEC, and Schlumberger was, at that time, the second largest customer after the US Army. The network that DEC had, which was called DECnet, was used throughout the company. So, at that time, 1983, we already had email throughout the whole company. That was 42 years ago. We had also a system which was called VAX (Virtual Address extension). That was the name of the computer, the mainframe from DEC. We had VAX phone where, actually, you could talk on the computer.

So, really, it was extremely nice to be ahead of the curve in terms of communication through Schlumberger and being able to communicate and interact with different centers. Schlumberger had a policy of not having all the technology developed in one or two centers. Actually, they had them throughout the different many countries either for strategic reasons or for historical reasons, but that made the interaction between all those scientists much easier than it would have been without those tools of communication.

Dunlop:

Thank you. Yes, it's fascinating to imagine the before and after.

Ben Naceur:

Absolutely. We were privileged to have some of the most advanced computing systems in every single center and all interconnected.

00:27:18 On the Fast Track to Technology & Cracking the Code for Unconventionals

Dunlop:

So, you're in operations, you've come from R&D, you have this technology which can greatly enable your ability to join the dots between those two domains and between all the actors in those domains. So, did you stay in operations?

What do you feel were your biggest achievements, most significant achievements, when you were in operations?

Ben Naceur:

So, in operations, I came with the perspective of trying to accelerate the new technology introduction. So, I became known for being the fast tracker of technology. I was privileged to be trusted by [customers] who would say, just prove us the technology. We have done so many firsts. In some cases, we had one customer who had a very big problem with the field. This was in the east of Venezuela, where most of their wells were just shut down after a few months due to different types of problems. So, we were able to work together and find a solution which developed one of the biggest fields for the customer. So, the ability to work with the customer to understand their problems and trying to find solutions has always been very prevalent throughout my life in the operations.

One of the most recent ones was when I was in Brazil, and Petrobras had developed these pre-sold fields. But the first well that they drilled in the pre-salt cost them north of 350 million dollars. Three hundred fifty million dollars. One well.

Dunlop:

Good heavens.

Ben Naceur:

And of course—

Dunlop:

This is what year? What year are we talking about again?

Ben Naceur:

So, we are talking about the end of the decade, from 2005 to 2010, and obviously, developing a field with the wealth at that cost was not an option. So, Petrobras had a fantastic drive in terms of innovation, and they created an innovation framework with their service partners to find solutions. Now the same well cost them less than 50 million, so the cost was divided by more than seven.

So, these kinds of developments, and we see that today in the unconventionals, where the operators keep improving the KPIs, obviously still respecting HSE rules, but lowering the cost per barrel. Even if it is in very tight formation, it can still produce in a very competitive way. So, to answer your question, is this drive for pushing the technology limits and making the developments commercial?

Dunlop:

Yes, yes.

Ben Naceur:

So, I did that in North Africa, then South America, which was a great discovery because I love South America. Between the north of Mexico and the Tierra del Fuego, and almost the Antarctic, was a great continent. I took the opportunity to learn both Spanish and Portuguese.

Then, I moved to the Middle East to take a marketing and technology role until a new organization arose in Schlumberger, which was called the Oil Field Services, which was putting all the companies under one leadership, and I was privileged to have been chosen as one of the first marketing vice presidents for the region for all the services. So, that was the second big challenge for me because you have to go basically from your comfort zone in the technologies to be able to speak for all product lines. [It] was another step up in the technical career, but you always have to be here to keep an open mind, and second thing you always have to keep learning new areas that may be either adjacent to what your core discipline is, but also could be further away from your core discipline.

Dunlop:

So, we've got a very clear picture on both you and your personal growth, and also the kind of impact your personality and brain power were able to catalyze. It's really very impressive, Kamel.

There is one you mentioned: unconventionals. I think just in the context of today's world, maybe a little sidebar about your involvement in unconventionals at a time when—well, there's a reason why they're called unconventionals—at a time when they were unconventional. Can you tell us a little bit more? Because it's very newsworthy at the moment.

Ben Naceur:

Yes, basically unconventional was developed thanks to the combination of horizontal wells and fracturing, and those two, done the right way, enabled us to crack the code for unconventional. We had pushed the limits in fracturing in terms of being able to do very reliable operations and optimized operations. So, this was used actually to start developing the first unconventional assets in North America.

We never thought that it would develop so quickly, but I think this was a great—one of the most important discoveries of the last, I would say, 30 years, was the unconventional. That changed completely the nature of the oil and gas industry.

Dunlop:

Change the world. Absolutely.

00:35:28 Benefits of Member Societies & the Drive to Volunteer

Dunlop:

Kamel, you've mentioned the industry several times, and you know, having worked in so many different countries. I have the impression the outside world sees the industry as very joined up and this single kind of monolith, whereas in fact, it's a lot of moving parts. But how joined up is the industry in your view? what role do associations, for instance, like the SPE and the companies that support the members, what role do they play in creating that sense of connection and coherence in the industry? You've observed that. What's your view?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, so I would say, I have my definition for what the society, like the SPE, does. SPE is there to connect people to people and the people not only in their own companies, not only in their discipline, but also throughout the industry. So, that's the first one, connecting people to people.

The second one is connecting people to knowledge because those societies, I would say, a big role is to organize events where their members will be presenting developments.

Then the third one is connecting people to the industry. So, this is done through exhibitions. This is done through different ways. What I loved in the industry is that, okay, you may be from very competitive companies like a blue versus a red or green, but still, there is a lot of respect going there between those individuals.

Dunlop:

They're professionals.

Ben Naceur:

So, I think I would say those professional societies are a mesh for the industry to be able to, for people to interact. Obviously still respecting the ethical behavior or anti-competition rule, but with the objective of advancing the industry, making it the most efficient, the safest, and perhaps the most profitable, but profitable with a good sense that, without that, we wouldn't have the framework.

Dunlop:

Tell me, Kamel, you know, joining a society—whether it's SPE or other, you know, AAPG (American Association of Petroleum Geologists), SEG [Society of Exploration Geophysicists], and other

great societies in AIME, of course—in our industry clearly benefits people's careers. But all of them are based on a volunteer model. In order to really achieve a level of significant quality and impact, volunteers give an extraordinary amount above and beyond. And what do you think inspires individuals to go so far doing something which is truly volunteering? It's unpaid, it's often outside their work hours, and requires a phenomenal level of commitment.

What do you think it is that drives them, apart from benefiting their career, which I think is one of the motivators? What are the others?

Ben Naceur:

So, I think that in terms of personal, I mean, access to knowledge is one of the drivers. There are lots of things that you learn from meeting with people that you don't necessarily see in publications or in conferences, and so on. Let's say we generally talk about success stories, but we talk about problems, failures, and so on, because failure has a negative perspective. So, the ability to talk about those and learn from previous mistakes is something that is very, very important.

The second aspect, I would say, is the attitude of the employer with respect to professional societies. Companies like Schlumberger valued a lot this engagement and were supporting it. And I wanted to again, sorry to mention Schlumberger again, but we were part of the journey to create a technical ladder in Schlumberger, and moving up the technical ladder was not decided by management; it was actually decided by peers—

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

—and on the basis of your own engagement in professional society, in publications, and so on. So, these are some of the benefits that you would get from that. You and I have been part of the board, and we know how fantastic it is to interact with all the sections, whether they are technical sections or physical sections, and meet so many people.

For me, one of the most grateful moments happened about two and a half years ago, [when] I had to go to Timor-Leste. Most people don't know where this country is. It's a new country that has less than 20 years, which used to be part of Indonesia. That country was opening up their first student chapter, and the level of enthusiasm that we had there from those young students, but also the involvement of the president of the country, who came and spent almost a whole day with us.

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

This person is very distinguished; he's a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and seeing that kind of atmosphere is absolutely gratifying.

Dunlop:

Yes, and the numbers are absolutely phenomenal. I think over 400 members of the student chapter. It's really quite incredible.

00:43:22 The Industry is Not a Silo – Thoughts on the Future of Engineering

Dunlop:

So, let's talk a little bit about these young people who are coming into our industry and whom we want to attract into the industry. What are we doing and what should we be doing in your view to attract the kind of talents and to be the industry that attracted you over 40 years ago, but in today's context, where the industry is under tremendous pressure, both in terms of the technical challenges, but also the reputational and geopolitical challenges? What do we need to be doing, and what are we doing?

Ben Naceur:

So, what we are doing, we need to make sure that the ones who have entered recently in the industry are actually well taken care of, and they really feel that they have a home. And I want to give a big credit to someone in our industry. His name was Giovanni Paccaloni, who was a previous president of the SPE. He really pushed—he had a passion to develop young professionals—so, these are members that are less than 35—and network between them. Have them really have a voice in the society.

So, his legacy lives until this day with so many people who have been influenced by what he has been pushing. So, that's the first aspect is making sure that our young professionals are well taken care of.

The second thing is being able to give them the tools to keep abreast of what's happening around them. Our society should not be seen as a silo. Our society should be seen as a way of interacting with others.

I want to give a second example; I have a colleague, his name is Maurice Nessim. He used to be president of the SEG [Society of Exploration Geophysicists], and his expertise is in seismic, but now he's taking that knowledge to the medical industry to develop new ways of interpretation of diseases. So, the percolation between our industry and others is extremely important.

I'm chairing a startup, it's called DAMORPHE, which is focusing on nanotechnology. What we are actually learning a lot from is other industries like aerospace and defense, and others. Then we are also providing our learnings to other sustainability areas, like the geothermal energy. So, everything must be aligned so that we are not siloed.

Dunlop:

Yes, that's very interesting. I think we're so self-sufficient in a way it's contributed to those misunderstandings or lack of appreciation sometimes of the industry. That's good to hear. Very encouraging.

00:47:18 Leaving My Comfort Zone – Unexpected Opportunities & Career Highlights

Dunlop:

So, Kamel, I want to talk about three more things before we wrap up. I want to hear about your legacy. So, in terms of publications, patents, products. I want to also talk a little bit about the people who were significant to you throughout your career, your mentors and other figures. Then I want to wrap up with a few words of wisdom.

So, if we could start with the legacy. You had a lot of publications, a lot of patents, and led to products. What are the highlights for you in terms of your legacy?

Ben Naceur:

So, I look at it from a first career standpoint. I talk about points in my career where I have moved. One of them, after actually going into the oil field services global organization, was actually being called by the CEO of Schlumberger—Andrew Gould at that time—and the chief technology officer, Philippe Lacour-Gayet, who asked me to come for a discussion. Then they asked me—that was in 2002—what did I think about carbon capture and storage? Which I said, well, I don't know about carbon capture and storage. Their answer was, okay, so this is why we want you to learn about it and then come back to us in a year and tell us what Schlumberger should be doing in carbon capture and storage.

My answer was, okay, why me? I don't know about this field, and I was very actually flattered when they said, by the way, when we have something that is out of the box, your name comes up.

So, that was great because, for me, it was a complete eye-opener. I was in the oil and gas industry, I was interacting with my colleagues and peripheral areas, but then I started interacting with very different types of stakeholders: the people who are climate experts, people who are earth scientists, but looking at different types of interactions, not oil and gas, policy makers, and also politicians.

Then after one year, which was absolutely fantastic and great. I mean, we were accepted, actually, in my company in almost every single project to provide expertise. And we came back, and I was very happy when the company decided to create a new division, which was called Carbon Services. That was around 2004. So, that was another turning point.

Then, five years later, I was called again by the CEO, again, Andrew Gould. [He] was asking me to become his chief economist. But I said, Andrew, I'm an engineer, I'm not an economist. He said, you have the background, and you can do it, and that was also fantastic to do it at the corporate level.

Then another big change happened to me at the end of 2013 when I was in Brazil. I got a call from someone I didn't know in Tunisia who introduced himself as being the new Prime Minister of Tunisia. He asked me to become Minister of Industry, Energy, and Mines in Tunisia.

Dunlop:

And you said, I don't know anything about this.

Ben Naceur:

I said, I have never worked in Tunisia, and I have never worked in politics. He said, these are the two

good reasons why you should join us. It was fantastic because—I couldn't refuse it. I mean, my country was very generous to me in terms of education and support. So, it was a way of giving back to the country. Actually, the organization that brought us got the Nobel Peace Prize for the initiative. Very happy. We were very happy to support them.

Then afterwards, I moved also to other things, which again were very gratifying. So many different changes, and they all go back to, let's say, one: having the fundamental knowledge to understand those different disciplines, but also the eagerness to learn more, and to continue adapting.

Dunlop:

Yes, very significant. You're really a living testimony to the growth mindset. But you dismissed. You said, and then there were "other things." Let's actually talk about those other things, which are part of your legacy. I mean, you were the first director of the International Energy Agency (IEA) with sustainability in their portfolio. You also went on to be the chief economist of ADNOC (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company).

So, let's just give a little bit of attention to both of those. What do you feel was the most significant achievement that you were able to enable when you were at the IEA, and equally with ADNOC, when you joined ADNOC also at a very significant time? If you could speak to both of those experiences a little bit, Kamel.

Ben Naceur:

So, the first one as a director for sustainability technology and outlooks for the IEA happened just before COP21 (Conference of the Parties) in Paris, which was in 2015. The agency is known for preparing long-term outlooks. So, we were very privileged to be part of the discussion in terms of understanding the scenarios. At that time, we could think about a two-degree scenario without many discontinuities in the energy system. We could move smoothly from the current status quo to, let's say, a sustainable system with a two-degree. 1.5 was much, much more difficult to imagine.

So, this was somehow reflected in the wording of the Paris Agreement, where the objective was to go two degrees or below two degrees. So, that was very gratifying. We had a fantastic team at the IEA, and we managed also to get to the leadership of the Clean Energy Ministerial, which is a very important organization in terms of promoting a new energy, including carbon capture and storage, and hydrogen, and so on.

So, all that was very gratifying. Then the ADNOC experience was another very interesting one under the leadership of Dr. Sultan (Ahmed) Al-Jaber, who had just been appointed. One of the big projects was actually unifying the company. It used to be composed of 14 different companies, and creating one company globally known as ADNOC was the challenge, which was very similar to what we had in Schlumberger, where we had 15 or 16 different companies, and then came one Schlumberger. So, it was somehow, I mean, in a different context, another one.

So, that was another very interesting one. Then, after a couple of years at ADNOC, I felt that it was time to have my own startups. The first one was [an] advisory company in the energy transition. But energy transition is quite wide. So, I was privileged to work with different governments to help them from green fields up to brown field strategies, what would be the best strategies, but also in terms of technology.

I was approached by former colleagues from Schlumberger to create a company called DAMORPHE, which is another very interesting venture.

So, I would say one of these urges to create a startup actually comes from inside my family because our oldest son decided to go to startup very early in his career. We were very doubtful at the beginning, but we're so happy that now he's gone to a very successful pathway. So, that's one.

00:58:06 Serving as SPE President in the Time of COVID – Navigating Loss and Growth

Ben Naceur:

Then the next, let's say, big marker in my career was when I was appointed SPE president.

Dunlop:

Yes, so let's talk about that.

Ben Naceur:

Yes, so, at that time, it was with the SPE cycle: you are president-elect one year before, and then president, and then past president. That was during the COVID time. It was [a] very difficult time for the industry.

Obviously, we had many colleagues who had left the industry. The people were not able to move around in the world, and then the Society of Petroleum Engineers could not do its role, which was to organize events.

Dunlop:

Convening.

Ben Naceur:

So, that had a major impact on its financial health. So, with my predecessor, Tom [Thomas A.] Blasingame, and my successor, Medhat [M.] Kamal, and obviously the SPE staff, we were able to have a strategy that proved to be right, in order to make sure that we would sail through that period and emerge when business goes back to normal without incurring major disruptions. We decided at that time that we would not let go a significant part of the staff. We kept most of the staff from the SPE. We were criticized for that, but I think at the end we were proven right because that staff went out through the crisis and now the SPE is back sailing with the same quality of events thanks to those very valuable influence.

Dunlop:

What about the membership in that period?

Ben Naceur:

The big loss in membership that happened was after 2015.

Dunlop:

Yes, your downturn.

Ben Naceur:

That was when there was a big decrease in prices in oil, and the activity in North America had gone down significantly. So, we lost quite some numbers, but I'm so happy that since 2023 our membership has been going back up again, and student membership is very strong.

Dunlop:

Excellent. And in terms of the balance around the world?

Ben Naceur:

So, what's happening is that—and that's a great point—is that we are increasing our membership in many new areas around the world. We both mentioned Timor-Leste, but if you go to places like Nigeria or other places in the southern part of Africa—

Dunlop:

Namibia.

Ben Naceur:

—or in Asia. It's very encouraging to see the momentum in those regions.

Dunlop:

Yes, and the new producers.

Ben Naceur:

Yes.

Dunlop:

Great. That's fantastic. It's an exciting picture.

Ben Naceur:

Yes. Then financially, SPE is back on track in terms of, let's say, positive results. Those positive results are currently driven by the investment portfolio. The idea is not to make money from the activities to break even, but the portfolio is doing well.

Dunlop:

It’s strong. It’s strong. That's good to hear, very encouraging to hear. Thank you. I mean, there are always challenges, obviously.

01:02:49 Mentors, Privilege, and Recognition – Memorable Moments of My Career

Dunlop:

I'm always struck by the incredible talent across the world in the SPE. Actually, let's have a little segue there because, you know, one of the SPE flagship programs is the awards program. Personally, for me, it's my annual reset because I'm always so humbled by the talent, you know, from around the world, and the quality of the awards program.

So, you yourself, Kamel, have had some significant awards. I mean, you're part of the Nobel Prize, but you've had other awards and recognition. So, what's your most memorable one? What's the one that you treasure the most?

Ben Naceur:

So, one of them has been the highest recognition in Tunisia, my country, that was given to me by the late Tunisian president. This was after my role in the ministry. Obviously, there have been several SPE and AIME awards I'm extremely proud of. I was also recognized in the first place where I actually worked in France, which was the city of Saint-Étienne, by the gold medal of the city, which is given to people who have contributed. And one thing that I'm really proud [of] is that in the city of Saint-Étienne, the engineering school named one of their cohorts under my name.

Dunlop:

Wow.

Ben Naceur:

Yes.

Dunlop:

That's touching. Very significant.

Ben Naceur:

So, these are things that really I cherish.

Dunlop:

It's interesting that despite having lived all over the world and traveled all over the world and being a true global citizen, that clearly Tunisia, your home country, remains extremely dear to your heart.

Ben Naceur:

Absolutely. I love Tunisia, I love France, and these are countries I will always support every way I can.

Dunlop:

Excellent, lovely. Well, so you've mentioned quite a few names of people who I know were very significant: Philippe Lacour-Gayet, Andrew Gould, [Maurice Nessim]. Are there other individuals that you would like in this to take the opportunity to recall them and their impact on you?

Ben Naceur:

Yes, I mentioned also Giovanni Pacaloni. In the area I have worked, I had the privilege to work with Ken (Kenneth George) Nolte, who was one of the gurus in hydraulic fracturing. I also had the privilege to work with great leaders in the industry, like Chad Deaton, who was the previous CEO of Schlumberger and CEO of Baker [Hughes Incorporated].

So, these are people who have marked my professional career. When I was a student, I was very privileged as my colleagues. Some of my colleagues became well-known globally. Two of them actually got medals, the Fields Medal, which is the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in Mathematics.

Dunlop:

Yes.

Ben Naceur:

Yes, one of them was Jean-Christophe Yoccoz, and the other one was Pierre-Louis Lions. So, all these are extremely important. In terms of, let's say, other political figures, President (Habib) Bourguiba, who was the first president of Tunisia, was really someone who marked my country by putting it on the right track.

Dunlop:

It's quite a pantheon.

Ben Naceur:

Yes.

01:07:16 Minimizing Our Footprint – Advice for the Oil and Gas Industry

Dunlop:

So, let's start wrapping up, Kamel. This is a conversation that could go on for a long time, and it's really very enjoyable. Before, I'm going to ask you for some words of wisdom. But I'm also going to ask you a question, which is, this 2025, we're heading into what looks like very turbulent times.

You have this amazing industry, amazing talent working in this industry. What do you think is the single most important thing that we need to be doing as an industry to navigate and contribute to sustainable development? Is there one thing that we could do as an industry?

Ben Naceur:

So, if I look back over the last 60 years, the oil and gas industry has been the engine of development of the world. Now things are moving. You have other industries like the IT industry, artificial intelligence, and so on, that are taking more and more. In order to develop, they need the energy industry to power them.

So, I think that looking forward, the world needs energy; it needs much more energy than it's using today, maybe a different type. One thing that will remain is that the oil and the gas are still going to be a significant part of it. But we as an industry, we need to make sure that we take every single step to minimize our footprint.

I think we shouldn't be forced to do it. It should be coming from the industry itself to do it, and this would be the biggest achievement. There's been many very important progress.

I want to highlight what organizations like IOGP (International Association of Oil & Gas Producers), Ipieca, and others are doing for the industry to make sure that we are transparent, and then we do the right things, and we communicate them. So, this, I think, is the most important thing. The methane emission initiative is an absolutely important one. We need to help initiatives that are adjacent to ours, like the CCUS (Carbon Capture Utilization and Storage), like the geothermal, because we need all these energies.

So, I think that looking forward, we're going to be the biggest pillar, but we need to make sure that we have an ecosystem that has the least environmental footprint.

Dunlop:

That's encouraging, Kamel, and I think, you know, it's very encouraging if we all have your kind of out-of-the-box commitment to learning; that would take a lot of the pain out of this journey that we're on.

01:11:29 Six Points for Young Engineers – Finding Your Own Perspective in Industry

Dunlop:

So, let's wrap up, Kamel, maybe with a few words of wisdom that you might have given to the young Kamel Ben Naceur when he was setting out, joining the industry, and to any of us in the industry at the moment, or anybody listening. Life wisdom, professional wisdom. What are the words you would like to share?

Ben Naceur:

I'll say the first one is, as soon as possible, join professional associations and develop your network. The second one is mentoring. You need to identify mentors, either within the company or outside the

company, who will help you look at different perspectives so that you can choose the one that would be the best one. You can also test your own thoughts against their experience. I would say in your early careers, having two, three, or four mentors would be extremely valuable. Then once you grow up, you have to give back, and you also need to be mentoring—

Ben Naceur:

—younger people. So that system of paying back is very, very important.

The third one is, always learn. I would say that artificial intelligence with the ability to go and find information anytime might be leading to some type of laziness. We need to make sure that our own basis is strong, that we can filter from what's proven and what is not proven.

So, from the expertise, always make sure that your bases are being updated. In my case, when we created the demo of nanotechnology startup, I immersed myself into nanotechnology, which was fascinating. That was a new field, and I keep learning.

Dunlop:

Yes, keep learning.

Ben Naceur:

So, keep learning.

The fourth one is being adaptable. The world is not a long and straight highway. You might take exits and then follow a different highway, and then come back to that same highway, and your career is going to be made of different pieces that enrich your own perspective.

That's my fourth point. The fifth point is actually work-family balance, making sure that you never forget your role as being within a family ecosystem. So, I was privileged to have a very supportive family, and I always kept focusing on their needs. That worked quite well.

Then, finally, I would say, making sure that you are open in terms of culture. The culture diversity is extremely important because if you are going to move around the world, the first thing you're going to do when you arrive in a new country is understand how people think and act in those countries. I can tell you from my own experience between people in South America, in Russia, people in the Middle East, or in Asia, there are very different sets of values, and you have to understand.

Dunlop:

It's one of the most exciting things about the industry, isn't it?

Ben Naceur:

Absolutely. We are, I mean, a global industry. We are so proud to have these 130,000 members, student members, and the diversity is fantastic.

Dunlop:

Absolutely.

Ben Naceur:

And our society today is privileged to have the networking tools.

Dunlop:

Absolutely, and which has resulted in an Irish woman interviewing a Tunisian here on this wonderful day. So, thank you so much, Kamel. It was really wonderful to hear your story and to hear many things I didn't know about you, and just to enjoy this conversation, which I'm sure the audience of this wonderful oral history project will enjoy too.

Thank you very much, Kamel, for your time and your openness to sharing.

Ben Naceur:

Thank you very much, Johana. I look forward, actually, to hearing your story one day.

Dunlop:

It’s not nearly as exciting. Thank you, Kamel. Bye-bye.

Ben Naceur:

Bye now. All the best to all our listeners.