

GET YOUR MONEY'S WORTH THE LOW-DOWN ON WHAT INVESTORS SHOULD LOOK FOR IN A STARTUP

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QATAR

**MAKING HISTORY
(LITERALLY)**

**RONALDO
MOUCHAWAR**

SOUQ.COM'S CO-FOUNDER
AND CEO HAS CHANGED
THE MENA ENTREPRENEURIAL
LANDSCAPE FOREVER

**REAPING
THE REWARDS**

THE MENA
REGION'S
**ACHIEVING
WOMEN**

SUCCESS, MOTIVATION,
AND EXCEPTIONAL
ENTERPRISE CONDUCT
STRATEGIES FOR
WOMEN IN BUSINESS

**EXPANDING
HORIZONS**

KARIM YAZBEK

THE VICE PRESIDENT AND COUNTRY MANAGER OF HILL INTERNATIONAL
OPINES THAT IN THE MEDIUM TERM, QATAR'S ECONOMY WILL
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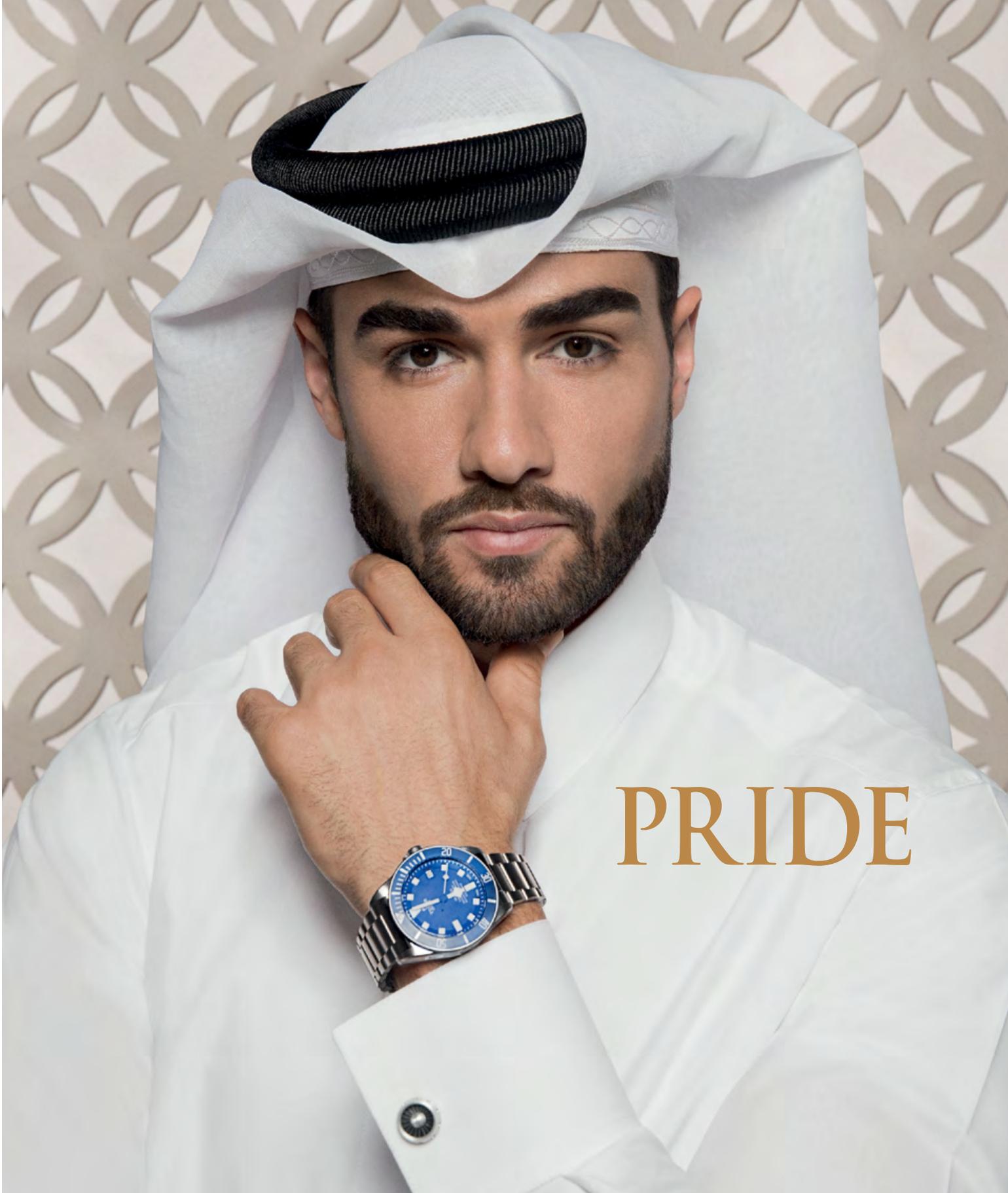
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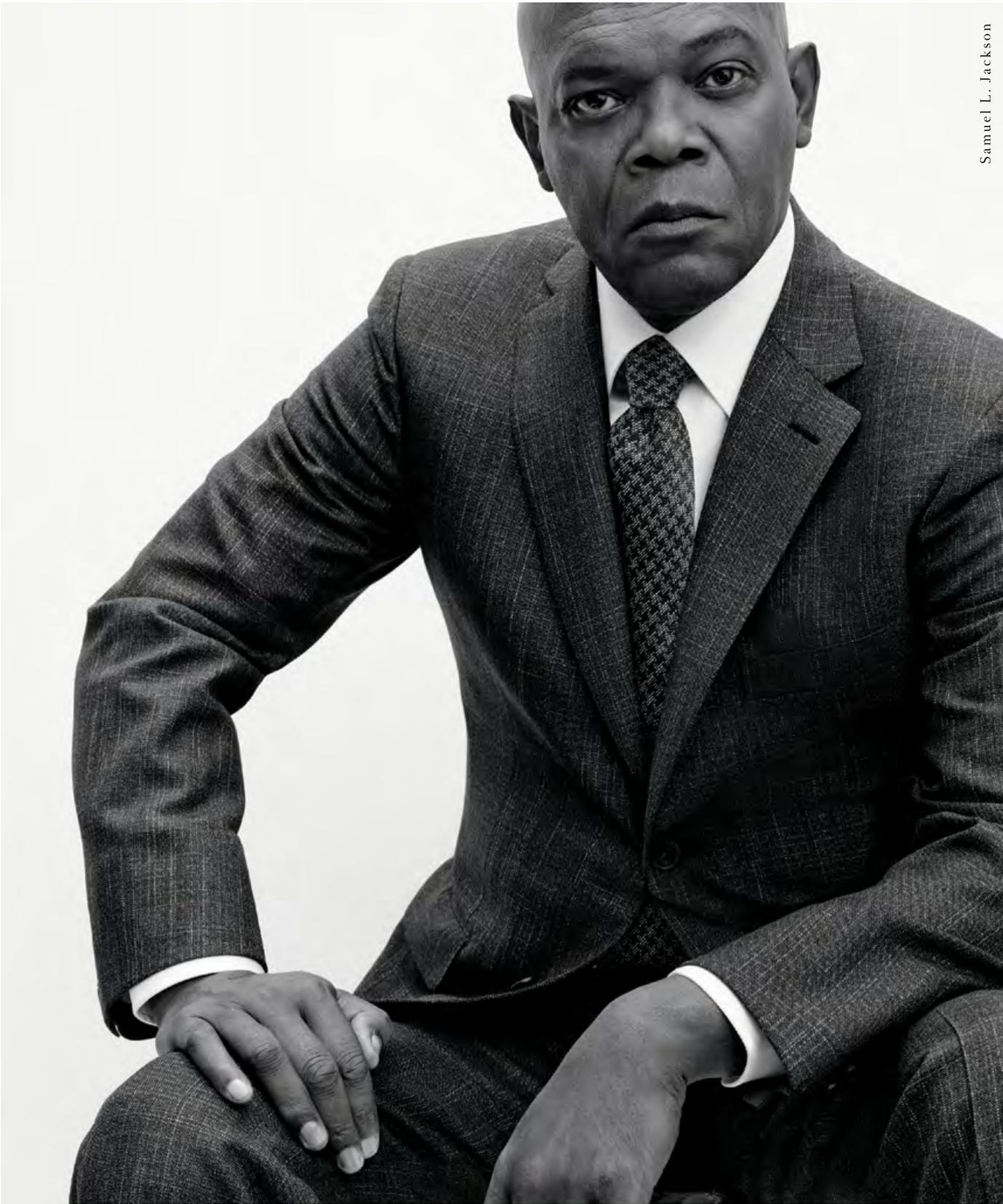
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Get connected

Entrepreneurship is a two-way street

One of my favorite moments from this year's edition of STEP Conference was after Souq.com co-founder and CEO Ronaldo Mouchawar's appearance on stage, when he stepped down and walked through what can perhaps best be described as an adoring audience. It was a sight to behold as the affable entrepreneur, fresh off his company's acquisition by Amazon, weaved his way through the crowd, as they essentially mobbed him with everything from heartfelt congratulations, to startup pitches, to selfie requests.

What stood out to me was the manner in which Mouchawar reacted to all of the attention he was getting: he calmly posed for every snapshot, happily shook hands with everyone, and responded with ideas, advice and tips for all the entrepreneurs that approached him. Mouchawar had no airs about at him at all, and I was in awe of his patience and positive attitude. When I met Mouchawar for the interview that headlines this issue of *Entrepreneur Middle East*, I commended him on his behavior at the event, but Mouchawar didn't think he had done anything special- according to him, what he did was just a matter of him giving back to the MENA entrepreneurial

ecosystem, and that was something he *needed* to do as an entrepreneur in this region. "Entrepreneurship is a two-way street," he told me. "You have to build knowledge, [and] you have to share it... People want to learn- they think you have done a process that they might have to go through. There are always learning pains, there are growing pains, there are experiences that you learn [from]. And, I think, as much as we internally focus on the company and our customers (and that has been where we put a lot of our investment), I think you need to always be connected to this ecosystem."

With an attitude like that, it's easy to see why Mouchawar has endeared himself to MENA's entrepreneurs, and it's a premise that others in this region should take to heart as well. Be it by speaking at a conference, or hey, by talking to media outlets like us, Mouchawar is, by sharing his knowledge and experience, playing a key role in helping this ecosystem grow, while educating and inspiring others to follow in his footsteps. And yes, there are benefits for those who engage in such interactions as well- Mouchawar claims that he's lucky that he's able to meet a lot of bright people, and their energy rejuvenates him. ("I have two passions: continue to



build the business, and continue to work with entrepreneurs," he says.) Mouchawar is aware of the value of what he does- as a Syrian hailing from the now-destroyed city of Aleppo, he *knows* that his entrepreneurial journey that led him to build a company that went to Amazon, is something that can provide hope to a lot of people in this region. And let's be fair, hope is something we need to see more of in the Middle East- let's take it upon ourselves to bring it about.

Aby Sam Thomas
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IN 1934, BRITANNIA DIDN'T JUST RULE THE WAVES



On October 22nd 1934, two exhausted airmen landed on a racecourse in Melbourne, surrounded by cheering crowds. Flying a specially-built De Havilland Comet DH-88, Charles Scott and Tom Campbell Black set a new record, flying the 11,000 miles from England in just 71 hours. The Bremont DH-88 commemorates their aircraft and their achievement. Containing actual material from the record-breaking plane, the Bremont DH-88 is available now in a strictly limited edition. But it won't be available for long.

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RAK in the spotlight

RAS AL KHAIMAH AIMS TO ATTRACT INVESTORS
WITH **NEW RAK ECONOMIC ZONE**

In a bid to position Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) as a world-class investment decision, the RAK government has launched the Ras Al Khaimah Economic Zone (RAKEZ), a public authority to “oversee, regulate and consolidate” the operations of its two main free zones—Ras Al Khaimah Free Trade Zone (RAK FTZ) and RAK Investment Authority (RAKIA). Encompassing around 33 million square metre of land, and with plans to house over 13,000 companies (those currently served by RAK FTZ and RAKIA), RAK expects RAKEZ to emerge as one of the largest economic zones in the region. Like its counterparts, RAKEZ will function to support the vision of making Ras Al Khaimah a leading investment destination for global investors, contribute to the Emirate’s economic growth, and make it easier for businesses to start and scale in RAK.



H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saqr Al Qasimi, Chairman, RAKEZ, RAK FTZ and RAKIA

Launched by HH Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member of UAE, and Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah, in the presence of officials, businesspeople, and clients, RAKEZ will offer both existing

clients and prospective investors a platform from which they can access local, regional and global markets, and grant free zone and non-free zone licenses for companies operating in diverse sectors. According to an official statement on the launch, RAKEZ will provide “customizable facilities, enhanced levels of service through five diversified and strategically located zones [RAKEZ Business Zone, Al Hamra Industrial Zone, Al Ghail Industrial Zone, Al Hulaila Industrial Zone and RAKEZ Academic Zone] for all types of business setups, including startups, entrepreneurs, SMEs and manufacturers.”

Commenting on the announcement, H.H. Sheikh Ahmed bin Saqr Al Qasimi, Chairman, RAKEZ, RAK FTZ and RAKIA, says, “It is our firm belief that after nearly two decades of operating independently, the time is right to leverage the combined resources of RAK FTZ and RAKIA under one strong, unified brand.” Ramy Jallad, Group CEO, RAKEZ, RAK FTZ and RAKIA, adds that bringing together the two free zones under the umbrella of RAKEZ is part of the Emirate’s efforts to take customer experience to the next level. The RAK government’s steps to merge its two primary free zones commenced last year when the Board and management teams were combined. Later, the administrative functions of both entities were also brought together to streamline operations and ensure service efficiency.

“WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS!”

American University In Dubai team bags first place at Microsoft’s UAE Imagine Cup 2017

Microsoft held the award ceremony for the UAE Imagine Cup 2017 earlier in April at Armani Hotel in Dubai, where teams Green Jam, B.A.S.S. and iBins, swept to victory. Imagine Cup, a global technology competition that aims to deliver educational, entrepreneurial and employment opportunities for youth by acquiring critical skills, was held under the theme of Smart Cities. This year, the event was sponsored by Emaar Properties, with the UAE Ministry of Education as Education Partner. The competition challenges entrants (16 years or older or enrolled as a permanent student) to collaborate in teams and submit imaginative ideas in the field of technology. Competitors need to develop the concepts from scratch and defend their usability and market draw to a panel of judges. This year, Microsoft’s Azure cloud platform was a mandatory tool for all the submitted projects.



Team Green Jam, winners of 2017 Microsoft UAE Imagine Cup

Team Green Jam from the American University in Dubai took first place for their project Green Jam, which was aimed at accelerating Dubai’s goal of being one of the world’s most sustainable cities through a reward system for recycling habits for UAE citizens. Second prize was won by Team B.A.S.S. of University of Wollongong for their project Smart Signal. The project is a smart city initiative to ease traffic conditions dynamically. Smart signal can think for itself, and make its own judgments about what constitutes high traffic. This means that a signal with heavier traffic would receive a longer period of staying green as compared to its counterparts with less traffic. Team iBins from Dubai Women’s College received third place for their project iBins, an IOT-based smart bin solution capable of monitoring the fill-level at regular intervals to alert the staff ahead of time, ease maintenance and help maintain a fresh, clean and hygienic environment. Green Jam, will now represent UAE at the Imagine Cup MEA semi-finals in Lebanon this month, after which the winners will move to the worldwide finals in Seattle. Team Green Jam received US\$15,000 as prize money, while Team B.A.S.S. from UOWD received \$10,000 and Team iBins received \$7,000 for second and third positions respectively.

Need to get meat. Chicken. Eggs.

Wonder which came first?

Both arguments

make sense.

Do I have milk?

Sugar. Tea.

Tea, Alice ?

I can't explain

myself,

because I'm

not myself.

Weird book.

I should make a teacake. Or sponge cake.
Get avocado. Salsa.

Maybe

I'll take salsa

lessons.

Move to Spain.

Why

do bulls go crazy when they see red?

Could do paella. We're out of washing-up liquid.

Fairy could be a good

costume.

Bad idea.

Everyone will ask for a

wish.

Go on, it's green !

Vegetables.

Potatoes.

Cereals.

My hairdresser looks like a serial killer.

But good stylist.

Did I miss my turning?

Because humans drift.

Lane Departure Warning.



Cadillac

*“OUR MODEL IS
VERY SIMPLE; IT’S
CONNECTING PEOPLE
WITH PRODUCTS
USING TECHNOLOGY,
AND CREATING BETTER
OPPORTUNITIES FOR
PEOPLE AROUND US.”*

Ronaldo Mouchawar, co-founder and CEO,
Souq.com



MAKING HISTORY (LITERALLY)

RONALDO MOUCHAWAR

SOUQ.COM'S CO-FOUNDER AND CEO HAS CHANGED THE MENA ENTREPRENEURIAL LANDSCAPE FOREVER

By Aby Sam Thomas

There's a job and there's passion. The kind of passion that comes from knowing you're part of something great, that you have a decent shot at making history, that you can enchant customers and empower businesses every day, and that you can transform yourself in the process. This is Souq.com. Welcome."

This is the message that greeted me by the door of Souq's Dubai offices, and after my hour-long conversation with the company's

co-founder and CEO Ronaldo Mouchawar, I couldn't help but marvel at how aptly these words described the singular spirit and ceaseless drive of this Syrian entrepreneur. This conversation with Mouchawar takes place about a month after news broke of Souq's acquisition by Amazon; a deal whose value hasn't yet been publicly disclosed, although the *Financial Times* had reported it to have been in the range of US\$650 million. For the MENA entrepreneurial ecosystem, this was the exit that it had long been waiting for, and at the same time, its significance for the region at

large cannot be understated either- it's worth noting here that elevating the Arab world has been a goal that Souq has been working toward ever since its 2005 inception. "We had a mission- we wanted to connect the Arab world," Mouchawar remembers. "We wanted Souq as a marketplace, as a brand. We felt we needed one; we should be able to build it and break the borders between the countries [of the region] as best as we can, at least economically, for trade. Something politically could take ages. With tech, you are able to do it faster, and just enable people all over."

For an e-commerce platform that today hosts more than 8.4 million products and enjoys over 45 million visits a month, Souq started out as something quite different to what it is today. "We launched Souq as an open marketplace; [it was] a very simple listings site till about 2009," Mouchawar says. "That's how the business was." Launched as a part of the Arabic web portal Maktoob.com, Souq had a number of verticals on it which included everything from online auctions to real estate classifieds. Following Maktoob's sale to Yahoo in 2009, Souq came into its own as an independent entity, and that was when it began to pivot from its original model. "We felt [that] the bigger pie was retail," Mouchawar remembers. "Retail is 50% of many economies, especially with the consumer here [in this region] and their buying power. And so we took a very hard decision that, for us to be able to meet customer expectations and grow the B2C (business-to-consumer) function, which is the area we wanted to focus on, we need to stop many things that were working at Souq." Mouchawar notes that this was a testy period at the enterprise- after all, those facets of Souq that were being shut down, such as the online auction and the classifieds, were fairly significant generators of both traffic and revenue. But Mouchawar and his team stuck to the plan that they had laid out for Souq, and began building up its retail section, with the primary aim being to ensure a comfortable shopping experience for their customers. "We started this journey of [finding out] what our customers want, and how we can adapt." >>>

“FOR A LONG TIME, WE WERE DISADVANTAGED BECAUSE WE WERE QUITE SMALL, BUT WE DEPENDED ON TECHNOLOGY TO CROSS THAT HURDLE AND BRING TOGETHER MANY MERCHANTS TO ENABLE TO PROVIDE AN ECOSYSTEM THAT THRIVED AND BECAME FUELED BY ITSELF. AND CUSTOMERS LIKED IT.”

Mouchawar recalls this period in Souq’s lifecycle to be a turning point for the company, but building up and transforming the website’s product catalogue was, at the time, a rather tough process for everyone involved at the startup. “It was not easy when we went through the transition,” he says. “We got many calls from sellers who were unhappy with the ecosystem changing. But, you know, we also tried to explain to them that we were doing this because we wanted the customer experience to improve. We want to be able to understand pricing, product gaps, categories, what customers like, how do you recommend other products- and you cannot do this until you structure your work.” However, this was just the beginning of Souq’s transformation into the Middle East e-commerce giant it is today- once the company felt it had improved the experience of the shopper on its website, it then began to look at improving whatever happened post-click, and that resulted in major investments being made in payment, logistics, after-sales and other such areas of the customer journey. All of this took time, of course, and yes, funds too- by early 2016, Souq had been

able to raise a total of \$425 million in two rounds of funding from investors such as Tiger Global Management, Naspers, IFC Venture Capital Group, and others.

Souq, however, wasn’t done growing yet, and the company had begun looking into all of the available options to fuel its next phase. Mouchawar reveals that he and his team did wonder about raising another round of funds, and yes, going public was also a choice they considered, but they were also looking at other enterprises Souq could perhaps join hands with, and an alignment with Amazon definitely made sense. “When you do all the work and get to where you are, and you look at who are the potential matches or fits for Souq, then suddenly, the list dwindles,” Mouchawar says, noting the kind of like-mindedness in terms of how Amazon and Souq conducted themselves- after all, there were already plenty of parallels drawn in the ways each of the two companies approached innovation and customer-centricity to fuel their respective businesses. From Amazon’s perspective, it was looking to enter the Middle East as part of its international expansion- and Souq proved to be the perfect vehicle for it to do just

this. In a statement released by Amazon, its Senior Vice President, International Consumer, Russ Grandinetti, said, “Amazon and Souq.com share the same DNA- we’re both driven by customers, invention, and long-term thinking. Souq.com pioneered e-commerce in the Middle East, creating a great shopping experience for their customers. We’re looking forward to both learning from and supporting them with Amazon technology and global resources. And together, we’ll work hard to provide the best possible service for millions of customers in the Middle East.” The deal is still being closed, and at the moment, Mouchawar reveals that discussions and processes are underway in learning how best Amazon can help Souq, and vice-versa as well.

When Souq’s acquisition by Amazon was finalized, it was his family to whom Mouchawar told the news to first, following which he touched base with his team, investors and shareholders. “The biggest thing I told the team was that you should be very proud, because we just joined the most innovative company in the world,” he recalls. “That was kind of what kept going on in my head- that, you know, this journey resulted in something that, I think, will take us and the region to a whole new level.” And it’s not just the retail sector that could benefit, Mouchawar says- the road ahead for Amazon in the Arab world could perhaps see, say, the creation of a Kindle that can allow for Arabic content, or an Amazon Prime division that produces videos catered toward the population here. All of this will also help address the problem

of unemployment that pervades the region today- as Mouchawar put it: “We were able to create 3,000 jobs... What could happen in the next 5-6 years?” As for Souq itself, Mouchawar thinks the platform by itself is going to further evolve and grow- it’s got a good base and structure now, sure, but Amazon will help it to continue to innovate in all sorts of capacities. “We’ll continue to push that edge, in terms of things that we have done, and continue to do,” he says. “But I think, overall, customers will see more choice, that’s very clear, because we’ll be able to hopefully tap into the global supply of Amazon, its merchant base, and the partners that they work with. We already work with many of them in the region, but it [the acquisition] will put it on an accelerated path.”

As for the e-commerce landscape itself, Mouchawar doesn’t seem to be worried about competition in the region, be it with existing players in the market, or soon-to-launch entities like the billion dollar Noon.com- the Souq CEO believes that each player will have their own strategy, and their success will ultimately depend only on how they deploy and execute it. “I think it’s quite already a fragmented market, and there will be many players,” he says. “You just have to find what your customer wants, and build your segment in that share. I think, globally, this is what happens; there is always competition. On the internet, competition is even more fierce, because customers don’t need to travel, so you’re not protected by distance. It’s a URL that you change, or an app that you switch. We always compete also with the offline world. For a long

time, we were disadvantaged because we were quite small, but we depended on technology to cross that hurdle, and bring together many merchants to enable to provide an ecosystem that thrived and became fueled by itself. And customers liked it, it brought more customers, more merchants, more products, and suddenly, when you look at it and see a nine million selection [on the site], and now, you are bigger than the bigger malls. So I think we just live with competition; everyone will have a strategy; everyone has customers. We would feel we know our customers in the region... Customers come to this destination, but they go to other places as well,

and ultimately, there will be many players. I don't see that changing: global players, local players, niche players, and horizontal players."

Mouchawar's vision for the future makes it clear that there's a lot of work ahead for the Souq team, but then again, that's the way it has always been at this homegrown enterprise. "You know, this came with a lot of hard work, and I think that's the common theme. It is people who have vision, people who have the will to work... Initially, it was never about finance and rewards; we didn't have that any way to give." There have been challenges aplenty- be it with hiring people during the early years, or with flash

businesses that seemed to be a threat to Souq's standing in the market- but Mouchawar and his team persevered. "At every stage, we faced a different challenge- every step, there always was a solution. Because we're a team of builders and innovators; so, you know, we had to figure out what we need to do. We have always focused on our customers, not as much on our competition, which, I think, has helped us to always be ahead of everyone else." At this point, I ask what is it that drives Mouchawar to do all that he does- I am curious to know the source of this entrepreneur's unrelenting enthusiasm for what he does. In response, Mouchawar smiles

and draws my attention back to the mission that Souq was founded upon. "Our model is very simple; it's connecting people with products using technology, and creating better opportunities for people around us. I think the opportunity part of it always was a huge motivator, because I have seen how our team, our people, our sellers, our customers, have grown around us."

On a more macro level, as a citizen of the Arab world, Mouchawar is keen on seeing change come to this region, and he believes the tech sector -and entrepreneurship per se- can be key to realizing this. "If you think about it, this region needs these kind of companies and >>>

Ronaldo Mouchawar, co-founder and CEO, Souq.com



jobs more than other types of jobs, because, we have human capital as a main resource, and getting them into this type of entrepreneurship, tech careers would do wonders for this region.” Mouchawar uses the example of India to illustrate his point. “If you look at India, 20 years ago, India was a big outsourcing center using technology for the West. Fast forward 10 years, there are a lot of entrepreneurs [there] who have learned to scale with the global players, and became local entrepreneurs, and changed, I think, the way India is perceived globally as a tech hub. Today, many, many of the tech companies are there, local companies have scaled, [and] some of them hopefully will go global. So you see how opportunity it created. We feel the same could happen in Egypt, in Jordan, and other parts of the Arab world.” Mouchawar is also hopeful that Souq’s acquisition by Amazon will have a knock-on effect for the region’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. “This will not be the first and last global investment in the region,” he predicts. “These things usually propagate, and we’ll see more of them... I think, having global players set up in the region, at this level of technology, and availing that stack to so many people in the region, it will definitely change the way the region works. When the Maktoob-Yahoo deal took place, Souq was an outcome; that’s where some of the investment went, and that initial investment, that phase was so critical, when we raised that first US\$5-6 million... But that came out of one exit, and now, you know, we’ll have more to come. A lot of our investors will invest more, because they get encouraged,



Russ Grandinetti, Amazon Senior Vice President, International Consumer and Ronaldo Mouchawar, co-founder and CEO, Souq.com

“THIS WILL NOT BE THE FIRST AND LAST GLOBAL INVESTMENT IN THE REGION. THESE THINGS USUALLY PROPAGATE, AND WE’LL SEE MORE OF THEM.”

because [they see] you can do exits out of this part of the world.”

But for the entrepreneurs in the region, Mouchawar advises against building a business with the sole purpose of engineering an exit. “Before exits, build businesses that do scale using tech,” he says. “I think that’s the key, regardless of how the exits pan out.” According to Mouchawar, the past few years have seen the ecosystem in this region develop and grow to such an extent that it’s become relatively easier for people to set up businesses here, but one should remain prepared for hurdles that are inherent to this part of the world. “I think the challenge will remain always that not everyone can scale,” he says. “You need to find niches that make money. Not everyone can be a huge company, but all can be

successful.” When I broach the topic of funding in this region, Mouchawar declares: “Good ideas get funded.” He says that while all of us want to see more startups get funded, investors need to be given their time to spot the ones that they want to invest in. “It’s upon us as entrepreneurs to get the investors to be comfortable [with us], because it’s their funds that they are investing. They need to also see and understand the entrepreneur, and be able to trust the ecosystem.” Mouchawar believes the landscape has changed quite a lot in this respect, with a lot of seed money coming into the ecosystem—the growth funds are still lacking, sure, but that’s a scenario that could change soon as well. At the end of the day, Mouchawar says entrepreneurs need to stay true to the goals they lay out for

their enterprises. “You have to believe in your mission,” he says. “But sometimes it’s not the initial idea that you had that would work out. So you have to be stubborn, but flexible in how you execute.” As for whether the troubles the Arab world is currently seeing should be seen as a deterrent for entrepreneurs, Mouchawar, who hails from the now-destroyed Syrian city of Aleppo, chooses to remain positive. “It’s painful, for sure,” he says. “You want to focus on developing the region and the human capital, so all this instability creates setbacks for a lot of people, which is very unfortunate, and for me, personally, weights heavily on me, because I am from Syria... But we have also learnt that we have potential in the region, and we just got to grab these opportunities, and you can make a difference. And the region needs us... We know the risk of the region, we are from the region, but, you know, this is our region.” And that sense of ownership for the region is motivation enough for Mouchawar to keep plowing ahead—and the rest of us shouldn’t think twice about following suit. ■



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*“EVERY CLIENT IS
UNIQUE AND REQUIRES
DIFFERENT THINGS
FROM US, AND AS
HILL INTERNATIONAL,
WE TRY TO FIT
THE CLIENT’S
REQUIREMENTS AS
MUCH AS POSSIBLE.”*

Karim Yazbek,
Vice President and Country Manager,
Hill International



EXPANDING HORIZONS

KARIM YAZBEK

THE VICE PRESIDENT AND COUNTRY MANAGER OF HILL INTERNATIONAL, IN CHARGE OF ITS QATAR OPERATIONS, OPINES THAT IN THE MEDIUM TERM, QATAR'S ECONOMY WILL OUTPERFORM THE REGION AS A WHOLE

By Aparajita Mukherjee

As the Qatar Country Manager of one of the largest independent project management consultants, Karim Yazbek, Vice President of Hill International, has a long and varied experience in the region, having served in Dubai, Bahrain and now, Qatar. This is his second tenure with Hill International, which was interspersed with a stint with joint venture between Emaar Properties and a local developer in Lebanon. Speaking about his experience profile in the Levant and the GCC markets, Yazbek mentions that post his education at Canada and the US, “prior to joining Hill International, I was working with the family business in contracting and real estate development and based in Lebanon, which was followed by a tenure with the government for three years at the Council for Development and Reconstruction, a parastatal

body that is responsible for planning and infrastructure at a nationwide scale, reporting to the Council of Ministers in the government. Post that, I joined Hill International in 2006, first in the capacity of a project director and based in Dubai. Then I moved to Bahrain in charge of the country operations in 2008 and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, post which I moved back to Dubai in 2010 when I was promoted to Vice President and was placed in charge of the sales and marketing in the Middle East, except Saudi Arabia. My role was to promote the business of Hill International through contacting new clients. At the end of 2011, I went back to Lebanon in charge of a real estate development with a joint venture between Emaar Properties and a local Lebanese developer, and was the general manager of that project for four and a half years. After that, I rejoined Hill in charge of the Qatar operations in February 2016.”

Yazbek notes that Hill International has been present in Qatar since 2004, and has been involved in over 40 projects in the country, which include the Qatar Financial District, the refurbishment of the Sheraton Hotel, the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Mall of Qatar and the North Gate Mall. “Among our current commitments, we are on the National Museum of Qatar which is designed by the Pritzker Prize winning architect Jean Nouvel, and our 2000-villa contract for Qatar Development Bank in Al Wakrah, apart from one of the largest private residential developments in Al Waab area,” Yazbek reveals. “On the infrastructure side, we are on the Green Line of the metro with Qatar Rail as the project management consultant (PMC); we are also the project manager for the Lusail Light Rail Transit Passenger project.” With Qatar being heavily invested in the infrastructure around the FIFA World Cup in 2022, legacy use of the related projects has been a

matter of great discussion, and Yazbek feels that each of the infrastructure projects related to the games is, in some way, a good stepping stone for achieving the roadmap for the country as laid out in the Qatar National Vision 2030, in addition to some other specialty areas such as the health services and research and development (R&D) with the government’s keenness to position and project Qatar as a regional hub for R&D. Citing one of their projects, Yazmek mentions, “We are involved in the Qatar Foundation Research & Development that is based on Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser’s vision of investing in hi-tech laboratories. They also are looking at options for stadiums that will be dismantled after the FIFA World Cup 2022 and re-built in developing countries which will contribute to the legacy use.”

With respect to the region at large, Hill International has had a very robust presence in the Middle East, and has been involved in projects since the mid-1990s in the Middle East, with a bevy of large projects under its belt- in Abu Dhabi, the Saadiyat Island; in Dubai, the Palm Jumeirah; the infrastructure of Al Ain; and the Bahrain Financial Towers and the expansion >>>

THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A FEW OF HILL INTERNATIONAL'S PROJECTS IN QATAR

- > American School of Doha
 - > Grand Hyatt Hotel and Villas
 - > Navigation Tower
 - > Al Bidda Tower
 - > West Bay Lagoon Plaza
 - > Palm Towers
 - > Silhouette Tower - Intercontinental Hotel
 - > Hamad Medical City - 2006 Asian Games Athletes Village
- www.hillintl.com/en

of the international airport of Bahrain; in Kuwait, four state-owned hospitals; in Saudi Arabia, there are the Ministry of Housing projects and the Ministry of Defence. “In Saudi Arabia, we are the project managers for now may be more than eight years in the Jabal Ammar development in Mecca, and the King Faisal Financial District in Riyadh; we are also part of the JV for the metro in Riyadh; in Oman, the two huge airports are with us, and a sea resort,” Yazbek notes. Commenting on the service offerings of Hill International in Qatar, Yazbek says, “We offer all our services in Qatar that can be grouped under project management consultancy, and depending on what the client actually wants from us. Every client is unique and requires different things from us, and as Hill International, we try to fit the client’s requirements as much as possible. In Qatar, we have

“WE START WITH DESIGN AND CARRY ON THE CONSTRUCTION AND TO DELIVERY, AND WITH QATAR BEING THE SECOND LARGEST IN TERMS OF REVENUE GENERATION, IT IS ONE OF OUR PRIORITY MARKETS DRIVEN BY THE FACT THAT ITS ECONOMY WILL BE MOVING FASTER THAN THE OTHER REGIONAL ECONOMIES.”

been very successful in offering project management, construction management, design management, and less of project management oversight (PMO), though we have PMO services too.”

When asked about the company’s preference for having the government or the private sector as clients, Yazbek says, “There are pros and cons to having the government as a client and a private sector company as a client. A private company is better placed and more flexible when it comes to faster decisions and on a fast-track project with private companies, it is much easier to manage with regard to processes and procedures since these companies are faster in taking decisions. Whether it is the government or the private sector, the PMC relies a lot on the client representatives’ decision-making power and their ability to maneuver though the procurement process changes a lot between the private and public sectors. The private sector is more amenable to reviewing the technical aspects of the proposals of a project and not purely rely on the financial aspects which is more likely to happen with a public sector entity.”

Talking about their current corporate focus on Qatar, Yazbek says that they are looking at bidding on more projects in the country since the corporate philosophy is that “when we start with a client,

it is very rare that we stop midway—we start with design and carry on the construction and to delivery, and with Qatar being the second largest in terms of revenue generation, it is one of our priority markets driven by the fact that its economy will be moving faster than the other regional economies.” Speaking about the role that risk management plays in a construction company, Yazbek informs that the motto of the company is that “we are construction risk managers. In the construction business, risks are threefold— quality, time and cost. And it is a difficult balance in that: if we want to squeeze the time, then we will have to let go of the quality; if we want very high quality, the cost will be high, and so forth. They are all interrelated, and the major risks that need better care and management is to take time for the design, bring in quality contractors, which makes the prequalification checks very critical, especially in the context of the fact that a client will want to reduce the tenure of the construction period, since that is a period of negative cash flow for him. Apart from this, getting the right budget, setting a realistic timeframe and robust value engineering exercise are some other factors that curb construction risks to a great extent.”

With respect to the distinction between a Levant country’s construction sector and that of the GCC, Yazbek opines, “In a way, the Levant construction market is very different when compared to the GCC markets. The main difference is in the size of the projects and the complexities. The GCC construction industry is much more developed and way more professional compared to the Levant, where most of the projects were spearheaded by groups hailing from the GCC countries—for instance, in my second stretch at Lebanon, I was with a GCC group, Emaar. Additionally, the Levant construction market is more segregated, privately held and the government is more involved in the social and physical infrastructure creation. So it, in a way, is a stage behind than what the GCC markets are currently going through. Also, the major players in the Levant area are mainly local players, whereas in the GCC the players are of international origin— right from the design and consultancy point of view and construction contractors.”

One other factor Yazbek mentions is the level of affordability with the GCC

Hill International

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THE GLOBAL LEADER IN MANAGING CONSTRUCTION RISK

Hill No. 7 Subway Line featured in Metro Report
The link between public transport and wider urban development is well-documented, and concepts like transit-oriented development are already common in many cities. Recent and ongoing projects in New York provide good examples of the relationship between transport projects and property development.
More >

Hill Announces Changes to Executive Leadership, Welcomes Paul Evans, ICEO
David L. Richter has resigned as Chief Executive Officer of Hill International. Paul Evans, a Director on Hill's Board since August 2016, will assume the role of Interim Chief Executive Officer and Director until a permanent replacement is appointed. "I am honored to be appointed as interim CEO. We appreciate everything David has done to make Hill a global leader in construction management," said Evans.
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Hill International Sets May 5, 2017 Closing Date for Sale of Construction Claims Group
Hill has set a May 5, 2017 handing and closing date for the sale of its Construction Claims Group to Bridgepoint Development Capital, part of international private equity group Bridgepoint. On May 3, 2017, the Company and Bridgepoint entered into an amendment of the definitive Stock Purchase Agreement dated December 20, 2017.
More >



Karim Yazbek,
Vice President and
Country Manager,
Hill International

QUICK TAKES

TALKING ENTREPRENEURSHIP WITH KARIM YAZBEK, VICE PRESIDENT AND COUNTRY MANAGER, HILL INTERNATIONAL

What are the kind of qualities an entrepreneur must possess?

Vision, leadership, communication, resilience, and the ability to manage cash flow.

What can Middle Eastern governments do to help SMEs in the region?

Incubators, venture capitalists, access to capital and liquidity, encouragement in dealing with failure, so cushions need to be given.

What would be your advice for a budding entrepreneur?

If you believe in your vision, go for it.

economies, having greater room on the back of their hydrocarbon bounty, compared with those of the Levant countries, “In Lebanon, of late, we do see some Middle Eastern developers bringing in international contractors or signature architects, and it’s a tough game as well, since wherever one is, in the market, one does need to be competitive. In terms of finding international contractors, it clearly adds to the cost, over and above a paucity of stability, since all the Levant countries suffer from a lack of political stability, which is a great plus in the case of the GCC countries. Also the Levant area has more competent local players in the construction market, which makes it less of a necessity to get international companies to come into the market, though they do not have a matching power of the international

players, but it suffices for the market needs and the size of the projects that come within their competence.”

Discussing his Qatar market outlook in the medium term and what the local Qatari clients feel about the role of a project management consulting (PMC) company, Yazbek is of the opinion that the construction market has already become very competitive, and some clients prefer to cut costs, sometimes at the expense of the quality of delivery. “At the end of the day, PMC is a very small percentage of the overall project budget for a client. However, the impact that it has on the project as a whole in terms of the quality, delivery, time and the budget control is tremendous. If we assume that the PMC scope would be 2-3% of the total construction budget and if you do away with the PMC, you might save let’s say

20-30% of that, which translates overall to a measly 0.6% savings in the total budget. We try to explain to our clients that in case you save on PMC, it will not automatically translate into an overall saving for the project budget. However, unfortunately, in a market as competitive as Qatar, the clients are less inclined to listen to the PMC, so what we do is to provide very efficient teams that we call ‘squeezed teams,’ with inbuilt design review capabilities, which are partially deployed on projects, and these multi-skillset teams manage and set the project on the right path. This is a fallout of stiff competition where the tender is a very public one, and the likes of Hill International are competing with both international and big companies, and at the same time, with smaller companies. This is anything but a level playing field.” ■

ENGINEERING GROWTH

QATAR NEEDS A DEFINED INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY IN SYNC WITH QATAR NATIONAL VISION 2030 TO CATALYZE SME GROWTH, SAYS DR. ALI HAMED AL-MULLA, ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL FOR INDUSTRIAL PROJECTS SECTOR, GULF ORGANIZATION FOR INDUSTRIAL CONSULTING (GOIC)

By Aparajita Mukherjee

Despite a historic energy bounty, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are making all-out efforts to encourage SME growth, so much so that SMEs are seen as one of the fastest growing sectors in the region, according to Dr. Ali Hamed Al-Mulla, Assistant Secretary General for the Industrial Projects Sector of the Gulf Organization for Industrial Consulting (GOIC), a pan-Gulf industrial consulting body. GOIC was established in 1976, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, while Yemen joined in 2009. In support of his belief, Dr. Al-Mulla cites several initiatives across the GCC countries, noting “all the countries have put in place dedicated centers to assist and support SMEs to grow. Each GCC member country has put in place a regulator to encourage growth and development for these entities— the UAE has a dedicated council and determined incentives for SMEs, Bahrain has set up the Tamkeen Fund, Kuwait has a national fund for SME develop-

ment, the KSA has the Public Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises, and Oman has established Sharakah for the development of SMEs.” GOIC statistics, according to Dr. Al-Mulla, show that the number of SMEs currently in operation within the GCC is around 16,890 small and me-

dium sized factories— of which 11,288 are small and 2,707 are medium-sized, approximately accounting for 82% of the total number of factories in the GCC, and employing 45% of the total industrial sector manpower. Commenting on the sectors that the GCC SMEs belong to, Dr. Al-Mulla

states that although a larger number of SMEs are venturing into industrial manufacturing, they predominantly populate the e-commerce, technology, event management, food and beverages, sports and fitness, healthcare, education, construction, and the fast food sectors.

Dr. Al-Mulla is of the opinion that there are many challenges that SMEs are facing within the GCC, particularly issues relating to infrastructure development, where it lacks appropriate research and development (R&D) centers, testing centers, and well-developed infrastructure facilities for SME businesses to grow and eventually commercialize. “In addition to some other pressing problems that SMEs are struggling with, such as regulations, export support and cost of production or labor, there are also legal and logistical roadblocks that have emerged as impediments for SMEs in the region, such as high registration fees for business and licensing, ownership structures, and complicated legal frameworks. Also, the human capital is not groomed properly causing a lack of strategic planning and decision-making skills at the operational level. This is testified by entrepreneurs with limited ability to present their ideas clearly,” states Dr. Al-Mulla, agreeing in part to a premise that massive hydrocarbon revenues have led to a neglect of the SME sector earlier. It has seen reversal in recent times with the GCC governments’ initiatives, primarily focusing on SME legislation and making it easy for new entrants, although he states there is still room for more improvements. As a case in point, Dr. Al-Mulla cites the case of Qatar, which has enacted the Commercial Companies Law No. 11 of 2015 and eliminated minimum capital requirements



Dr. Ali Hamed Al-Mulla,
Assistant Secretary
General for Industrial
Projects Sector, GOIC

for the establishment of limited liability companies which gives partners the freedom to determine their own capital, thus encouraging SMEs. “The relaxation of minimum capital requirement has immensely helped new entrepreneurs with innovative ideas and business models to commence their startups even with small capital which was not the case earlier. Another example would be the Qatar Business Incubation Center, which, since its inception in 2015, has graduated 247 lean startups and 56 incubated companies. Similarly, Qatar Development Bank has financed many greenfield projects initiated by new local entrepreneurs and this relaxation in minimum capital has provided a level playing field to all newcomers in the market,” Dr. Al-Mulla says.

In 2016, GOIC entered into a partnership with Qatar University (QU) to collaborate towards promoting the economic and industrial sector in Qatar and the GCC. Commenting on the reasons behind this partnership, Dr. Al-Mulla states that this partnership has been born out of GOIC’s understanding that innovation and human capacity building are essential for the diversification of the GCC’s industrial sector. He details: “GOIC’s partnership with QU is a step



in this direction and GOIC is trying to align the research initiatives and activities in the R&D centers with the strategic interests of the GCC industries. GOIC is also working on commercializing and licensing patents, which were developed in the GCC-based R&D centers and have economic value for the industrial sector. In the case of QU, GOIC is working on a couple of initiatives: one is an industrial investment opportunities forum to present investment opportunities based on the university’s technical achievements. The second is a partnership with the College of Engineering to design a program that involves university professors, students and GOIC experts to assess a sample of local plants and provide a practical approach to eliminating waste and improving productivity and quality.” GOIC also has a wide network of contacts with several GCC

“GOIC IS A STRONG SUPPORTER OF A DIVERSIFIED ROBUST ECONOMY FOR THE GCC AND HAS BEEN CONTRIBUTING IN HOLDING MANY INITIATIVES TO ACCELERATE MANUFACTURING ACTIVITIES IN THE GCC AT VERY GRASSROOTS LEVEL.”

universities, including King Saud University and King Abdulla University for Science and Technology (both in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) for propelling SME growth there.

When asked about the policy level recommendations that a body of GOIC’s stature can make for faster development of SMEs in the region, within their capacity of a consulting institution, Dr. Al-Mulla believes that gone are the days when GCC members were only reliant on hydrocarbon revenue and were not nurturing other sectors. He points out: “There has been a consensus among member states that the non-hydrocarbon sector, predominantly led by private sector and SMEs, is the need

of the day. There have been many government initiatives advocating the same change in policies of the GCC members states, such as attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), privatization initiatives, incubators and accelerators for new startups, particularly for SME manufacturing, subsidized loans for new entrepreneurs, and enhancing support for an ecosystem that can not only nurture but bring fresh pool of talent into these sectors that could help diversify the economy and the gross domestic product.” Commenting on GOIC’s position on the regional economies’ diversification efforts, Dr. Al-Mulla says: “GOIC is a strong supporter of a diversified robust economy for the GCC and has been contributing in holding many initiatives to accelerate manufacturing activities in the GCC at very grassroots level. In particular, in Qatar we strongly feel that the country needs a very clear and defined industrial strategy that is in conformity with Qatar National Vision 2030, a strategy that expedites the industrial infrastructure needed to meet the pace of work and supporting legislation to incentivize and attract FDI in the SME sector.” ■



GOIC concluding the industrial classification training in Doha

REAPING THE REWARDS

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Dr. Raja Al Gurg

President, Dubai Business Women Council,
and Managing Director, Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group

“**W**e have to believe in ourselves, we have to believe in our skills, we have to find those skills within ourselves, and we need to nurture them. Every one of us has got that leadership skills inside us, but how [can you] bring it to surface? That’s your job.” This was what Dr. Raja Al Gurg said during her keynote address at a forum discussing gender balance and diversity in businesses that was held by Dubai Business Women Council (DBWC), United Nations Development Program and University of Wollongong in Dubai. With her speech, she invigorated the forum’s audience to champion for gender parity in UAE’s business sectors for economic progress, with Dr. Al Gurg insisting on women making the most of their capabilities.

Looking at the many hats Dr. Al Gurg wears, it is quite apparent that this accomplished lady practices what she preaches. While Dr. Al Gurg spearheads the Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group as its Managing Director, she also acts as the President of DBWC. In addition, she is also Vice Chairperson and Executive Director of Dubai Healthcare City, Board Member of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Dubai Women’s Association, and also sits on the Board of Trustees for the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives. Her prowess in the business arena has seen her industry acumen being sought after

by various enterprises. She is a member of the board at HSBC Bank Middle East, on the advisory board of Coutts Bank, a Board Member and the Head of the Auditing Committee at the Federal Customs Authority, and Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Al Jalila Foundation. She is also a member of the Dubai Economic Council, Arab International Women’s Forum, National Advisory Council, and College of Business Sciences. Given that all that she does, when asked what drives her forward, Dr. Al Gurg replies: “My work, my ambitions, my achievements, and taking care of all the achievements throughout the years- not to deteriorate, but to shoot up. Because once you stop somewhere, then you have the start of your downfall- that is what I believe.”

It is this goal of spurring women ahead in their professional lives that Dr. Al Gurg champions in her role as the President of DBWC. Established in 2002 under the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, DBWC is led by the mission to provide business and professional women with the support to make significant contributions in society, and dissuade perceptions of Arab women, whether globally or influenced through tradition or culture. Besides its networking platform to exchange insights, members are offered access to a variety of conferences, workshops and forums, which include personal and professional development workshops, as well as op-



portunities to meet business women and visiting political dignitaries, among others. In reference to the benefits of joining DBWC, Dr. Al Gurg says that the quality of training and speakers are highly beneficial for women in business- they just need to grab these opportunities that are being offered to them. “We are giving everything on a plate of gold- now who would like to eat from it, that’s up to them, and who wouldn’t, there are so many people who are really [trying to] hang [on] to it.”

As someone who has witnessed (and participated with her role at DBWC) the burgeoning growth of roles of women in leadership, Dr. Al Gurg attests that the gender parity in UAE society is “closing day by day.” She believes all of this to be the outcome of the country’s leadership’s keenness for women to have their role in society, and notes that there’s hardly anything today that limits a woman’s ability to achieve, and it is up to women to make an impact in a leadership capacity. When asked on what public and private institutions can do to facilitate and engage women in leadership roles, Dr. Al Gurg says training, education and providing flexible hours, and perhaps even having nurseries in the

workplace, is essential in encouraging this trend. While she says that though there are different ways in implementing these approaches, she reiterates that tackling these challenges, asking for changes, and pursuing roles depends on women’s determination- there are enough roles spread among UAE’s society for women, she says, “but how to take it, what to benefit from it, that is their job.”

QUICK TAKES

DR. RAJA AL GURG

On how senior management can encourage women in business

“Senior leaders need to speak up as sponsors for the skills of women. An organization’s leadership needs to take on a responsibility to better distribute opportunity in between men and women, [thereby] ensuring women can succeed as equal counterparts, making positive contributions to society and the economy.”

On achieving gender parity

“General equality and diversity should be received as a means to engagement, better performance and innovation. This is not [just] a nice [element] to have, but an absolute must-have.”



Dr. Amina Al Rustamani

Group Chief Executive Officer, TECOM Group

Dr. Amina Al Rustamani, Group Chief Executive Officer of TECOM Group, a member of Dubai Holding, opposes the usual clichés that women, especially those living and working in the UAE, allegedly have to contend with each day. “I was exposed to different sectors where I used to be the only female in the room,” she says. “The challenges we often hear about, actually don’t have anything to do with the sector or the culture, but it is all about believing in yourself and putting your efforts in to really move forward. This is a piece of advice that applies to both males and females: enjoy what you do.”

Dr. Al Rustamani is proof of how important are a cast-iron belief in oneself and, as in her case, in one’s country

and its leaders, for achieving continuous success, both personally and professionally. It was in 2001 that she joined TECOM Business Parks, a part of TECOM Group, as a project engineer, and quickly moved up the ranks, eventually taking control of this umbrella organization for many of Dubai’s free zones. In 2013, she came at the helm of the whole TECOM Group, leading its efforts to play a major role in the UAE National Agenda to achieve Vision 2021, and transform the country into an innovation-led economy. The group has spearheaded the development of 11 business communities across seven industry sectors: information technology, design, media, education, science, wholesale and manufacturing.

Today, Dr. Al Rustamani is also a board member of

the National Media Council, Dubai Media Incorporated, Dubai Healthcare City Authority (DHCA), Emirates Central Cooling Systems Corporation (Empower), and the Higher Dubai Smart City Initiative Committee. Furthermore, she currently serves as the President and a member of the Board of Directors of the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (DIDI), an educational institution offering the first bachelor of design degree in the region. Dr. Al Rustamani also launched Dubai Wholesale City and supported the

launch of Dubai Industrial Strategy, aiming to elevate Dubai into a global platform for knowledge-based, sustainable and innovation-focused businesses.

More recently, Dr. Al Rustamani has become the force behind Dubai’s efforts to become an innovative global fashion, design and business center by being appointed as the Chairperson of the Dubai Design and Fashion Council (DDFC). In 2013, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, formed the DDFC, a member of the Dubai Creative Clusters Authority (DCCA), with a mandate to raise the profile of Dubai as a regional and global destination for design and fashion, develop local talent, and attract companies operating in the fields of design and fashion to the city. “Every project has its own challenges and, to be honest, this sector has been something completely different for me,” Dr. Al Rustamani says. “I see a lot of opportunities in it, but at the beginning there were many things in terms of regulation and support that still hadn’t been established. So, it was more about how fast we were able to tick all the boxes than about challenges and limitations.

“THE CHALLENGES WE OFTEN HEAR ABOUT, ACTUALLY DON’T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE SECTOR OR THE CULTURE, BUT IT IS ALL ABOUT BELIEVING IN YOURSELF AND PUTTING YOUR EFFORTS IN TO REALLY MOVE FORWARD. THIS IS A PIECE OF ADVICE THAT APPLIES TO BOTH MALES AND FEMALES: ENJOY WHAT YOU DO.”

The fashion community is growing in a significant way and the interest in design, even of the wider society, is growing, so it is now the matter of keeping pace with the potential that we have here. Many things have happened in the last four years and I hope that we will continue being able to deliver. It is very exciting, and what is nice about it is that the whole fashion community is interested to be a part of this. I really appreciate that, and that is why we are successful."

Dr. Al Rustamani has also championed the development of Dubai Design District (d3), a purpose-built creative destination for the region's design industry. It is at d3 that we met for the launch of the DDFC Membership, a platform to support UAE-based designers through talent development and business support initiatives. "Designers are engineered in a different way," she says when asked how resilient local designers are when facing criticism. "They love to try something new and they are not scared of failure. Design is all about practice and you can see that in their nature and how they deal with things. They don't shy away from taking that risk. What is important and what we would like to focus on with this membership program is the support for their different needs. Every designer has different needs, but what I see to be common for all of them is the lack of financial and business skills. We also need to connect them with the right networks. So, that will be our focus from now on. Of course, for example, some of them have the talent and you can see it, but they need to shape their knowledge and skills to take them to

the next level." The DDFC Membership will enable designers to participate in local and international events and awards, but it will also support more established design companies in Dubai and the region by offering them access to young talents across various fields and segments of design. The reasons for Dr. Al Rustamani's work on facilitating this cooperation are plenty- the MENA design sector is still a predominantly import-oriented industry where locally produced design goods and services account for approximately 35% of the total market size, according to the *MENA Design Outlook* study, released by DDFC in collaboration with d3.

When it comes to nurturing and supporting local talent, she again states that gender is of little importance. "I see significant interest from local female designers," she says. "I was actually surprised because in our culture you would expect to find more male designers. We have a few very interesting success stories of male UAE nationals as jewelry designers, and so on. However, I see here that the interest of female designers is much higher than expected. In any case, I always say that gender does not matter, it is all about talent and the right support for it to develop."

"I think it is very important for women to support other women, to connect with them, share the experience and knowledge," she adds. "That is very important. Each one of us has a different journey, but we are all very much blessed with the support women get from the government here. And, you have to earn it. It's not that you will get it just because you are a female."

Jazia Al Dhanhani

CEO, Dubai Design and Fashion Council



"ONE WAY OF FINDING AND SUSTAINING A POSITIVE WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS THROUGH A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM THAT ENCOURAGES GROWTH IN THE BOTH PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE."

Gaining a wealth of experience at some of the most reputable companies in the UAE, including SmartCity, Emaar Properties, and Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq), Jazia Al Dhanhani joined the Dubai Design and Fashion Council (DDFC) team to raise the profile of Dubai as a regional and global destination for design and fashion. Serving as the CEO, she's spearheading several of DDFC's key initiatives, proving that women in the region are leading the workforce in many important industries.

What skills do today's working women need to get noticed and excel in the workforce?

"The skills I would say any woman needs in the workplace are having confidence in the capabilities they can offer, an open mind to help them overcome and conquer any challenges that they are faced with, and finally, a curiosity that allows them to continuously ask questions. Not only should this help them grow, but it should allow them to attain the skills to always think ahead."

What are the most common problems of today's working women living in this region?

"Women in this region are excelling at building and joining the workforce, but I think there is still an inherent fear that their careers may impact their personal decisions and lives, and vice versa. I think one way of finding and sustaining a positive work-life balance is through a strong support system that encourages growth in the both personal and professional aspects of your life."

What is your advice for UAE-based women on how to achieve their goals in 2017?

"My key piece of advice would be to stay focused and be persistent despite the constant challenges you will face. By ensuring you apply achievable and measurable actions, you will be able to reach your goals, pausing to assess your successes and learnings along the way. I would also say that it's not always about the end goal but all the successes (or tribulations) that happen along the way that will make you stronger."

H.E. Sheikha Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi

Chairperson, Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa)

If one were to put together a list of the many champions for youth in the MENA region, there is absolutely no question that the UAE's H.E. Sheikha Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi would easily find a position on that compilation. After all, the Chairperson of Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa) has long been a vocal proponent for the UAE's youth, and has been initiating programs aplenty to help enable them to harness their full potential. "We must always bear in

mind that nothing is more important to a nation than its continuity, its next generation," Sheikha Bodour says. "Without the proper investment in its youth, economic and social evolution comes to standstill. It is vital that we provide our young people with the means to thrive as individuals and make the most effective contributions to the society. We have the resources to nurture a highly talented, highly educated pool of students and young entrepreneurs, and my personal mission is to help these gifted young people

have the opportunities to realize their potential. Sharjah and the UAE in general have made such a dynamic progress in a short time; we now play major roles in many aspects of global affairs. I have every confidence that our future will be equally industrious, and we will have our youth to thank."

"ULTIMATELY, SHERAA WILL BE A REGIONAL ONE-STOP INSTITUTION FOR 'ALL THINGS ENTREPRENEURIAL,' ESPECIALLY FOR STUDENTS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO ENVISION A LIFE AS JOB CREATORS INSTEAD OF JOB SEEKERS."

It is with this mindset to enable the UAE's entrepreneurial youth that led Sheikha Bodour to establish Sheraa in 2016. "Sheraa reflects our faith in the ability of our youth to make a difference, and to contribute positively to the prosperity of our economy and the development of our society," she says. "Sheraa was conceived with an aim to harness the entrepreneurial skills of the region's youth. Through my interactions with young entrepreneurs over the years, it became increasingly clear that they had so much to offer, especially with regards to developing the economy of Sharjah through innovation. When we felt the need to es-

tablish an institution to cater to this entrepreneurship ambition and development, we wanted to position ourselves more as incubators for innovation than just an entity that supports startups and SMEs. We wanted to make successful examples out of people's creative ideas, and support their business plans, as well as empower them as strategic contributors to our existing economy." And given that Sheraa's first cohort of entrepreneurs have now graduated, Sheikha Bodour is quite hopeful about how the institution will shape up in the future. "Ultimately, Sheraa will be a regional one-stop institution for 'all things entrepreneurial,' especially for students and individuals who envision a life as job creators instead of job seekers," she says. "Our community of entrepreneurs, industry leaders and innovative youth has the potential to lead informed discussions and work closely with the government on policies that positively affect SMEs. We also plan to expand our outreach efforts to educational institutions, and collaborate with similar initiatives across the region to exchange best practices and inspire communities, as they aim towards building a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem."

"WE MUST ALWAYS BEAR IN MIND THAT NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT TO A NATION THAN ITS CONTINUITY, ITS NEXT GENERATION. WITHOUT THE PROPER INVESTMENT IN ITS YOUTH, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION COMES TO STANDSTILL. IT IS VITAL THAT WE PROVIDE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THE MEANS TO THRIVE AS INDIVIDUALS AND MAKE THE MOST EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIETY."





Mona Tavassoli

Founder and CEO, Mompreneurs Middle East

“Creating a stronger community of female entrepreneurs will only make it easier for more women to join the fold.” That’s how Mompreneurs Middle East founder and CEO Mona Tavassoli explains her passion for mentoring businesswomen in the region, and as the women entrepreneurship platform’s mission statement reads, Tavassoli feels strongly about empowering women (espe-

cially those juggling business with motherhood) “to find balance and success in their personal and professional lives.”

A look at some of the initiatives she’s involved with will convince you of her determination towards this cause. Among other things, as founder of the Mompreneurs network, Tavassoli helps organize a two-month entrepreneurship course called “Mompreneur Rising,” which takes women through a busi-

ness set up and scaling process. She’s also involved with the Global Mentoring Walk in Dubai, a global initiative by Vital Voices, where they match mentors and mentees to walk together, and discuss challenges and opportunities. Additionally, through Mompreneurs, she enables the network’s businesswomen to leverage the group’s social media platforms to gain exposure for their ventures.

Ask Tavassoli why she believes strongly in the need to create a close-knit fraternity for women, and she draws attention to the challenging life entrepreneurs lead, and how it’s tougher out there for the lady bosses. Not surprisingly, Tavassoli is a strong advocate of utilizing mentorship to change the scenario, and offers a few pointers on how you, as an aspiring women entrepreneur, can get the best out of such a relationship: “Both parties [mentor and mentee] need to make their expectations clear right from the beginning: how much time they intend to dedicate to the mentorship, how often they will meet,

and what the outcomes of the mentoring relationship will be.” She urges mentees to understand that a mentor is neither a coach nor a problem solver. “You need to do a lot of homework before you approach them, you need to know your questions, be able to explain your situation, and how you intend to go forward, then allow the mentor to guide you based on their experience.”

As for Tavassoli’s personal mentoring style, true to her advice, she prefers to be a guide for her mentees, “letting them figure out their own solutions, and offering advice” whenever they need it. “In my opinion, a mentor needs to encourage their mentee, and celebrate their victories, but still be tough and objective when there is a decision to be made,” she says. “I also make sure to have a mentor, and be a part of a mastermind group every year. It makes a huge difference to our growth when we surround ourselves with like-minded women entrepreneurs, executives and mentors.”

Zainab Mohammed

Chief Property Management and Marketing Officer, wasl Properties

Zainab Mohammed, Chief Property Management and Marketing Officer at wasl Properties, a subsidiary of wasl Asset Management Group, is easily one of the most prominent women in Dubai’s property sector, having worked in the Emirate’s real estate industry for more than 14 years. For her illustrious career, she has received accolades and awards, with perhaps one of the most noteworthy ones

being the recipient of the Emirates Women Award in 2014, wherein she was recognized by the Dubai Quality Group in the Professional Category under the Leadership criterion. In her role at wasl Properties, Mohammed leads more than 150 employees in more than 10 major divisions, while also overseeing the operations of the wasl Call Centre and wasl Owners’ Association Management. Earlier this year, when

wasl Asset Management launched the wasl Karama Bazaar in Dubai, a non-profit event that allowed 28 Emirati entrepreneurs to showcase their products at stalls for free within wasl buildings at the Karama Central Market, it was yet another instance of Mohammed showcasing wasl’s commitment to building up Dubai’s social fabric. “This initiative is just one element of a comprehensive wasl program, which aims to support the UAE’s 2017 Year of Giving initiative,” she said. “This series of activities will support the small-to-medium size lo-



cal entrepreneurs that make such a valuable contribution to the national economy.”



Nathalie Haddad

Founder and Managing Director, Right Bite Nutrition and Catering Services

When it comes to women who have pushed boundaries and challenged preconceptions, it is often evident that shattering glass ceilings has not been a goal for itself, but a mere consequence of their hard work. With a 12-year-long entrepreneurial journey behind her, Nathalie Haddad, founder and Managing Director of Right Bite Nutrition and Catering Services, the mother company of Right Bite Express and Nathalie's Café, explains that building a holistic nutrition and healthy catering company, with nutrition education at the center of its operations and business, has been a gradual process of her tirelessly responding to customer needs.

Born in Abu Dhabi, Haddad was educated abroad, obtaining a bachelor of science in nutrition and dietetics degree from the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, and a Master's of Science in nutrition from McGill University, Canada, before returning to the UAE in 2001 to start counseling people on how to make educated food choices. Right Bite Nutrition and Catering Services started as a meal plan delivery service, but it has since grown into a specialized center for expert nutritional consultation and bespoke gourmet healthy meal delivery service. Haddad explains that a continuous year-on-year growth in revenue, customer acquisition and a high percentage of customer retention were some of the parameters that

were indicative of her having built a scalable business model.

"Our strategy was based on organic growth and focusing on the details in everything we do," she says. "The infrastructure required for the growth phase of Right Bite was strongly reliant on our internal team. It was about ensuring that all the team were aligned with our company values, focusing on being customer-centric and providing a high level of service, from the nutrition consultations with our dietitian to the food that we prepare and deliver every day, and to our customer service

and delivery team. In addition, our infrastructure and team are being developed in line with the growth that we have been experiencing, and we have been developing the skill sets accordingly."

However, Haddad adds that staying true to the company's core values and beliefs has remained one of the most important aspects at Right Bite. "Our vision is to be a go-to expert team for all things health and nutrition-related," she says. "Customer satisfaction is one of the most important criteria that our business growth strategy had to satisfy as happy customers who have achieved their health goals have been our biggest advocates. Word of mouth is the most powerful tool in our industry." A pioneer in the UAE healthy meal delivery market, Haddad has developed various programs to cater for different customers' needs, including Renew You, Balanced Mom Fuel Up, Selective Plus, Mighty Lunchables, and Right Bite Cleanse, and Low-Carb.

Most recently, Right Bite Express, the company's demand delivery service, and Nathalie's Coffee & Kitchen, a coffee and kitchen concept launched in 2012, were among 13 food establishments that received Full Restaurant Certification by the Dubai Municipality during the pilot phase of its Eat Healthy, Live Healthy

"THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS BEING CLEAR ON THE STRATEGY AND FOCUSING ON ONE ASPECT OF THE BUSINESS RATHER THAN DIVERSIFYING INTO DIFFERENT CHANNELS OR VERTICALS. ONCE I WAS ABLE TO ACHIEVE THIS, EVERYTHING ELSE FELL INTO PLACE."

campaign. The two food outlets are now privileged to use the municipality's Healthy Food Logo on their menu card. Committed to health and wellness of her consumers, Haddad says that she will continue focusing on the nutrition consultancy and personalized meal packages since these have remained both the company's

core business and its biggest strength throughout the years.

"Transitioning from a startup to a scaleup is very much in line with being a startup again, revisiting the company strategy, the team, our offering and systems, and ensuring that they can take you to the next level," Haddad says. "The biggest

challenge was being clear on the strategy and focusing on one aspect of the business rather than diversifying into different channels or verticals. Once I was able to achieve this, everything else fell into place." Her tips for her peers in the ecosystem? "My advice to other entrepreneurs would be to take a step back from the business,

[and] look at where you want to be three to five years from now," she replies. "There is no right or wrong answer, but it depends on what you, as an entrepreneur, want for yourself and for your team. Based on that, make sure that your team is aligned, and that you have the right people to help you to get to where you want to go."

Aysha Al Mudahka

CEO, Qatar Business Incubation Center

Aysha Al Mudahka, CEO of Qatar Business Incubation Center (QBIC), began her professional life at Qatar Financial Center, which was, at that point of time, working on a new project aimed at promoting Qatar globally, as the ultimate upcoming destination for business investments. "It was a great learning experience for me, and I had the chance to network and connect with business leaders and influencers." From there, the next destination was to Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania, in the US for an executive course that lasted for a month, followed by an internship in one of the largest insurance broker companies in New York at the peak of the financial crisis in 2008. "It was a very challenging time for me to be involved in this sector, and from my experience, I decided that insurance was not the path for me," she remembers. But the stay in New York City exposed Al Mudahka to a number of startups –this included small boutiques, small projects in the field of arts, culture,

social media, e-solutions, food and beverage– which inspired her to get more involved in this realm, and she ended up joining a program at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar (CMUQ), related to corporate innovation and entrepreneurship. "It is at that stage that I realized my true calling– to focus on women's development in the workforce, alongside innovation and entrepreneurship. From that point, I became more involved with entrepreneurship. It has been eight years now that I have been working in this field, and being part of its development and really laying the foundations for a strong private sector, has made my career so much more worthwhile."

Given her current position and her career trajectory, it should come as no surprise that Al Mudahka is a role model for many women, and she doesn't hesitate from speaking up for her peers as well. She sheds light on a white paper produced by Education For Employment in collaboration with Bayt.com and YouGov entitled, *First Jobs for Young Women in the Middle East and North Africa*, which says that if



women's participation in labor markets in the MENA equaled that of men's, the regional GDP could rise by 47% over the next decade, and the MENA region alone could realize US\$600 billion annually in economic impact (US\$2.7 trillion by 2025). "This shows that there is actually more of an opportunity for women to start their own business than to join the workforce, because the latter requires 100% commitment," Al Mudahka notes. "Unlike a full-time office job, entrepreneurship grants women the opportunity to work from home, or from a place of comfort." She adds that if

we want a smarter economy, "not merely an economy trying to play catch-up with America regarding working women while America plays catch-up with Sweden, then the economy has to reflect the way we do things here. It has to be a transformation taking us towards our own ideal society, not someone else's. The economy is a function of human interaction and transaction. It is not separate from culture, history, religious practice, society's expectations, people's behavior. All of that means that women in the Arabic world can and should work if they want to."

H.H. Shaikha Hessa bint Khalifa Al Khalifa

Executive Director, INJAZ Bahrain

I'm a Bahraini citizen, and I firmly believe in citizenship- what your country has given to you, you have to give back to your country." That's the response we got when we asked about what drove H.H. Shaikha Hessa bint Khalifa Al

Khalifa to do all that she does in her role as the Executive Director of INJAZ Bahrain, a non-profit institution that she founded in 2005. Since its establishment, INJAZ Bahrain, which is a part of the global JA Worldwide network, has been, for more than 10 years, building on its vision "to inspire a generation of Bahraini youth to use their natural talents, inspirations, passions, and determinations to become the business leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow." Sure, it's a decidedly large undertaking to take on- but looking at all that INJAZ Bahrain has accomplished so far with young people in Bahrain, it seems fair to say that Al Khalifa and her team are very much in line with the realization of that vision. After

all, as Al Khalifa -who's also a member of Bahrain's Supreme Council for Women, as well as the Chairperson of Al Salam Bank's Board of Directors- proudly states, INJAZ Bahrain's programs, which has its volunteers educate students on workforce readiness, financial literacy and entrepreneurship, have, so far, reached 108,000 students in the country- and it's pretty certain that this number is only set to grow in the future.

Given that volunteers teach INJAZ Bahrain's programs, Al Khalifa is extremely cognizant of their contributions in realizing the organization's vision. "We tell them they are our partners in the program," she says. "Without the volunteers, we cannot open a class. So, our team -we are a team of 10 people working in the organization- try and outreach to as many people in the community as possible to join us, and support our mission. And it's been very good- the board of directors has been very effective in releasing their volunteers [from their respective companies] during working

hours, go to the schools once a week, and teach our program." In terms of future plans for INJAZ Bahrain, Al Khalifa is keen on increasing the organization's reach in Bahrain. "We aim to continue to reach as many students as possible, to engage as many volunteers as possible, because the program has two sides to it," she explains. "When the volunteer teaches the program, the volunteer gains skills as well; it's not only the student. So both parties are benefiting. If the volunteer did not take the program as a young person, the program itself will enhance the volunteer's communication, presentation, time management skills, etc. At the same time, the students are gaining a lot of information, learning how to communicate, and learning about the global economy. So the program has benefits to both the volunteers and the students. So we are trying to get as many people to volunteer with us, as many students to join with us... We want to train a lot of volunteers, and we want to train a lot of students."



Daria Solovieva

Founder, ella

Captivating an audience is a constant pursuit for any media business- and entrepreneur Daria Solovieva believes that perhaps, the best way to do so is through focusing on email newsletters. She points out how our inboxes are an integral aspect of how we consume news, and with the rise of fake news and diminishing readers' trust becoming hurdles for media platforms, it's now more essential for curators to establish trust with readers. Seeing the opportunity in the

MENA media landscape, Solovieva launched ella, a curated biweekly newsletter providing news insights, featured stories and events in MENA specifically catered for women. Though a novel idea for the MENA region, if you were a keen news junkie, you would have heard about theSkimm and other similar curated news services. So what makes ella stand out? The founder points out as a female-focused publication, their focus is not on usual fashion and beauty tips, but rather to, "speak to young women directly, deliver

relevant and timely information to them and connect them to other like-minded women... We're speaking to their minds, what they want to do with their lives." Taking in her own 10-year background as a journalist for outlets including *The Wall Street Journal* in Moscow and *Bloomberg* in Dubai, Solovieva says she noticed the lack of quality content for young women in particular, and so her approach with ella was in consideration of the target audience's interests. She notes how the young generation of women in Middle East, including driven women among the growing expat population, aren't accelerating their



career growth as fast as they should, and that perhaps, with the requisite information and inspiration, Solovieva believes they could be nudged to move ahead further. It's with this mindset that ella has also started producing offline events and workshops for

their readers to connect with like-minded driven people to further challenge them.

Curating news from print and online publications, local and international titles, ella's subscribers are primarily expats, with readers in UAE, KSA, Egypt and wider MENA and other regions. Solovieva describes their readers as CEOs, managers, and women who have recently graduated, transitioning between jobs or seeking inspiration. It's early days, but so far, the feedback has been positive— Solovieva says that readers recognize their "distinct editorial tone, how we take news content seriously, but have fun with it too." As of last month, according to Solovieva, their readership has been growing

"30% month-on-month," with a particularly high Instagram engagement rate. Their offline engagement events have also been received with good response— the founder states how they had 25 people signed up within less than two days for their latest workshop on career development, all without marketing investment. On the operations front, they bypass traditional website publishing almost completely, solely focusing on the newsletter and delivering content to subscribers twice a week and unlike traditional media settings, ella doesn't publish on its website first. Another approach they've decided is directly engaging in platforms where their audiences are, which are In-

stagram and Snapchat. "[According to their research], only 40% of news publications in the GCC are present on Instagram," says Solovieva, and this, she believes, is a definite opportunity for them. The startup leverages this advantage by tailoring and producing stories specifically for those social media channels, which has proven to be a smart move as a lot of readers end up subscribing to the newsletter after discovering it on Instagram.

As for her personal motivation as an entrepreneur, Solovieva is definitely purpose-driven. "First, I'd like to see young women grow up and see more media outlets speak to them and engage them as smart, capable

individuals, not shame them or tell them what they should look like," she says. "There is a clear demand for smarter content, and we're catering to this global demand that's not specific to the Middle East. Secondly, wherever there is a considerable market demand and an engaged, fast-growing demographic, advertisers find multiple opportunities to engage and market to their target audiences. We're just getting started, but what gets me up in the morning is to see a profitable, innovative media company that makes women a priority and caters to them every single day across multiple channels. Women are fighters, they are half the world's population, and they shouldn't be an afterthought."

Lilian Barbosa, Haya Al Ghanim, Amina Ahmadi

Co-founders, Oola Sports

It's a common thing for entrepreneurs to start up a business to solve a problem that they personally face, and that seems to have been exactly the route Oola Sports co-founder and CEO Haya Al Ghanim took when starting up her venture that offers women "loose-fitting and not revealing, yet contemporary and elegant sportswear." According to Al Ghanim, her company's activewear line is for women who are like her— passionate about staying healthy, but want to stay true to their individual values while doing so.

"It all came from my personal need," she remembers. "I had the desire to enjoy the great outdoors, while staying in line with my values and culture. I love outdoors

sports, and I wanted to be comfortable while exercising. Plus, I wanted friends to join me. If they can't find the right clothes to exercise with me, they don't even make it for an outdoor run, for example. The more I looked into ways to solve this challenge, the more I realized how big of a market it is. That led my partners, Amina [Ahmadi], Lilian [Barbosa], and I to work together on finding a solution, and we decided to launch Oola to provide more women with access to outdoor sports by providing modesty-inspired, loose-fitting activewear." Explaining the name of her company, Al Ghanim says, "In Arabic, oola means the first, the pioneer. We believe every woman is a pioneer in her own life, and our brand reflects this belief. Oola is a revolutionary brand that caters to the active woman who chooses to maintain an active, healthy lifestyle, while choosing to maintain her individual values. Our garments are made for the pioneer in

you." And for what it's worth, it certainly does seem like Oola Sports has been a pioneer in whatever it has set out to do so far. In less than a year, Oola has grown to be a brand that has achieved recognition in Qatar and the region, with the first batch of its activewear collection having hit the market in the last quarter of 2016. "We came together for a common goal— gearing up for the launch, accepting the challenge to be agile, and quick to act on a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo with the teaser, 'Oola Sportswear: Activewear That's Got You Covered' that was started in the beginning of October 2016. This experience reshaped my expectations of the new hires on the Oola team, and in the end, after 30 days on Indiegogo, we raised a total of US\$33,790 from 115 backers. This was over and much beyond our expectation of \$25,000."



As for the road ahead, Al Ghanim has set her sights high. "The crowdfunding campaign has raised my bar for new hires," she says. "Going forward, for 2017 onwards, we will be looking for new team members to join us, only if they can have the same agility, responsiveness and selfless giving of quality work for the overall betterment of the team and Oola. Secondly, our goal for 2017 and onwards is to not only continue to be good listeners to our customers' needs, but also when it's time to make decisions, we would refer to their valuable insights. That's our priority, and a determining factor in making decisions."

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

We ask seven female entrepreneurs in the MENA region to explain how they are getting their voices heard in the ecosystem

By Tamara Pupic

For three years in a row, the UAE ranked first in the world for treating women with respect, as per a global social progress index developed by the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council and Harvard Business School Professor Michael Porter. Indeed, the country has made significant progress towards parity between men and women, with one such initiative being the formation of the UAE Gender Balance Council in 2015 to enhance women's roles as key partners in building the country's future. Then, in 2016, the council adopted the *UAE Gender Balance Program*, with a mandate to review existing legislation, propose a new set of regulations related to gender balance, and oversee their implementation. Most recently, the council launched

the *Gender Balance Guide: Good Practices for UAE Organizations*, a comprehensive set of guidelines and concrete actions for UAE organizations to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in their workplace.

The goal behind all of these efforts is to raise the UAE's ranking to one of the top 25 countries in the world for gender equality by 2021. In just a few years, the UAE aims to move up 99 spots in international rankings made by the World Economic Forum (WEF), as it is currently placed 124th out of 144 countries. The WEF's *Global Gender Gap Report* of 2016 revealed that the GCC nations are among the lowest ranked countries in the world, with Qatar being the highest ranked Gulf nation (119th), Kuwait (128th), Bahrain (131st), Oman (133rd), and Saudi Arabia (141st). Yet, the WEF's 2016 benchmarking exercise,

which measures progress towards parity between men and women in four areas every year—educational attainment, health and survival, economic opportunity and political empowerment—showed that the region has closed over 95% of its educational attainment gender gap.

Traditionally, the MENA countries have been populated by women who value education highly. Not cut from the same cloth, the UAE has gone an extra mile by breeding a young and educated female population, which is also capable of embracing leadership positions. In enabling women, both local and expat, to exploit their economic power, the UAE has managed to attract ambitious females from around the globe who are driven to better their communities. As a result, the UAE Gender Balance Council today presents some inter-

esting statistics—women constitute 46.6% of the UAE labor market, with 66% in the public sector, of whom 30% hold leadership roles. Furthermore, around 20% of representatives in the UAE Federal National Council are women, and eight of the country's ministers are women. Looking specifically at the private sector, the country has 23,000 registered businesswomen running investments worth around US\$15 billion. On the list of achievements, which is by no means exhaustive, is also the fact that the UAE is the first country in the Arab region to introduce a mandatory female presence in corporate boardrooms, with a target of 20% by 2020 for listed companies.

A common thread connecting the seven women I interviewed to capture a snapshot of on-the-ground experiences of what empowerment means to women working in the MENA region today is that they all, although being of different origins and hailing from different continents, call the UAE home. Contrary to the generation of their equally educated mothers, they have opted to climb up the corporate ladder and later hop off the treadmill to form companies that are more aligned with their values, or embarked on an entrepreneurial journey from the outset. Lastly, they all point out to changes—not challenges—when talking about how today's women ensure their voices are heard.

Ola Doudin, the founder of BitOasis, a Dubai-based fintech startup allowing Middle Eastern users to safely buy and store bitcoins online, explains that education has been a priority for women in her Jordanian family



Sonia Weymuller,
Founding Partner,
VentureSouq

“GOING INTO THE CORPORATE WORLD IS ACTUALLY REALLY IMPORTANT BECAUSE YOU LEARN A LOT ABOUT YOURSELF. IT’S LIKE AN MBA. A SOLID CORPORATE EXPERIENCE TO BACK YOU UP DOES GIVE YOU A SORT OF CREDIBILITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP.”

throughout the generations. “My mother and my aunts are all university educated,” she says. “But, there was no sort of drive to realize your potential in terms of going out into the workplace, getting a job that aligns with your values and makes you wake up every morning eager to work. However, I think that is not related to women alone, but that the generation of my parents in general valued stability over creating new businesses that change the way people live.”

Sonia Weymuller, Founding Partner of VentureSouq, a Dubai-based early-stage equity funding platform, also grew up among the examples of strong, educated, and principled womanhood. “My Indian grandmother was the first woman and first Muslim to head the student

union at her university in Lucknow, India,” Weymuller says. “She spent her lifetime fighting for women’s rights, which transpired down the generations. My French grandmother was involved in the Resistance and ended up at the Ravensbrück concentration camp. She is an extremely strong woman. However, when I look at my mum’s generation, the idea of entrepreneurship was not the first thing to come to mind. Yet, it has nothing to do with gender, but the mentality. The Indian side of my family, who are closer to the Arab culture, thought I was crazy for wanting to leave my corporate job to do my own thing. So, I think it is more of a generational gap, than a gender issue.”

Although not uniform, progress has been steady

across the MENA region, and this includes the traditionally most conservative Saudi Arabia. Lama A. Younis, a Saudi children’s rights activist and founder of Hissah Enrichment Center, a Dubai-based child abuse prevention and care center, explains that technological advancements have given rise to cultural differences among generations of Saudi women. “Saudi women have always been creative, but they have had to be creative behind closed doors,” Younis says. “Now, there has been an explosion of creativity and they can showcase it to the world much more easily. My mother’s world was smaller, unplugged, and the women of her era felt a greater pressure to assume more traditional roles, especially in a collectivist culture like ours. Their choice of lifestyle was limited and their lives were framed by stricter societal rules, values and morals. A greater proportion of women from my generation are university educated.

We have the opportunity to study in the GCC or abroad. For many, living abroad, in a different culture, has broadened our perspectives, and it has opened our minds to exploring the many career, business, and life choices that are available to us. We are risk-takers. While having greater freedom is beneficial it is also confusing at times as it challenges our beliefs. However, the upside of this is that it makes us stronger in our faith and values.” While Younis, the

first female criminologist in the Middle East, decided to establish the Hissah Enrichment Centre only four months after obtaining her PhD in childhood studies in the UK, both Doudin and Weymuller gained business experience in corporations before venturing out on their own. As a testament to the innate leadership skills of women in the UAE, a report by Accenture states that they are more likely than their male classmates to aspire to senior leadership positions, (67% versus 62%, respectively); almost as likely to have a mentor, (69% compared to 70%); or choose an area of study that they believe offers high earning potential (42% versus 37%). According to Weymuller, joining the corporate world is a good starting point for enabling these skills to develop further. “Going into the corporate world is actually really important because you learn a lot about yourself,” she says. “It’s like an MBA. >>>



Lama A. Younis,
founder, Hissah
Enrichment Center



Carla Koffel,
Executive Director,
The Pearl Initiative

“WE SEE A LOT OF CHANGE IN THE REGION IN THAT IT IS BECOMING MORE A COMMON PLACE FOR WOMEN TO BE WORKING, AND ALSO TO BE WORKING IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF ROLES.”

A solid corporate experience to back you up does give you a sort of credibility in entrepreneurship. People work in different ways, for some it is more important that you went to a good school and had an amazing experience work-wise, whereas others do not care whether you are a college drop out or not.”

Educated at Yale University and the London School of Economics, Weymuller started her career at Microsoft, which was followed by stints at Viacom and Turner Broadcasting. In 2013, she co-founded VentureSouq, which has grown from an informal investor group of friends to a network of over 650 people investing more than \$6 million in 13 portfolio companies. “Sadly, there

were no startups recruiting at universities at that time, only banking or consulting companies. I kind of fell into corporate work because while I was doing my master’s in London, which is an expensive city for students, I wanted to make some money, so I took a contract job with Microsoft and joined their Strategy M&A team which reported directly to a CFO in Seattle. I was 22, and it was a sink or swim situation, but I learned a lot due to my amazing mentors who really sat by my side and walked me through everything. I liked what I was doing, although it was very numbers-driven, but it was important for me because it was a base that I needed in order to understand a lot

of stuff later on. I realized that, ultimately, I am more a people person. While I cherished and appreciated the numbers-driven experience that I had, I didn’t want to be stuck behind my laptop.”

BitOasis founder Doudin quit her job as an IT Associate at Ernst & Young London in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, moved back to Jordan where she worked on entrepreneurship initiatives with Fadi Ghandour, Executive Chairman of Wamda Group, before establishing her company in 2014. In hindsight, she says, joining a corporation seemed as the only option for an engineering graduate she once was. “I studied engineering at the University of Birmingham. A natural thing to do was to go to a career center, which was where I realized that, for an engineer, consulting jobs in technology were highly paid, and London was a great place to start your career, so I applied to all consulting firms. Entrepreneurship wasn’t even a part of the career center. No one really thought about entrepreneurship being a viable career path. In a corporation, you learn a lot on the job as a graduate. During the first year, it was all new, and I was learning so much, but in the second year, once I learned all the basics, I felt I was just repeating everything, but with twice as much work. That is when I became aware that a corporate environment is very structured and, specifically in consulting, it doesn’t encourage you to think outside of the box. While I was considering what to do next, the whole entrepreneurship wave started springing up in Europe and the Middle East, and then I decided that if I wanted to start my own business, it should definitely



Ola Doudin,
founder,
BitOasis

be in the Middle East, where my roots are.”

Analyzing whether corporations promote policies that encourage higher achievement by women is a part of the mandate of the Pearl Initiative, a Sharjah-based organization fostering a corporate culture of accountability and transparency. Its two GCC-focused reports - *Women’s Careers in the GCC: The CEO Agenda* (2015) and *Women’s Careers in the GCC - Four Good Practice Case Studies* (2016)- revealed that even though three quarters of over 600 surveyed women, occupying managerial positions, felt that their families were supportive of their education and career, they were still hampered by traditional role models. As a result, the first report stated, around half of the women chose to opt out by taking career breaks, starting their own businesses, or becoming self-employed. “We see a lot of change in the region in that it is becoming more a common place for women to be working, and also to be working in different types of roles,” says Carla Koffel, the Executive Director of The Pearl Initiative. “However, a lot of companies here are at the start of their journey and some of them haven’t focused on the issues, such as flexible working or how to provide facilities for their employees’ children, and so

on, yet. There is no easy solution to this and each company needs to identify what is going to specifically work for that organization. It depends on what business they are in and the demographics of the people who are working in that organization, and then what is best suiting for both the workforce and the objectives of that organization. It also means that quite a bit of time needs to be invested into asking these questions so that something that is going to work can be applied. We have also found that it is important to, firstly, bring men into the conversation, and secondly, to look at middle managers who have such big impact on the career development of women. They often make decisions about promotions, they often make decisions that affect the policies that apply throughout the organization, so it has been seen to be very important."

"WHEN I STARTED MY OWN ENTERPRISE, I WAS FORCED TO BE ON THE FRONT LINE AND HENCE HAD TO OVERCOME MANY OF MY PERSONAL BARRIERS AND FEARS TO BE ABLE TO POSITION AND GROW MY BRAND."



Jumana Al Darwish, founder, The Happy Box

In addition, a failure to translate relevant policies into action leads to the same results- women leaving the workplace. A report conducted by Hopscotch. ae shows that women seeking to join the workforce feel the need for support in terms of flexibility (79%), competitive pay (58%), childcare (53%), maternity leave (49%) and mentorship and training (46%). One example of a woman seeking to strike a balance between her professional and personal demands is Jumana Al Darwish, founder of The Happy Box, a lifestyle brand, and The Happy Studio, a pop-up community space recently opened in Alserkal Avenue. The 35-year-old Jordanian had worked in the public and nonprofit sectors, including The Executive Office (TEO)-Dubai School of Government, The Executive Office (TEO)-Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation (MBRF), and Dubai Cares, for 10 years before co-founding The Happy Box in 2014. "The price of success when I was working in the public sector was family," she says. "Though I worked for incredible entities that granted me flexible time, I was still very much away from my family and suffered greatly from guilt when I became a mother. Now, as an entrepreneur, I have more ownership over my schedule. However, I feel that as an entrepreneur I have neglected myself greatly. Entrepreneurship can be an incredibly lonely journey, and without the right support from family and friends, one can end up losing themselves in the process. I have to continuously remind myself that I am human and need time off to take care of me and that is okay."



Sarah Jones, founder, Sprii.com

Sarah Jones, founder of Sprii, a curated online lifestyle hub for women launched in Dubai in 2014, started her career at Deloitte London which led to an international secondment in the Middle East just a few years later. "The main challenge of being a woman in the finance world is that you are expected to work extremely long hours and that is the norm," Jones says. "It is easy when you are 21 or 22, but if you do want to start a family, this might be a challenge. There were [a] few [women], just one or two, senior partners at Deloitte when I worked there. It is virtually impossible for most women [to succeed] in those companies because how can you lead a team of 20, who are all men and who are all happy to work till 2 a.m. every day, when you have a family as well? They tell you that you can, but it is just incredibly hard to gain the respect of your colleagues because you are not there [as much as they are]. That is the challenge that one faces, and has to accept in a big corporation like that. However, my biggest reason for wanting to leave and start my own thing

was the company's inability to be agile. They can't move quickly. If a junior has got an idea or even if partners have got an idea, it has to go through 17 different levels of approval. I was buzzing with ideas every day. They don't want that from an assistant manager. They want people to come and do their day job, but I wanted to be able to think of and implement an idea on a daily basis."

A daughter of a Palestinian refugee, San Francisco-born Joy Ajlouny is now an internationally acclaimed e-commerce veteran. However, since her early twenties, Ajlouny has not shied away from jumping into the unstable waters of entrepreneurship headfirst. A risk-taker by nature, Ajlouny first opened a fashion store in New York, and later founded Bonfaire, a US-based e-commerce discovery platform for luxury footwear and accessories, which was acquired in 2013 by fashion e-commerce giant Moda Operandi, owned by LVMH and Condé Nast. Bringing her vast experience to the region, Ajlouny co-founded Fetchr, a GPS-tracked parcel delivery app, in Dubai in 2013. >>>

In her opinion, women entrepreneurs rarely face discrimination in the Middle East. “I find that being a woman entrepreneur in the Middle East to be an advantage actually,” she says. “When negotiating, a man on the other side of the table is not going to confront you, or be as ego-driven as he would be with another man. However, it is about how you conduct yourself... The same applies to men. It works both ways; it’s not just a woman thing. There is a way to conduct yourself to be taken seriously.”

When asked whether eventually taking the entrepreneurial route has empowered them to reach their potential, Al Darwish, Weymuller, and Doudin all agree that the greatest burden that could be a deterrent to success of today’s women entrepreneurs is, essentially, inside of them. “Personally, fear held me back for many years,” says Al Darwish. “I was terrified of being in the frontline. I was

always used to being a foot soldier, someone behind the scenes. That had an impact on my growth professionally. When I started my own enterprise, I was forced to be on the front line and hence had to overcome many of my personal barriers and fears to be able to position and grow my brand.” Weymuller adds, “I think that there is a fear, which is more prevalent amongst women, of not knowing enough, that either it’s not the right time [to start a business] because, for example, they need to work in a corporation a bit more before they make the switch, or because they are still a bit green and there is more to learn, and so on. Yet, you just need to take the

jump because you are never going to know everything.” Likewise, Doudin opines that the lack of self-doubt is what evidently differentiates male entrepreneurs from their female counterparts. “Men pitch as if they did it already,” she says. “It is either confidence that projects trust in the other person or some do it arrogantly, but either way, it works. There is a certain way of presenting yourself, your body language, the words and the tone that you use, that men have perfected a lot more than women.”

Pitching to investors is something Ajlouny knows well. She is among the 1% of female entrepreneurs worldwide that have raised

larger funding amounts from most prestigious international venture capital firms. Furthermore, she has done it more than once- in addition to successfully exiting Bonfaire, she closed a funding round for Fetchr, raising over \$11 million in Series A. Ajlouny hopes that the success she has seen -and the work that she has done to get it- will encourage more women in the region to take advantage of the opportunities accorded to them, and not turn a blind eye to them. “When I travel, I often see women from the Middle East having a photo of a wedding dress on their cell phone, and then when I congratulate them on getting married, they often answer: ‘No, not yet, but this will be my wedding dress;’” Ajlouny explains. “So, they are not getting married, and might not even have a boyfriend at all, but they have a photo of their future wedding dress on their cell phones. Arab women traditionally get education, but just to find a better husband. They don’t get education to actually use the learning. Yet, Arab women have just as much the brains and the passion to go after what they believe in. Again, it is not just an Arab thing. You are considered a success story worldwide if you find a husband and have children. I think that it is really important as women that we accomplish things for ourselves. You get your self-esteem and your happiness from the goals that you have set and accomplished in your life. It is good to have a husband and children too, but you still need something for yourself. Therefore, my message to women is that they can do both. You can have both, but don’t lose yourself; don’t lose the essence of who you are.” ■

“I THINK THAT IT IS REALLY IMPORTANT AS WOMEN THAT WE ACCOMPLISH THINGS FOR OURSELVES. YOU GET YOUR SELF-ESTEEM AND YOUR HAPPINESS FROM THE GOALS THAT YOU HAVE SET AND ACCOMPLISHED IN YOUR LIFE.”



Joy Ajlouny,
co-founder, Fetchr



Dubai - The Dubai Mall
Abu Dhabi - Etihad Towers
The Galleria, Al Maryah
Rodeo Drive Burj Al Arab
Bloomingdales Harvey Nichols

LANVIN
PARIS

UP THE CAREER LADDER AND THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING

Empowering women to lead *By Suha Mardelli Haroun*

OFTENTIMES, MANY FEMALE EMPLOYEES HAVE THE POTENTIAL, THE DRIVE, AND THE INTEREST IN ASSUMING LEADERSHIP ROLES AND WORKING THEIR WAY UP THE CAREER LADDER. HOWEVER, MANY ARE OFTEN DISADVANTAGED WHEN IT COMES TO SKILLS AND TRAINING.

We are half of your workforce, if not more. We have the capacity to fill just about every position in your company, from technology and engineering, to marketing and sales, and all the way to finance and management. We are often tasked to juggle numerous roles and responsibilities between our professional and personal lives. And, as far as we all know, we are equally valuable and productive as our male counterparts.

Yet, research consistently shows that women in our region are still significantly behind when it comes to opportunities for career advancement and promotions as well as several other factors such as salaries and benefits.

We conducted the Bayt.com *Working Women in the Middle East and North Africa Survey*, in which the gender gap at the workplace was still reportedly wide. Although many companies and startups may not intentionally adopt discriminatory policies, they often do not provide their female employees with the resources and tools to help them excel and achieve the business goals as well as the employees' own professional objectives.

Women employees have to fight their way uphill towards a promotion or a leadership role. Indeed, moving up the career ladder is a competitive process regardless of gender and everyone has to work hard and show true commitment for it. Nonetheless, there are many ways to ensure that advancements and promotions as well as the overall work environment is free of discrimination or bias.

Companies that are interested in maximizing the productivity of their entire workforce and ensuring employee satisfaction and retention must give the same value and attention to their female employees, as to their male counterparts. You can help your female employees who possess the drive and the leadership potential to find their opportunities in-house, instead of having to quit their jobs and search elsewhere.

ADOPT AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY ENVIRONMENT

This is one of the most essential elements to securing higher productivity, satisfaction, and even retention for all employees. Adopting discrimination-free policies starts as early as your strategy for sourcing and hiring talent.

Every company that is truly interested in finding the best employees should hire based on the job requirements, as well as what is most likely to improve the performance of the company in whole. This means looking at and evaluating skills and competencies, relevant work experience, and past performance. Gender should play little to no role when it comes to these essential objectives.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the opinions are nearly split. The Bayt.com *Working Women in the Middle East and North Africa Survey* revealed that less than half (47%) of the respondents feel that job offers are based on experience and qualifications and gender plays no role in the decision. Less than half (47%) have never been asked questions that made them feel discriminated against as women during a job interview. But the opposite is true for the other half.

Even beyond hiring, employers who seek to help all of their employees succeed and assume more leadership roles ought to remove gender barriers when it comes to training, promotions, salary raises, and the day-to-day matters at work.

RESEARCH CONSISTENTLY SHOWS THAT **WOMEN IN OUR REGION ARE STILL SIGNIFICANTLY BEHIND** WHEN IT COMES TO OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND PROMOTIONS AS WELL AS SEVERAL OTHER FACTORS SUCH AS SALARIES AND BENEFITS.

FOSTER YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL THROUGH TRAINING

Oftentimes, many female employees have the potential, the drive, and the interest in assuming leadership roles and working their way up the career ladder. However, many are often disadvantaged when it comes to skills and training. More than a third (35%)

of females who responded to the Bayt.com *Working Women in the Middle East and North Africa Survey* stated that the lack of sufficient job training and coaching is their main challenge at work.

One of the ways to help women succeed at work and pursue their leadership potential is to provide them with more training and development opportunities, some of which can be targeted for what female employees at a particular company specifically need. Whether it is negotiation skills, management skills, or other technical know-hows that are essential for higher positions, it is vital that female employees, at least, have the opportunity to learn about and develop these competencies.

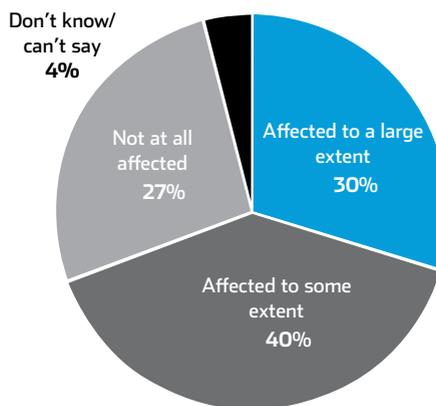
By providing sufficient training and career development opportunities, you could also complete your succession planning, map out your next key employees and leaders, and bolster your retention strategy.

ACCOMMODATE EMPLOYEE NEEDS

When it comes to the day-to-day challenges and life circumstances, women may be put under more pressure at work. For instance, pregnancy, marriage, and child-care are frequently perceived as barriers for promotions and assuming leadership roles and that should not be the case. Seven in 10 women surveyed in the Bayt.com *Working Women in the Middle East and North Africa Survey* said that their decision to have children has affected their career, at least to some extent. The survey also showed that only 8% of women working in the Middle East are satisfied with their company's maternity leave policy.

Employers should be aware that many of these life circumstances are bound to happen but they should not interfere with the employee's career progression. In fact, it is the employer's responsibility to provide accommodation for such occurrences,

IMPACT OF HAVING CHILDREN ON WOMEN'S CAREER



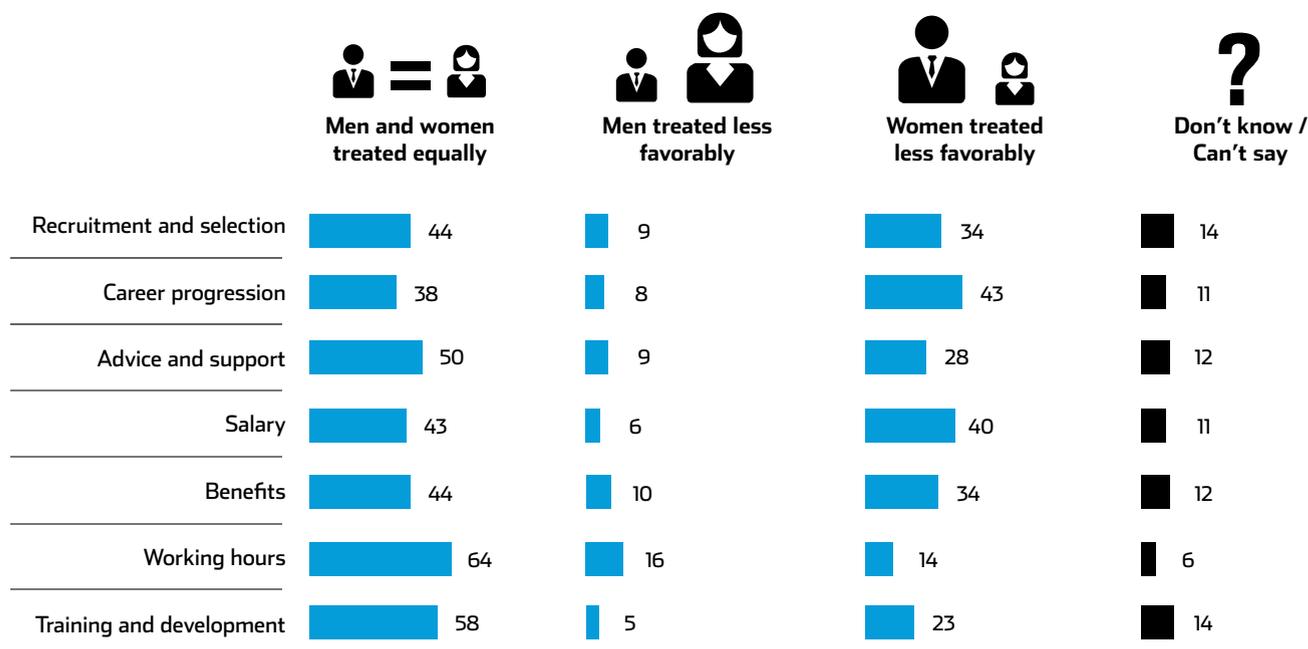
such as paid maternity leave and flexible work hours, in compliance with the labor law, and in order to enable female employees to get back on track and reach their desired career level.

This process starts by working collaboratively with employees, planning leaves and replacements ahead of time, opening communication channels among teams, and offering more flexibility for working mothers.

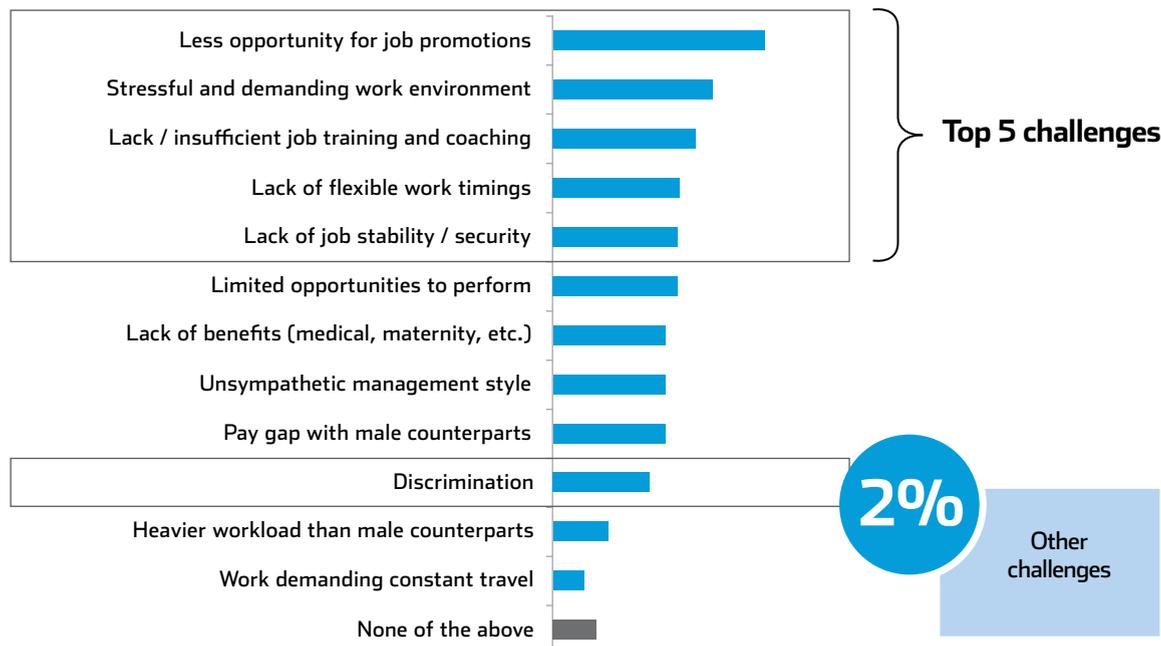
BRING YOUR ROLE MODELS TO THE SPOTLIGHT

Mentorship is one of the most effective techniques for professional development and for encouraging employees to perform their best and work their way towards their career goals. Sometimes, women may be hesitant to even ask for a promotion or a leadership position if they do not see other women leaders who are empowered and are succeeding in their roles. >>>

TREATMENT OF MEN VS. WOMEN AT WORKPLACE



VARIOUS CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN THEIR WORK ENVIRONMENT



Employers should encourage their senior female employees and managers to have these discussions with other female employees, see what their goals and needs are, and start providing them with the right tools. Build a culture of mentorship, pair up employees based on interest or career trajectory, and allow them to share their knowledge and help each other advance.

ONE OF THE WAYS TO HELP WOMEN SUCCEED AT WORK AND PURSUE THEIR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL IS TO PROVIDE THEM WITH MORE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES, SOME OF WHICH CAN BE TARGETED FOR WHAT FEMALE EMPLOYEES AT A PARTICULAR COMPANY SPECIFICALLY NEED.

In doing so, you are hitting multiple birds with one stone; you are identifying your potential leaders, you are celebrating your current leaders, you

are enhancing team synergy and dynamics, you are providing useful and cost-effective training opportunities and you are creating a cohesive and goal-driven work culture.

SHOW CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWER

At the end of the day, employees need to feel trusted to lead or assume a more challenging role. Employers need to show confidence in their female employees by giving them more difficult tasks, accepting their request to work on new projects, helping them explore new areas of their jobs, and enabling them to lead, even if at a small scale as a start.

For example, assigning your female employee as a team leader or a manager for a specific project will help them develop more managerial skills. Ultimately, they will be more confident and competent to apply for a higher position.

Otherwise, women who are not trusted at work may feel disempowered and could perhaps disengage or seek better work opportunities elsewhere.

Take Bayt.com as a case study. The job site has very strict anti-discrimination policies to protect applicants and employees. Applicants are only recruited based on their skills. There is no discrimination based on race, age, color, gender, religion, or national origin. As a result, women are employed at Bayt.com across all roles and departments, including technology, marketing, human resources, finance, sales, and leadership. The top management and executive board has a very healthy gender ratio.

The truth is: women have achieved great progress in the workplace over the past decade. The Bayt.com *Working Women in the Middle East and North Africa Survey* showed

that there are several notable improvements and positive signs of women empowerment and satisfaction at the workplace. Especially when it comes to labor laws, working hours, as well as the recruitment and selection process, more and more women are on their way to securing a balanced position with their male counterparts. Nonetheless, the survey also points to several areas, such as salaries and promotions that women are still not fully satisfied with.

Progress can be achieved and the steps are easy to implement. Young companies and startups, in particular, have the leg up in this equation; more flexibility to challenge the status quo, to enhance and encourage female participation in the workforce, and to be the industry leaders in welcoming female leadership and gender balance to their company cultures. ■



Suha Mardelli Haroun is the Regional Director of Bayt.com, one of the leading job sites in the Middle East with more than 40,000 employers and over 27,500,000 registered job seekers from across the Middle East, North Africa and the globe, representing all industries, nationalities and career levels.



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A GALAXY OF OPPORTUNITIES

SAMSUNG GALAXY S8 AND S8+

Samsung is making quite a splash with the launch of the Galaxy S8 and S8+ smartphones- both devices are bigger and better than ever! The S8 sports a 5.8-inch Infinity Display, while the S8+ has a slightly larger 6.2-inch Infinity Display. With Corning Gorilla Glass and smooth, continuous design, the devices give you a seamless viewing experience. The Galaxy S8 and S8+ are equipped with an 8MP Smart autofocus front camera and a 12MP rear camera for taking the best low light, zoom

and anti-blur photos. They also include beloved Galaxy features like IP68 water and dust resistance, Micro-SD support up to 256GB, always-on display and fast wireless charging. And if that's not enough, Samsung has added new technologies too. For instance, you can extend the use of your Galaxy S8 device using Samsung DeX, a unique solution that transforms your smartphone into a desktop computer. Samsung DeX allows you to easily display and edit data from your phone.

Need an assistant? Samsung's new intelligent platform, Bixby, is designed to help you get more from your phone. Press the Bixby button and you'll be able to conveniently scroll through services and apps using touch, vision or text commands. Bixby offers personalized help based on what it learns about your interests, situation and location over time. Another addition is Samsung Pay, which turns your Galaxy S8 and S8+ into a digital wallet that can be used instead of a debit or credit card. With more than 870 worldwide banking partnerships, you can use it just about anywhere. Last but not the least, the brand has improved security as well. The devices are built on Samsung Knox, a defense-grade security platform that allows you to choose from biometric security options to secure your device. You can use facial recognition, the iris or fingerprint scanner to unlock your Galaxy. These are certainly devices that are living up to their names- and opening up "a galaxy of opportunities."



Samsung Galaxy S8+



Samsung Galaxy S8



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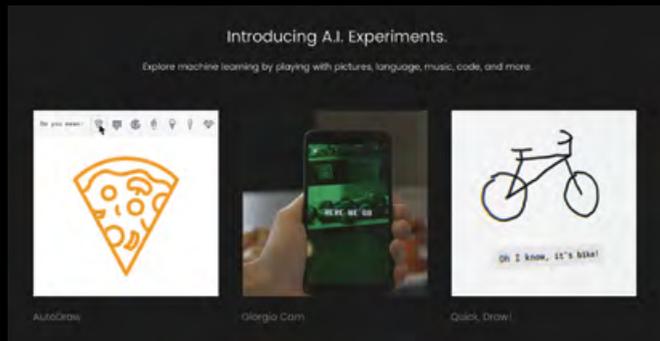
PICTURE PERFECT**NIKON D7500**

The Nikon D7500 features the high performance EXPEED 5 image-processing engine, 4K UHD video recording and an updated Nikon DX-format 20.9-megapixel CMOS sensor. It's an updated version of the D500- but is it worth the upgrade? Well, the new Nikon DX-format sensor has a native ISO range of 100 to 51,200, which provides minimal noise in low light situations- making it literally a snap to take great photos in the dark. Capture your subject more precisely with Auto Focus (AF), Auto Exposure (AE) and auto white balance performance delivered by the 180K-pixel RGB sensor and 51-point AF System. With D7500, you'll

never miss a moving subject either with a high-speed continuous capture of up to 50 shots with each burst of approximately 8 frames-per-second. D7500 is made for you to capture and share with SnapBridge and built-in Bluetooth and Wi-Fi. All of these features are packed into a redesigned camera body that is lighter and more compact, so it can go wherever life takes you.



Nikon D7500

**DRAW LIKE THE PROS****GOOGLE'S AUTODRAW CAN TRANSFORM YOUR DOODLES TO ART**

If you find your drawing skills laughable and your expertise in this department only extends to stick people and random shapes, then perhaps this new technology from Google is your shot at redemption. Launched by Google's A.I. Experiments -an open source platform showcasing creative uses for machine learning- AutoDraw is a tool which analyzes and pair your doodles to similar (and quite accurate) drawings of professional artists to replace it and help you draw fast. The tech behind it is a cool insight to AI's capabilities- it utilizes one of Google's AI experiment projects called Quick Draw, which uses

machine learning to analyze and guess people's doodles, and get better as it self-learns too. It's pretty straight forward to use: you can start by doodling your best attempt of a house or a cake, then the AutoDraw suggestion tool would guess what it closely resembles from your squiggles and replace your amateur doodle with a more refined version. Clearly a nifty and fun tool, it's free to use on a phone, tablet or computer, so doodle away fellow wannabe artists! And if you're an artist yourself, creatives are also welcomed to submit drawings for others to use with AutoDraw. aiexperiments.withgoogle.com/autodraw



#TAMTALKSTECH Tamara Clarke, a former software development professional, is the tech and lifestyle enthusiast behind *The Global Gazette*, one of the most active blogs in the Middle East. *The Global Gazette* has been welcomed and lauded by some of the most influential tech brands in the region. Clarke's goal is to inform about technology and how it supports our lifestyles. See her work both in print regional publications and online on her blog where she discusses everything from how a new gadget improves day-to-day life to how to coordinate your smartphone accessories. Visit www.theglobalgazette.com and talk to her on Twitter @TamaraClarke.

'TREP TRIMMINGS THE EXECUTIVE SELECTION

From better goods to better wardrobe bests, every issue we choose a few items that make the approved executive selection list. In this issue, we present the Digel SS17 line, a retro addition for your timepiece lineup, and a worthy pick from a cool skincare range.



Tissot Ballade (Gent)



Tissot Ballade Powermatic 80 SI calibre



Tissot Ballade (Lady)

BLAST FROM THE PAST

TISSOT

Fresh out of Baselworld 2017, the famous annual international watch and jewellery exhibition staged in Switzerland, Tissot's Ballade has caught our eye. With expertise dating back since 1853, the Swiss brand has definitely earned our trust when it comes to chronometry. The Ballade pays homage to Tissot's history of antimagnetic watches and improves upon the Powermatic 80 automatic movement. Available for both ladies and gentlemen, it offers seven styles of black, white, stainless steel, grey, brown and



yellow gold straps. And if you look closely enough, there's that peculiar Clous de Paris detail on the bezel, giving off that old-school vibe, and making it an easy timepiece to sport at both meetings and social scene gatherings. www.tissotwatches.com

EDITOR'S PICK

NIOD

If your skin often feels tight and in need of that hydration hit, it's worth giving NIOD Hydration Vaccine a try. It protects the skin's natural moisturizing factors against hydration loss, and supports the production of those same elements within the skin. After your cleansing and toning regime (or post shave, for the gents),

apply evenly all over the face day and/or night, or even between flights for a hydration pick-me-up. Keep one at home, and one in your travel essentials to use during your next business trip or weekend getaway, and give your skin that much needed boost staving off dehydration. Moisturize, friends, moisturize! www.niod.com



LINE BY LINE

DIGEL SS17

The summer months are ahead, but that doesn't mean it's time to slack off. Digel's SS2017 line presents a look that suggests that you mean business. Bright tones and minimalistic suits are dominant in this collection, paired with smart cuffs and clean edges. And though we're sure you want to make an impression in the boardroom, the German brand also encourages its clientele to mix and match, meaning repurposing your jacket and trouser combinations to create everyday casual ensembles. www.digel.de



LESS IS MORE

The *Esquire* Guy on what not to do when you are managing people

By Ross McCammon

Of the tools at a manager's disposal—meetings, delegation, assistants, fear, the key to that one closet that no one else seems to have access to—restraint is probably the most underrated. Discretion. Holding back. Not doing things. There's a whole industry set up for how to actively manage employees. There are books and websites and "learning systems" and seminars. What there aren't enough of are guides to being less of a boss. This is gonna be about that.

My father started out as an accountant at Apple in the '80s, then became CFO of various other tech companies. (In general, I would suggest that anytime a writer invokes either of his parents this early in a story, you should immediately stop reading that story. In this case, I humbly ask you to bear with me.) As you can imagine from someone who came up with Steve Jobs early on, my father's approach to

managing is as philosophical as it is practical. 20 or so years ago, he typed up some thoughts about being an accountant and about being a manager, and when I was in college, he shared them with me.

Many of the items are specific to his profession, but there are other more general rules about the workplace and life. The only one I remembered until rereading the document recently was: no touching. Of employees, of customers, of vendors, of peers. Anything other than a handshake is outside the boundaries of professionalism.

I've always loved the "no touching" rule. At first it seems a little repressive, fussy and small. But like all great "don't" rules, it's actually freeing. While it places a limit on a manager's behavior, it has the effect of eliminating all kinds of mixed messages that can confuse people and stifle work and creativity.

It suggests that the manager should be professional and discreet



KEY TECHNICAL MATTERS

Things a manager should never do

No touching. That includes high-fives, hugs, two-handed forward-facing shoulder grabs, back rubs, cheek pinches, noogies and all other forms of touching, excluding the handshake.

No berating of an employee in front of others.

In fact, no berating ever.

Also: no berets. Unless you're managing a battalion of Green Berets. In which case you should also feel free to openly berate ... sir.

No playful e-mails.

No scornful e-mails.

No e-mails that would someday look really embarrassing or criminal if read out loud in a court of law.

No trying to solve personal problems between two employees. They got in the mess. They can get themselves out.

No soliciting employee input on your own personal problems.

No planning after-work outings without first asking yourself, "If I were an employee, would I want to spend time with my boss outside of work?"

No pauses for longer than five seconds.

No employee friend requests on Facebook.

No employee friend requests in person.

No threats.

No winking.

No threats of winking.

No compliments about employee's style of hair, fit of pants, clarity of skin, choice of spouse, duration of restroom visit, etc.

Compliments about cut of jib are fine. Easy on the thumbs-up.



and, more important, should never do anything that might compromise the professionalism and discretion of employees. Which is the key to the whole philosophy of being less of a boss, really.

My father's document had other "don't" rules:

Don't fall in love with companies. People last. Your company may not.

Don't try to fix problems between two people. Whenever you try to fix this kind of problem, you create a new problem that can be fixed only by getting out of the way.

Don't bail people out. They will learn only that you will bail them out, and you will end up doing their job.

Don't lie. There are things you

cannot tell certain people even if they ask. But you have a responsibility to tell them that you cannot tell them.

Don't be responsible for other people's careers. If these people are in the organization that reports to you, you are responsible only for their jobs, not for their careers.

Don't take credit. And don't ever place blame.

THINGS A MANAGER SHOULD NEVER DO, ACCORDING TO A PERSON WHO ISN'T MY DAD

In the interest of doing a little reporting that involves someone other than one's own father, we called Claudine Cheever, who is today the Global Head of Marketing and Media at Amazon, to find out what's on her "don't" list.

Don't rely on the same people to do the same things. "Once someone performs on something, there's a temptation to use that same person again, but that demotivates the whole team. Stretch people to do different things so you have a team with diverse talents; creatives are happy when they're challenged."

Don't always listen to the loudest person in the room. "The person with the loudest voice isn't always the person with the best ideas."

Don't assume that only money makes people happy. "Money is really important, but recognition and joy are equally important. Often times when people quit, it isn't because they got offered a job with more money- that'll be the rational alibi- but it's because they lost connection to the organization."

Don't wait for employees to come to you when they're unhappy. "You should know when they're unhappy before they're unhappy."

And one of the best rules we've ever heard:

Don't try to have a good meeting. "Sometimes you have to have a bad meeting to get to greater creativity, because you're trying to create change. Don't coach people to always please the client and always have a good meeting. Don't tell them to be good little boys and girls."

SPOT THE DIFFERENCES

A BAD MANAGER E-MAIL

Steve! I hope you had a glorious weekend. Great pair of pants today. Where'd you get those? Listen, about that thing we discussed the other day--the thing where we were thinking maybe it could be perceived as money laundering or mail fraud or that other kind of fraud? Anyway, I think we should at least explore our options on that. I'm sorry for yelling at you the other day, by the way. Sometimes I get a little hot under the collar. But at least you know my boiling point. Best not to push things that far. How's the wife? Enjoyed seeing her at the picnic. You really traded up from your last one. Anyhoo, let me know about the thing. And the pants.

A GOOD MANAGER E-MAIL

Steve, can you come into my office? Thanks.

"MONEY IS REALLY IMPORTANT, BUT RECOGNITION AND JOY ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT. OFTEN TIMES WHEN PEOPLE QUIT, IT ISN'T BECAUSE THEY GOT OFFERED A JOB WITH MORE MONEY."

SOME MORE "DON'T" ADVICE FROM EXTREMELY FAMOUS MANAGERS

We looked back at the *Esquire* archives and found these pithy nuggets:

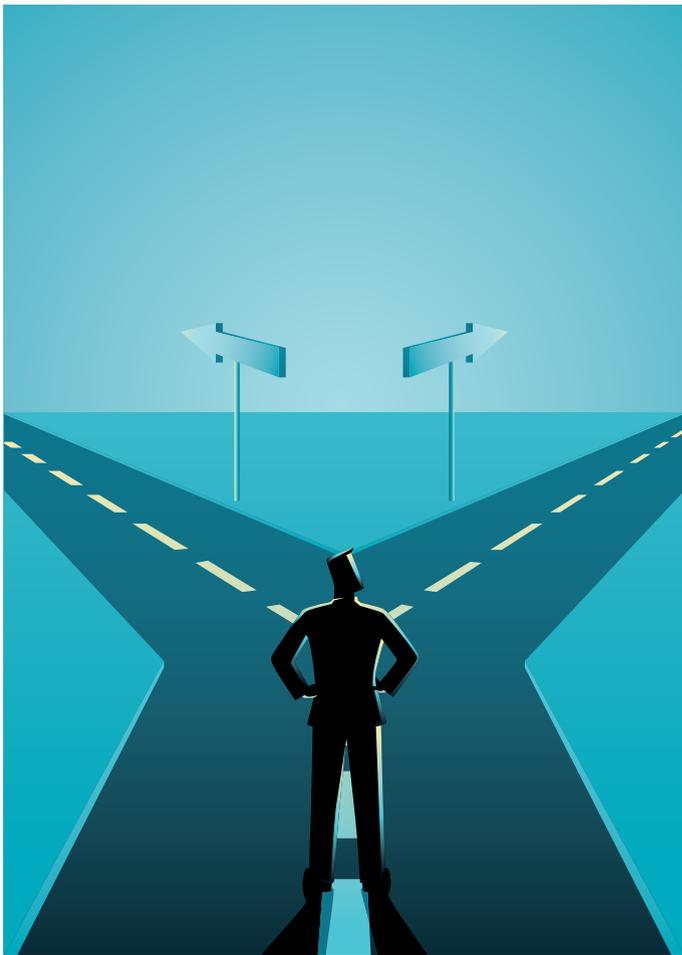
Jack Welch: "Don't linger."

Carol Bartz: "Don't work with as-sholes."

Richard Branson: "Don't put out crap."

(Another thing a manager should never do: use the term "pithy nuggets.")

The best part about the "don't" approach is that it requires less time, effort, money, meetings, team-building exercises, doughnuts, etc., than the "do" approach. In fact, it requires none of those things. You're doing without doing anything at all. And in business, there's no better deal. ■



THE ROAD TO SMARTER CHOICES

Five common mental errors that stop you from making good decisions

By James Clear

I like to think of myself as a rational person, but I'm not one. The good news is it's not just me— or you. We are all irrational.

For a long time, researchers and economists believed that humans made logical, well-considered decisions. In recent decades, however, researchers have uncovered a wide range of mental errors that derail our thinking. Sometimes we make logical decisions, but there are many times when we make emotional, irrational, and confusing choices.

Psychologists and behavioral researchers love to geek out about these different mental mistakes. There are dozens of them and they all have fancy names like “mere exposure effect” or “narrative fallacy.” But I don't want to get bogged down in the scientific jargon today. Instead, let's talk about the mental errors that show up most frequently in our lives and break them down in easy-to-understand language.

Here are five common mental errors that sway you from making good decisions.

1. SURVIVORSHIP BIAS

Nearly every popular online media outlet is filled with survivorship bias these days. Anywhere you see articles with titles like “8 Things Successful People Do Everyday,” or “The Best Advice Richard Branson Ever Received,” or “How LeBron James Trains in the Off-Season,” you are seeing survivorship bias in action.

Survivorship bias refers to our tendency to focus on the winners in a particular area and try to learn from them while completely forgetting about the losers who are employing the same strategy. There might be thousands of athletes who train in a very similar way to LeBron James, but never made it to the NBA. The problem is nobody hears about the thousands of athletes who never made it to the top. We only hear from the people who survive. We mistakenly overvalue the strategies, tactics, and advice of one survivor while ignoring the fact that the same strategies, tactics, and advice didn't work for most people.

Another example: “Richard Branson, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg all dropped out of school and became billionaires! You don't need school to succeed. Entrepreneurs just need to stop wasting time in class and get started.”

It's entirely possible that Richard Branson succeeded in spite of his path and not

because of it. For every Branson, Gates, and Zuckerberg, there are thousands of other entrepreneurs with failed projects, debt-heavy bank accounts, and half-finished degrees. Survivorship bias isn't merely saying that a strategy may not work well for you; it's also saying that we don't really know if the strategy works well at all.

When the winners are remembered and the losers are forgotten, it becomes very difficult to say if a particular strategy leads to success.

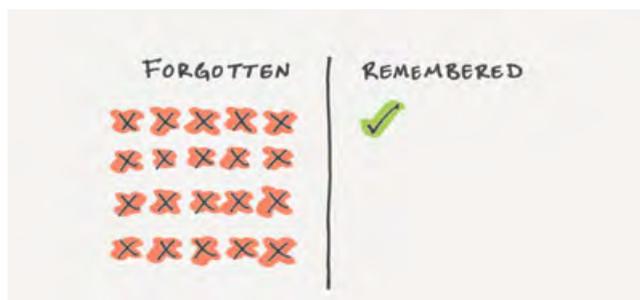
SURVIVORSHIP BIAS REFERS TO OUR TENDENCY TO FOCUS ON THE WINNERS IN A PARTICULAR AREA AND TRY TO LEARN FROM THEM WHILE COMPLETELY FORGETTING ABOUT THE LOSERS WHO ARE EMPLOYING THE SAME STRATEGY.

2. LOSS AVERSION

Loss aversion refers to our tendency to strongly prefer avoiding losses over acquiring gains. Research has shown that if someone gives you US\$10 you will experience a small boost in satisfaction, but if you lose \$10, you will experience a dramatically higher loss in satisfaction. Yes, the responses are opposite, but they are not equal in magnitude.

Our tendency to avoid losses causes us to make silly decisions and change our behavior simply to keep the things that we already own. We are wired to feel protec-

THE SURVIVORSHIP BIAS



tive of the things we own and that can lead us to overvalue these items in comparison with the options.

For example, if you buy a new pair of shoes it may provide a small boost in pleasure. However, even if you never wear the shoes, giving them away a few months later might be incredibly painful. You never use them, but for some reason you just can't stand parting with them. Loss aversion.

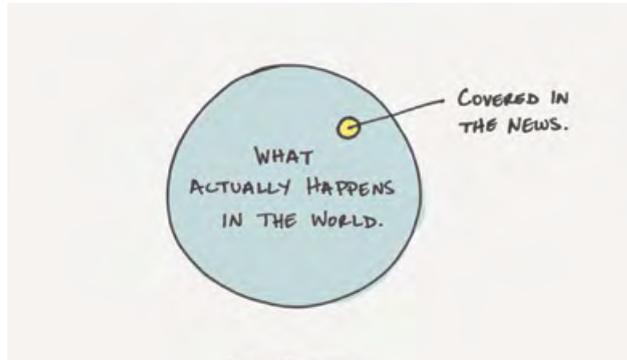
Similarly, you might feel a small bit of joy when you breeze through green lights on your way to work, but you will get downright angry when the car in front of you sits at a green light and you miss the opportunity to make it through the intersection. Losing out on the chance to make the light is far more painful than the pleasure of hitting the green light from the beginning.

3. THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC

The availability heuristic refers to a common mistake that our brains make by assuming that the examples which come to mind easily are also the most important or prevalent things.

For example, research by Steven Pinker at Harvard University has shown that we are currently living in the least violent time in history. There are more people living in peace right now than ever before. The rates of homicide, rape, sexual assault, and child abuse are all falling.

Most people are shocked when they hear these statistics. Some still refuse to believe them. If this is the most peaceful time in history, why are there so many wars going on right now? Why do I



THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC

hear about rape and murder and crime every day? Why is everyone talking about so many acts of terrorism and destruction?

WELCOME TO THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC.

The answer is that we are not only living in the most peaceful time in history, but also the best reported time in history. Information on any disaster or crime is more widely available than ever before. A quick search on the internet will pull up more information about the terrorist act of your choice than any newspaper could have ever delivered 100 years ago.

The overall percentage of dangerous events is decreasing, but the likelihood that you hear about one of them (or many of them) is increasing. And because these events are readily available in our mind, our brains assume that they happen with greater frequency than they actually do.

We overvalue and overestimate the impact of things that we can remember and we undervalue and underestimate the prevalence of the events we hear nothing about.

4. ANCHORING

There is a burger joint

close to my hometown that is known for gourmet burgers and cheeses. On the menu, they very boldly state, "LIMIT 6 TYPES OF CHEESE PER BURGER."

My first thought: This is absurd. Who gets six types of cheese on a burger?

My second thought: Which six am I going to get?

I didn't realize how brilliant the restaurant owners were until I learned about anchoring. You see, normally I would just pick one type of cheese on my burger, but when I read "LIMIT 6 TYPES OF CHEESE" on the menu, my mind was anchored at a much higher number than usual.

Most people won't order six types of cheese, but that anchor is enough to move the average up from one slice to two or three pieces of cheese and add a couple extra bucks to each burger. You walk in planning to get a normal meal. You walk out wondering how you paid \$14 for a burger and if your date will let you roll the windows down on the way home.

This effect has been replicated in a wide range of research studies and commercial environments. For example, business owners have found that if you say "Limit 12 per customer"

then people will buy twice as much product compared to saying "No limit."

In one research study, volunteers were asked to guess the percentage of African nations in the United Nations. Before they guessed, however, they had to spin a wheel that would land on either the number 10 or the number 65. When volunteers landed on 65, the average guess was around 45%.

When volunteers landed on 10, the average estimate was around 25%. This 20-digit swing was simply a result of anchoring the guess with a higher or lower number immediately beforehand.

Perhaps the most prevalent place you hear about anchoring is with pricing. If the price tag on a new watch is \$500, you might consider it too high for your budget. However, if you walk into a store and first see a watch for \$5,000 at the front of the display, suddenly the \$500 watch around the corner seems pretty reasonable. Many of the premium products that businesses sell are never expected to sell many units themselves, but they serve the very important role of anchoring your mindset and making mid-range products appear much cheaper than they would on their own.

5. CONFIRMATION BIAS

The grand daddy of them all: confirmation bias refers to our tendency to search for and favor information that confirms our beliefs while simultaneously ignoring or devaluing information that contradicts our beliefs.

For example, Person A believes climate change is a serious issue and they only search out and read stories >>>



James Clear writes at JamesClear.com, where he uses behavior science to share ideas for mastering your habits, improving your health, and increasing your creativity. To get useful ideas on improving your mental and physical performance, join his free newsletter JamesClear.com/newsletter. To have James speak at your entrepreneurial event contact him jamesclear.com/contact

about environmental conservation, climate change, and renewable energy. As a result, Person A continues to confirm and support their current beliefs.

Meanwhile, Person B does not believe climate change is a serious issue, and they only search out and read stories that discuss how climate change is a myth, why scientists are incorrect, and how we are all being fooled. As a result, Person B continues to confirm and support their current beliefs.

CONFIRMATION BIAS REFERS TO OUR TENDENCY TO SEARCH FOR AND FAVOR INFORMATION THAT CONFIRMS OUR BELIEFS WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY IGNORING OR DEVALUING INFORMATION THAT CONTRADICTS OUR BELIEFS.

Changing your mind is harder than it looks. The more you believe you know something, the more you filter and ignore all information to the contrary. You can extend this thought pattern to nearly any topic. If you just bought a Honda Accord and you believe it is the best car on the market, then you'll naturally read any article you come across that praises the car. Meanwhile, if another magazine lists a different car as the best pick of the year, you simply dismiss it and assume that the editors of that particular magazine got it wrong or were looking for something different than what you were looking for in a car.

It is not natural for us to

formulate a hypothesis and then test various ways to prove it false. Instead, it is far more likely that we will form one hypothesis, assume it is true, and only seek out and believe information that supports it. Most people don't want new information, they want validating information.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

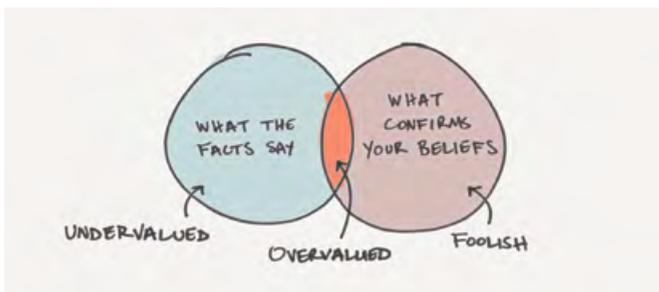
Once you understand some of these common mental errors your first response might be something along the lines of, "I want to stop this from happening! How can I prevent my brain from doing these things?"

It's a fair question, but it's not quite that simple. Rather than thinking of these miscalculations as a signal of a broken brain, it's better to consider them as evidence that the shortcuts your brain uses aren't useful in all cases. There are many areas of everyday life where the mental processes mentioned above are incredibly useful. You don't want to eliminate these thinking mechanisms.

The problem is that our brains are so good at performing these functions—they slip into these patterns so quickly and effortlessly—that we end up using them in situations where they don't serve us.

In cases like these, self-awareness is often one of our best options. Hopefully this article will help you spot these errors next time you make them. ■

THE CONFIRMATION BIAS



SCALE UP

ENSURING (REALLY) GOOD CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES CAN HELP YOUR BUSINESS GROW IN THE UAE

By Spencer Lodge

The UAE has proven its strength across a multitude of business areas. However, an area that's sadly not kept up to speed with the country's dramatic progression is the customer experience. What this has created is an opportunity for businesses to take the lead and really own a large section of market share.

A shining example of progressive customer service, and as a result market share, in the Emirates is Careem, the car booking app. Careem has cleverly identified its top 10% of clients and makes personal calls to them every month to ask their opinion as to how they might improve their service. Out of this, Careem Kids was born. Customers didn't want to have to carry car seats around with them so Careem launched this new (and quite brilliant) service, which has made lives easier for parents and increased its offering and customer base, all in one. Companies should be reinvesting budget into designing customer experience journeys and focusing on creating memorable interactions with their customers. Overall it is more cost and time effective to create a repeat customer, than to constantly attract new business. That said, the touch point that needs the most focus and can make or break the customer relationship is the one that's often not given enough importance. A company's frontline employees often hold the organization's reputation in their hands—over time, brand reputation really does come from how customers are treated.

I've prepared a few questions businesses need to ask if they want to improve their bottom line through improved customer service:

- 1. What is the customer journey?** Know where their journey starts and create touch points along the way.
- 2. Who is your target audience?** Is the type of person or business you are hoping to attract the same as you are currently attracting?
- 3. What are the right platforms to use?** This is largely based on where your customer's journey starts— is it the moment they step into your shop, or is it the moment they type the name of your service into Google?
- 4. What is the right frequency of engagements?** No one likes getting spammed, nor do they appreciate five members of staff assaulting you with the same questions one after the other.
- 5. What is the right message?** Know and understand your audience before you approach them.
- 6. What are the core interests of your audience?** Find out and capitalize on them.
- 7. What is your cost per acquisition?** If you consider this against your client retention cost, this will give you a much better financial yardstick as to the value of your customers.



Spencer Lodge is the Managing Director of Make It Happen, an online sales training system that teaches you the tools you need to break through your barriers, smash through your sales targets, and achieve the massive success you deserve. Make-It-Happen.com

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AI can't solve all of our customer service problems (yet)

WHILE EFFORTS TO USE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO DRIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE MEAN WELL, AT THIS POINT, YOU STILL CAN'T BEAT GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED HUMAN INTERACTION

By Jon Richards

OVER THE LAST YEAR or so, we've seen consumer-facing companies, both international and local, jump on artificial intelligence (AI) like it's an all-encompassing answer to every customer service woe out there. The big draw, proponents of AI say, is chatbots and voicebots that are able to respond to basic queries without you needing a human to oversee things.

And on paper, it sounds great. You create an AI chatbot for next to nothing, and instead of having to employ dozens of customer service agents to interact with your customers over menial requests, the bot will handle the basics for you. This means that the agents you do employ can spend their time speaking to customers requiring more advanced assistance.

Consumer-facing firms have bought into AI chatbots in a big way. These days, if you interact with a company via chat through its Facebook page, or through a live chat window on its website or app, the first response will likely come from a bot, rather

than a human. The responses started out as placeholders, letting the customer know that they're about to be served, and that their messages are important to the business. But as chatbots have advanced, they're now able to respond to a pretty wide variety of questions and queries based on pre-determined keywords. For example, at [compareit4me](#), we'd be able to program a chatbot to fetch information on credit cards and loans. We're always fielding questions from customers on things like minimum salary requirements for this credit card or that loan. And from an insurance point of view, customers constantly ask if one policy comes with off-road cover, or if another policy comes with passenger cover. It'd be relatively easy to take the information from our insurance policy documents, plug it into a bot, and have the bot answer these sorts of queries.

The thing is, in this region, I'm not convinced that AI chatbots would help to improve customer service.

I've always said that innovation is great, but innovation for innovation's sake isn't going to get you far. You need to consider the market that you're operating in, and jumping on the chatbot bandwagon doesn't take into account the nuances of the UAE market. For example, in the UAE, businesses have to contend with the fact that a large percentage of customers like to deal in cash. So if you're selling something online and you're not offering a cash-on-delivery option, you're alienating a lot of people— and missing out on their business. And it's the same thing with chatbots. We've got real evidence to show that customers in this region want interaction with a real human.

They want the trust that being able to reach someone on the phone instantly provides. When we launched our insurance comparison platform a little over a year ago, the system was largely designed to be automated and online. Pretty soon, though, it became clear that we needed a call center to guide customers through the process. We invested heavily into a call center and our conversion rates for insurance sales jumped by 500%. That's the value that real human interaction provides.

THERE'S A REASON WHY BANKS STILL INVEST HEAVILY IN BIG CALL CENTER TO SERVICE THEIR CUSTOMERS— PEOPLE WANT THE TRUST THAT HAVING ANOTHER, IN-THE-KNOW HUMAN ON THE OTHER END OF A PHONE PROVIDES.

Indeed, we've seen cases where a customer has requested cash on delivery by ticking a box online, but as soon as they've spoken to a customer service agent on the phone, they've offered their credit card details to us— totally voluntarily. That's entirely down to having trust

that you're dealing with a legitimate company.

A year down the line, and precisely because we have well-trained, impartial call center agents guiding customers through the car insurance comparison and purchase process, we've got repeat clients happy to insure all of their cars through us. A recent customer used us to buy a policy for one his cars, and because we had such good interaction with him, he proceeded to buy policies for his eight (!) other cars through us, too. The customer wouldn't have gotten such good interaction through a simple AI chatbot.

FINTECH STARTUPS HAVE THE ANSWERS TO CONSUMER PROBLEMS, BUT BANKS HAVE ALL THE TRUST. SO TO GAIN THAT TRUST AS A FINTECH STARTUP, YOU'VE GOT TO DO THINGS MORE LIKE A BANK.

That human-to-human interaction is especially valuable when you're talking financial products, which often need explaining to consumers. There's a reason why banks still invest heavily in big call center to service their customers— people want the trust that having another, in-the-know human on the other end of a phone provides. As I heard at a conference recently, fintech startups have the answers to consumer problems, but banks have all the trust. So to gain that trust as a fintech startup, you've got to do things more like a bank.

None of this is to say that there isn't a place for AI or chatbots in the Middle Eastern market. I have no doubt at all that companies will find applications for AI that are suitable for use here. However, as things stand, you really can't beat good, old-fashioned human interaction. And that won't change for the foreseeable future. ■



Jon Richards is the co-founder and CEO of [compareit4me.com](#), a finance comparison site in the Middle East.

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MEASURING (ONLINE) SUCCESS

THE FOUR ELEMENTS
YOU NEED TO CONSIDER
WHEN SETTING UP
YOUR SEO CAMPAIGN

By Adrian Jennings

Businesses of all sizes are now quite aware of the benefits of an effective SEO strategy, and they are keen to employ the services of SEO agencies to increase their rankings in search engines. However, with many smaller organizations, where digital knowledge is often more limited, little consideration is given to creating a clear strategy that is SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. SEO campaigns can be difficult to measure

as results take time, and there are several different elements to consider when measuring success. However, it is worth considering the following when setting up goals for your campaign: rankings, traffic, impressions, and ROI and attribution. By considering these elements together, we can create a clear picture of how a website is performing in terms of organic search.

RANKINGS

Traditionally, search engine marketers would prioritize rankings as the number one measure of SEO success with high rankings for selected keywords representing more

TRAFFIC IS AN EXCELLENT INDICATOR OF THE PERFORMANCE OF ORGANIC SEARCH. IF TRAFFIC FROM ORGANIC SEARCH GOES UP AFTER SEO WORK HAS BEEN DONE ON A WEBSITE, WE CAN DEDUCE THAT THESE IMPROVEMENTS ARE WORKING.

traffic to the website. This was said because the top 10 positions in the search engine results traditionally received 95% of the clicks, and therefore, the traffic.

However, with search engines evolving all the time, we can no longer focus solely on rankings. We see rankings as a base measure to see how the campaign is performing, and, more importantly, rankings are a check to see if something has gone drastically wrong, with big drops in rankings representing a problem with the website or a penalty.

The reason we use rankings this way instead of as a KPI is that the search engine results page has changed in several ways in the last few years. Firstly, with the Hummingbird Algorithm change in 2013, Google started to recognize the semantic relationship between keywords—for example, in the past “motor insurance” and “car insurance” were completely different keywords, and these would have very different search results. However, this changed in 2013 as Google saw that the user would consider these two keywords and products as the same thing, and therefore, the same websites should rank for these two keywords. Knowing this, there are endless combinations and semantically similar keywords that could be ranking, and showing a report with one or two keywords ranking doesn’t tell the whole story.

Secondly, the actual layout of the page has changed

dramatically over the years. We have gone from 10 simple search results (10 blue links) to maps, images, and knowledge graphs and these are constantly changing. This means that for a given keyword, a website might be the first organic result on the page, but due to several other types of results, it is pushed down to below the fold, and thus does not gain the traction normally associated with a high ranking. Therefore, even though a high ranking is being reported, we can see that not much traffic is coming from this keyword, giving you a false sense of performance.

TRAFFIC

Traffic is an excellent indicator of the performance of organic search. If traffic from organic search goes up after SEO work has been done on a website, we can deduce that these improvements are working. This can easily be tracked through analytics, with traffic being split into pre-determined channels within your account. It is best to compare this on a year-on-year basis to make sure seasonality is taken into account. It is also a good idea to compare to the previous month to make sure that you understand your traffic patterns- if it has increased or decreased dramatically, you can investigate why.

One problem with taking traffic as a KPI on its own is that it can be affected by other factors that are out of your control from a SEO point of view. As a brand, you might see dramatic increases from organic search in terms of traffic, and this is reported as your SEO campaign working, but

in reality, this might be due to above-the-line activity with more people searching for your brand in that month due to a TV or radio commercial. Therefore, you have not gained traffic from better rankings, but because of increased interest in your brand. SEO as a marketing channel focuses on gaining traffic from non-branded keywords (any keyword that does not contain your brand). Naturally, your website will rank for your brand unless there is something drastically wrong with it.

WHEN THERE IS AN E-COMMERCE ELEMENT AND E-COMMERCE TRACKING HAS BEEN SET UP, THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SET UP KPI'S BASED ON REVENUE GENERATED FROM ORGANIC SEARCH. THIS MEANS THAT ROI GOALS CAN BE SET UP USING THE MONTHLY SEO RETAINER AS SPEND.

Analytics however does not report traffic on keyword level anymore, as Google hides this data. It is therefore extremely difficult to accurately report on branded versus non-branded traffic. For this reason, it is important to use the Google Search console to view your results on a keyword level. If your SEO campaign is working, you will be able to track improvement through clicks, impressions, click-through rate, and position. These terms can be explained as follows:

> **CLICKS** The number of times each keyword generated a click through to your website

> **IMPRESSION** Every time your website appeared in the search results for a given keyword

> CLICK-THROUGH RATE

The ratio of users who click through to your website who have seen your results

> **POSITION** The average ranking or position of your website for a given keyword

IMPRESSIONS

The number of impressions is becoming a far more vital performance indicator for us, as it merges your visibility in search engines with the amount of times your listing is being presented, thereby giving you an indication that you are not only increasing in rankings, but for the right key phrases as well, which have a lot of searches taking place. Of the information included in Google Search Console, impressions are a clear indication of performance on a keyword level. By saving the data monthly (Google deletes it after 90 days), we can compare impressions and track improvements over time. As search visibility increases, impressions should increase as a result. If we are seeing an increase in position and rankings, but impressions are not increasing with these improvements, it is likely that the wrong keywords have been targeted. An increase in impression share should be the result of increased search visibility, and using impressions as a metric should be reflected by these improvements.

ROI AND ATTRIBUTION

When there is an e-commerce element and e-commerce tracking has been set up, there is an opportunity to set up KPI's based on revenue generated from organic search. This means that ROI

goals can be set up using the monthly SEO retainer as spend. This can be extremely helpful as it gives the marketing team a clear indication of performance, which can be easily justified.

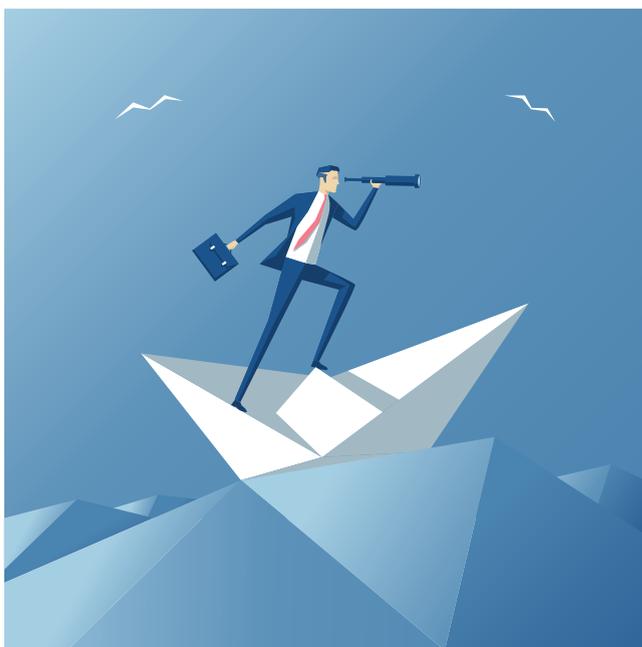
When setting up ROI goals, it is important to consider attribution, as it is very rare that one click equates to one sale. Users tend to go through a purchase funnel with multiple clicks to the website before making a purchase. These are general clicks from different digital marketing channels. It could be made up of PPC, social media, display and organic search. The default setting in analytics is assigned to all the revenue, to the last click at the time of purchase. Therefore, your SEO campaign might be leading to sales, but when the last click is from a different channel, this revenue is not reflected in organic search.

By adopting an attributed model for e-commerce tracking, we can assign a percentage of the revenue to each of the clicks along the users' click path. This gives you a better idea of which channels are performing well and how they are working together.

The way SEO is measured has changed from very simple rankings data, to considering keyword performance not only from rankings, but from increases in impressions and clicks. With the advance of e-commerce tracking and attribution modeling, we have a much clearer picture of how organic search works together with other digital channels, and should therefore be able to create much more measurable and integrated digital strategies. ■



Adrian Jennings is the Search Performance Director at Sekari, a search optimized content agency that focuses on search, content and performance marketing. Adrian is responsible for leading client strategy across Sekari's entire client portfolio delivering overall performance across all search, content, and paid media channels. Adrian's ten-year SEO career has seen him run complex SEO accounts in the UK, RSA, Nigeria, KSA and the UAE, with high-profile clients including Royal Bank of Scotland Insurance, Citibank, and Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai Parks & Resorts and *Gulf News*.



Starting up smart

Here's how you convert your vision into a viable product

By Loulou Khazen Baz

THE RECENT SALE of Souq.com has certainly increased the degree of pontification about the value and potential scale of technology startups in MENA, with opinions varying on the timing and value of the deal. No one however could deny the significance of this deal on boosting (the morale at least) of an already burgeoning ecosystem, and giving investors and founders a weapon to add to their arsenal as they raise funds.

The news will certainly attract more people to tech entrepreneurship, but the reality remains that transforming ideas into products would require much more than a stellar education or a fancy corporate resume. It requires a mixture of market readiness, capital, a bit of luck, and most importantly, startup experience—something that a nascent ecosystem is still in the process of accumulating

and hasn't yet started assimilating.

While building technology products has become more affordable due to the various off the shelf solutions, the truth remains that building a scalable and custom solution is going to require a fairly large investment. It is much more than hiring a developer to build a website or an app.

We've had many entrepreneurs looking to build products approach us at Nabbesh, and we often find ourselves having to educate these entrepreneurs about transforming ideas into products. Our recommendation to entrepreneurs is always the same, before you approach us or any other supplier or even any potential hire, you need to think long and hard about what you're trying to build and why and we often ask them to do the following.

1. WRITE IT DOWN, MAP IT OUT AND VISUALIZE IT

When the eureka moment strikes and your heart is consumed with passion for an idea, start by putting together a wireframe. What is this product going to look like? What features does it have? What is my customer journey? What type of operation is required to support the business? What is my go-to market strategy, and the list goes on. Basically you need to map out how your product is solving a consumer problem and what you need to build to get you there. At this stage it is highly advisable that you get some validation from stakeholders and especially future customers. Do not, and we often stress on that, do not be scared about sharing your idea and getting feedback. It is the only way to highlight potential gaps before wasting precious resources (time and money) on building something irrelevant.

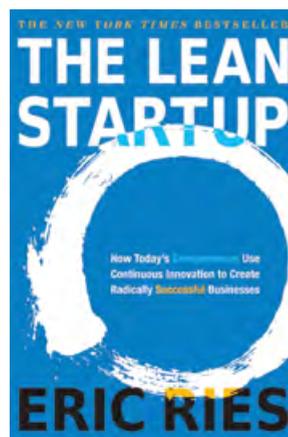
2. DO NOT EXPECT THE AGENCY/FREELANCER TO DO YOUR WORK

Once you know what you want and decide to approach an agency or a bunch of freelancers, you need to be clear on what it is you need. Do not expect the service providers to build your product specifications, work on your copywriting or add images on your behalf, and honestly for them to care beyond the fact that you're a client and they are there to deliver a service for you. Take control of the outcome right from the outset by having a clear idea of what you want or brace yourself for some nasty surprises.

IF YOU HAVE A SMALL BUDGET, REDUCE YOUR FEATURE SET, AND BUILD AN MVP INSTEAD OF TRYING TO BUILD A SPACESHIP.

3. SET A BUDGET- AND MULTIPLY IT BY 3

If I had a dollar for every time an entrepreneur tells me "I want to have impact on a budget." Well, don't we all? But that is an oxymoron. While I understand that entrepreneurs need to be frugal, you need to prioritize where the money has to go and there are areas that require a proper investment to get the intended results. If you have a small budget, reduce your feature set, and build an MVP instead of trying to build a spaceship, which won't have the necessary fuel to lift off. It doesn't have to be this way—read the book *The Lean Startup*.



4. SET A TIMEFRAME, AND BE REALISTIC

Let's face it, things take time, and there is no reason for entrepreneurs to set unrealistic expectations and rush the idea incubation process. Whilst speed is important no doubt, there is a difference between building something fast due to efficiencies and clarity of brief versus rushing an agency or freelancers for the sake of creating a sense of urgency. You want speed? Put more planning and more bodies on the project and it will move faster.



Loulou Khazen Baz is the founder and CEO of Nabbesh.com, the Middle East's first online work marketplace which connects businesses with top quality freelancers from the world's emerging markets with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa region. Baz founded Nabbesh.com out of Dubai with the vision to fill the gap between talent demand and supply pockets, as well as to encourage local businesses to hire experts from the region, creating more job opportunities and therefore a positive economic impact on local communities.

5. A DEVELOPER IS NO MAGICIAN

I have developed a lot of sympathy for the developers in our region. The poor guy/girl is often expected to work on design, wireframes, writing product specs, coding, writing content, finding images, and unit testing, while of course falling in love with the client's project- but that just isn't going to happen. We must learn to manage our

expectations, as this is the job of three, or maybe four, people. Building a product requires UI experts, product experts (this is generally the entrepreneur), multiple developers depending on whether it is a custom or off the shelf solution and copywriters, graphic designers etc.

As more people in the business world jump into entrepreneurship (and it is a welcome step),

we need to work together on raising the bar when it comes to building world-class products and executing on a well-defined vision. New entrepreneurs need to leverage the knowledge of other more established entrepreneurs who have had a few battle scars. As an entrepreneur who's looking to share knowledge and learn from the ecosystem, I hope the aforementioned points will help put

all you wannabe entrepreneurs on the right track of building something sustainable for the long run. Good luck! ■

THE TRUTH REMAINS THAT BUILDING A SCALABLE AND CUSTOM SOLUTION IS GOING TO REQUIRE A FAIRLY LARGE INVESTMENT. IT IS MUCH MORE THAN HIRING A DEVELOPER TO BUILD A WEBSITE OR AN APP.



Excite and engage

SIX TIPS TO UPDATE YOUR WORKSPACE FOR THE OFFICE RENAISSANCE

Take a moment and describe what comes to mind when you think of a modern room. Your brain may conjure up images of thin, sleek furniture, and minimalist decor. Now, instead of thinking about the room, turn your thoughts to the modern man or modern woman. He or she may be rushing to the next meeting, all while preparing mental talking points, answering a text message and having a "casual" yet critical offline conversation with a co-worker. Is your image of a modern room supporting the modern worker?

When designing spaces for today's employees, the best result is human-centered, a workplace crafted to mentally excite and engage, physically

comfort and emotionally support busy workers. Mobile technologies promised workers the ability to be productive on the go. But it's not enough. Needs for collaboration, team building and individual focus are just a few of the reasons employees are coming back to the office. The elevated importance of the workplace is creating an office renaissance.

As employees return to the office, the workspaces of yesterday won't meet the needs of today. The spaces for the new office need to combine an updated look with an authentic employee. Beautiful spaces are only worth investing in if they are also productive.

The Steelcase Design Studio considered the entirety of the

person when putting together the below tips for modernizing your workspace. Emotionally, how people feel in the space, was considered important along with employees' physical health and people's ability to focus and solve problems. With a view of workers' holistic well-being, Steelcase's team of designers created six suggestions for how to update your workplace for the office renaissance:

1. Democratize the space

Similar to a healthy ecosystem in nature that is bio-diverse, create a range of spaces that support different types of work that people can choose to work from, regardless of where they fit within the organization's hierarchy. Large team meetings, small group conversations and private moments to focus all support the modern worker's needs.

2. Support multiple postures and movement

Incorporate spaces that allow people to work in whatever posture works for them- lounging, standing, perching, walking or sitting upright.

3. Take cues from nature

More than just adding plants -which is important- seek variation over uniformity. Incorporate

rate naturally complex materials, lots of different shapes, forms, patterns and textures.

4. Embed performance

The most inviting and inspiring spaces need to help people make meaningful progress on their work. Integrate technology that makes it easier for people to collaborate, that encourages movement and makes it easier to get into focus. Help people find their favorite places to get work done and provide a feedback loop to the organization about what spaces work.

5. Add needed privacy

Balance the desire for openness with the human need for solitude. Create spaces that support focused work as well as rejuvenation.

6. Promote personalization

Create spaces that feel bespoke to the organization and the individual. Prioritize self-expression and authenticity over perfection.

Modernizing the workplace doesn't need to feel intimidating or overwhelming. By keeping the holistic wellbeing of people in mind, your workplace can be at the forefront of the office renaissance, becoming a place where everyone wants to be.



John Small is Director of Industrial Design, EMEA, Steelcase, the global leader in the office furniture industry. Small leads the EMEA team responsible for product design and development as well as the design of Steelcase workspaces across the EMEA region.



Cadillac CT6 at the annual International Auto show 2017 in Chicago

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Raising the stakes

IN TODAY'S COMPETITIVE MARKET LANDSCAPE, ENSURING A STELLAR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IS KEY FOR YOUR BRAND TO STAND OUT

By Christian Soemmer

Over the past five to ten years, the automotive industry has seen huge interest across the region. Established brands in the Middle East have increased and adapted the products that they bring to the market. They're offering more technology, luxury, and modern design than ever before. It's not limited to the old hierarchy of European or American companies, with Japanese and Korean counterparts also offering exceptional quality with very competitive pricing.

What this has caused is an even more competitive market, and this is great news for customers who, as well as getting an even wider choice

of models to choose from, now have options offering better quality and technology, without necessarily paying a high price for it. With the product quality and technology gap slowly closing with the exception to the ultra-luxury brands, this has caused further saturation, and an abundance of choice for the buyer.

What this all means is that as automotive manufacturers, we have had to adapt and change. When we sell a customer a car now, we sell them a lifestyle. At Cadillac, for example, we take people on a journey of various experiences that they identify with, making them proud to drive a Cadillac as it mirrors their life

and ambitions. This is done on a global, and a local level.

Customers' buying decisions no longer depend on the brand or the vehicle itself, but the experience they have outside of the vehicle. Smart customers will also judge your brand and your products based on the experience they receive. Hence, it's critical to provide a seamless, consistent, and premium experience from the moment they visit your website, to when they enter your showroom to purchase a vehicle, through to when they take their vehicle to be serviced.

The ownership experience is now playing more of a role than ever in influencing a person's decision whether or not to purchase a vehicle. Knowing whether or not you can expect to have a good or bad experience with a dealer is becoming just as important as ensuring the car itself meets your needs.

Again, this is where the battles are won and lost for many brands. You can see now across the GCC and Levant, upgrades and renovations taking place for many showrooms, elevating the customer's perception and experience. New technologies are introduced to help the po-

tential buyer see and imagine the car they are considering, with drawers and walls filled with different colors, leathers and trims for them to combine and choose from.

With more and more brands competing for the same customers, keeping them as customers for life has become a standard target for many automakers. One of the biggest factors to allow this is the quality of aftersales service: the industry here has also changed and adapted. Many now offer shorter service times, replacement vehicles while your vehicle is being serviced or repaired, and same day appointments— all in the interests of providing a better customer experience that puts convenience for the customer first. The stakes are high in a connected world, where one dissatisfied customer can tell the world of their experience and cause major brand reputation damage.

In the coming years, the industry will begin to see big shifts and an even tougher competition between brands to capture customer attention. This is good news for any car buyer, as they will have the luxury of choice knowing that each brand is vying to retain them for life, and hoping to sell them the latest model to come off the production line.

Customer service is not something that is perfected overnight, brands have to continually make sure that every step and decision taken is made with the customer in mind. We all know that premium vehicles packed with the latest connectivity technologies can be (and are being) manufactured, and so, the deciding factor is now on the experience the owner has outside of the vehicle— not just in it. ■



Christian Soemmer is the Managing Director of Cadillac Middle East.



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THE FUTURE OF E-COMMERCE

Five trends to watch out for in the digi space in 2017 *By Saad Khan*

THE OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY VARIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, THE RISE OF ANALYTICS STUDIES OF DEVICES AND MULTIPLE PAYMENT OPTIONS, AND THE CHALLENGES OF CONSUMER FRAGMENTATION ARE SOME OF THE MAJOR TRENDS WE EXPECT TO PLAY OUT IN 2017 AND BEYOND.

From hailing a cab to ordering food, from buying pre-owned kids' clothing to procuring services online, we have seen how cheaper connectivity and growing penetration of smartphones can transform businesses and lives. The e-commerce market in the GCC countries is expected to grow to US\$20 billion (AED73.4 billion) by 2020 from \$5.3 billion in 2015, as online shopping grows in the region, according to a 2016 report by global consultancy AT Kearney.

Without doubt, a variety of ongoing developments are feeding into the overall growth of the e-commerce sector. Businesses are not just focusing on a digital store selling some nice-enough items, but instead they're trying to create new markets, plug the unexplored terrains, create a shopping experience that consumers can enjoy as they browse, provide round-the-clock services and meet the overall customer service expectations at all times-

before, during, and after a purchase.

As businesses seek ways to prosper in the transforming e-commerce landscape, it's important to keep a track of all the recent trends in the sector so that you can best compete. Here are five trends that we at Whoopey.com expect the e-commerce industry will experience in the year 2017:

1. COMPELLING CONTENT

A visually alluring website and an interesting array of products are not just enough to stand out among the crowd in your consumers' memory. You require an armory of compelling content, which is presented in unique ways that not only manages to grab the customer's attention, but that also helps in engaging them and forges an emotional connection with the brand. So, it's not just the product and service descriptions that need creative content, but also social media posts, blogs, press releases, advertisements, and more.

Interesting content is one of the major reasons why people follow brands on social media, as it helps them by being

informative, educational, and motivational, which then reflects significantly on sales and brand loyalty. As a marketing strategy, too, it's also one of the most cost-effective, efficient, and impactful solutions to generate ROI. That being said, content should not be restricted to just the written word, in fact, multiple forms must be targeted to suit varying consumer preferences. For example, videos, infographics, tutorials, podcasts, are some of the interesting ways to create a stronger connect with the audience.

2. CONSUMER FRAGMENTATION

TURNING CHALLENGE INTO OPPORTUNITY

Owing to the greater convenience digital media brings, consumers today have access to more buying opportunities than ever before. Our smartphones, which are an integral part of our daily "decision-making" lives, provide us instant access to a plethora of retailers where the good and the bad get sifted by a ruthless competition in a matter of just one swipe.

So, giants find this fragmentation a Herculean challenge to deal with because niche boutiques are well positioned to gain market share. On the flip side, smaller firms plug this challenge quite easily as there are lower barriers to market entry and growth.

3. SAME-DAY DELIVERY

THE EVOLUTIONARY "EXPRESS" ERA

As the title suggests, the easiest explanation of this service is: you can place an order for a product or a group of goods and have them delivered within a 24-hour time frame on any day of the week. Why does the concept have the potential to fundamentally revolutionize the industry?

FOR ONLINE RETAILERS, THE OPTION OF SAME-DAY DELIVERY HELPS IN INCREASING PURCHASE CONVERSION WHILE LIMITING CANCELLATIONS AND CONSUMER SWITCH TO A LARGE SCALE AND, AS THE FAST-TRACKED MODEL PROVIDES LITTLE TO NO TIME-WINDOW FOR CONSUMERS TO EXPLORE FURTHER AND HAVE A SUBSEQUENT CHANGE OF HEART ON THEIR PURCHASE.



For starters, the introduction of same-day delivery will take the online shopping experience of customers to a new level of convenience. Consumers clearly attach value to the meticulous integration of convenience of online retail with the immediacy of bricks-and-mortar stores, which same-day delivery concept brings in. Reduced delivery time, improved access to products, higher convenience, and lower prices of online shopping are some of the key factors that can be attributed to the said concept.

Secondly, for online retailers, the option of same-day delivery helps in increasing purchase conversion while limiting cancellations and consumer switch to a large-scale and as the fast-tracked model provides little to no time-window for consumers to explore further and have a subsequent change of heart on their purchase.

Finally, the model also offers immense opportunity for business development and job creation across logistics providers- who are the natural partner for same-day delivery on a broad scale due to their existing network strength.

4. MEASURING CONNECTED DEVICES

Most often, consumers don't stick to a single device when buying from you. In fact, they switch between devices, from the web to mobile to apps, before turning into paying customers. Device-driven analytics not only provide e-commerce ventures with a deeper insight into assessing their audiences better, but also assist in leveraging this information to predict subsequent purchases and personalize the consumer shopping experience. So, businesses that want to gain a competitive

WITHOUT DOUBT, YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK PROFILES AND THE CONTENT YOU SHARE ARE AS IMPORTANT AS A BUSINESS' STOREFRONT SIGNAGE AND PRODUCT DISPLAYS IN TODAY'S CONNECTED ERA.



edge and have a more methodological approach to fresh conversions are now looking at multiple devices to collect data and draw consumer insights.

5. SOCIAL E-COMMERCE

Social media is now an integral part of almost every consumer's online habits. Statistics abound about its popularity and potential as a means of driving new visitors. Perhaps one of the biggest trends last year was the inclusion of e-commerce in social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest. One of the major reasons for inclusion of commerce in social media platforms is strong internet penetration across tier-I, tier-II and tier-III audience, where availability of low-cost smartphones and low rates of data plans have played a pivotal role in expanding the markets.

An old marketing adage says, "Go where your customers are!" For e-commerce ventures, effective social media engagement represents real value. These platforms offer innovative methods to reach first-time and

new generation customers, engage and reward existing customers, and showcase the best your brand has to offer. Without doubt, your social network profiles and the content you share are as important as a business' storefront signage and product displays in today's connected era.

But businesses must realize that leveraging the complete potential of social media requires a more focused approach and a broader understanding of the medium. The concept of commerce using social media tool box, in many ways, take us back to the origins of retail, one where merchants were familiar with their clients, and correspondingly shoppers established deep relationships with the merchants they buy from. This return to small commerce, with the help of social platforms, will continue to play an important role for both- the networks and the retail industry. Staying ahead of the curve, however, will clearly be defined by how e-commerce ventures experiment and innovate to interact and connect with their customers.

The opportunities created by various social media platforms, the rise of analytics studies of devices and multiple payment options, and the challenges of consumer fragmentation are some of the major trends we expect to play out in 2017 and beyond. They represent both big opportunities for those that move fast, and enormous risks for those that fail to address them. For retailers, our message is simple: engage, stay focused and move fast. ■



Saad Khan is the founder and CEO of Whoopey.com, an online e-commerce portal that offers brands a 360 approach with an end-to-end marketing and distribution solution. Prior to founding Whoopey.com, Khan led the retail and corporate business at Redington Gulf, managing a portfolio of more than \$250m. His industry accolades include management of leading brands, such as HP, Dell, Apple, Lenovo, Microsoft, Logitech, i-Life, and Targus. An Indian native residing in the UAE, Khan holds an MBA-International Business & MIS degree from Cardiff Business School, Wales, UK.



Brands on fleek

Seven PR and marketing tips for luxury startups

By Anne-Claude Wenger

So you have the ultimate luxury product, and are now building a luxury brand, something beautiful, sumptuous, inspiring, something close to your heart. The good news is that the Middle East is an exceptional market for luxury. In a shaky global environment, luxury retail developments in the region continue to thrive and expand. The retail market in the UAE alone has grown to more than US\$35 billion with continued growth anticipated at more than 5%, and top consultants like Deloitte continue to recommend the region, pointing out that it presents a big opportunity for luxury brands.

The bad news is that growth in global luxury retail sales has slowed from 8% to a more modest forecast of 4%, making a highly competitive sector even more competitive. Additionally, this is a disrupted market segment, with social media bringing the most change. Many tried-and-true approaches to marketing luxury are no longer effective, and even the most venerable luxury brands—the ones that used to dictate fashion to consumers—are scrambling for fresh ways to interact with customers.

Furthermore, your potential customers are more sophisticated, with greater confidence in their own judgment, less brand loyalty, and ever higher expectations of bespoke brands that offer real experience, real knowledge and real storytelling. If you can provide these things, you can win customers away from even the gold-standard luxury brands. Here's how.

1. BUILD A POWERFUL NARRATIVE

Luxury today is defined by three key elements: scarcity, exclusivity, and provenance. Your marketing narrative and brand story must convey all three. The most successful luxury brands tend to be very story-rich and any content you put out must be imaginative, authoritative and relevant. Most importantly, it must stir the imagination and resonate with your target audience's dreams and ambitions. Every brand has stories, so find the most exquisite and evocative ones and make the most of them with image- and narrative-rich content about what makes your brand unique: rare materials, skilled craftsmanship, authentic provenance, new technology, creative talent. Imagination matters.

2. CREATE EXCLUSIVITY Luxury brands thrive on the perception of exclusivity, constantly reaffirming their position as an elite, aspirational force. From Swiss master watchmaker Patek Philippe, to extreme car manufacturer Koenigsegg, to British-built Rolls-Royce, exclusivity is a consistent theme. Rolls-Royce makes no more than 2,000 cars per year, every one bespoke and hand-finished. Buying into these brands allows consumers to become part of their world and feel that they belong to an exclusive club, which is an expression of their personality and taste. To build exclusivity, consider inviting select customers to exclusive VIP events, set up an invitation-only VIP membership or offer exclusive access to limited run and bespoke products.

3. EMPLOY A SOPHISTICATED TEAM

People who regularly buy luxury items or services are shrewd and sophisticated. They are connoisseurs. They demand seniority, experience and expert knowledge. Make sure your sales people—at every level—are elegant, well-trained, and intelligent as well. This includes your PR and marketing team, who must also be sophisticated to have insights into the taste and desires of your target customers.

4. BUILD COMMUNITY

The main difference between traditional and internet marketing is the level of interaction between you and your customers. Thanks to social media, consumers are accustomed to interacting with their favorite brands and with other followers of their favorite brands, and a good PR and marketing strategy needs to take this into consideration, online and off. As a luxury brand, the internet is the best way to reach your customers and keep an eye on your competitors. A strong web presence can be a much faster (and cost-effective) way to build community through blog posts featuring 'ambassador' customers, social media interaction, and influencer marketing.

6. USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Luxury brands should not overlook the impact of social media. Instagram is an especially powerful tool for this market segment. Of course, you want to include



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VISUALIZE IT!

SIX SIMPLE TIPS FOR DESIGNING STUNNING INFOGRAPHICS

By Dorothy Mitchell

stunning images and content about your products, but don't neglect to vary your content beyond obvious self-serving sales images or your followers will lose interest and confidence in what you have to say. If you're selling, say, crocodile handbags, like Ethan K, include mouth-watering content about art and sporting events like Art Dubai, images of the designer's mood board and places that inspire him, as well as images of the bags and brand ambassadors.

A STRONG WEB PRESENCE CAN BE A MUCH FASTER (AND COST-EFFECTIVE) WAY TO BUILD COMMUNITY THROUGH BLOG POSTS FEATURING 'AMBASSADOR' CUSTOMERS, SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTION, AND INFLUENCER MARKETING.

7. USE INFLUENCER MARKETING

There is nothing that influences people as much as other people, and a few select people have the power to influence millions or even billions. Look at Kate Middleton: nearly every dress she is photographed in sells out within hours. This has been nicknamed "The Kate Effect," and it's estimated to contribute £1 billion to the UK fashion industry. We have had similar results for our clients, but the key to successful influencer marketing is to choose the right influencer, using well thought-out analytics, not just Google, or ask a famous friend to be a brand ambassador. The other key to successful influencer marketing goes back to my first point: create superb content true to your brand narrative. Work closely with your brand ambassadors on the content they post about your brand, and post complimentary content on your own accounts and associated accounts to create a layered effect and build excitement. ■

Infographics remain one of the best forms of visual content in the digital world today. They catch the eye and they can publicize a great deal of information in a short span of time.

But not all infographics are born equal. You can't use a free tool and generate a five-star infographic every time. It takes a great deal of care and thought to create an infographic that people are going to respond to. Here are a few tips that will help you to design stunning infographics:

1. MAKE THE PURPOSE CLEAR

Infographics can allow you to give your readers a lot of information fast. But you don't want to overload them with information. An infographic should be as specific as possible. Even if the various facts and figures can apply to multiple subjects, they should be positioned and placed in a way that all joins on one point. A clear purpose will allow you to hit your target audience and will prevent confusion. It'll also make it easier to make more infographics out of limited resources.

2. MAKE EVERY PART OF IT CLEAR

You should never have to explain what a part of your infographic means. Infographics are designed to be consumed in a matter of minutes. Your point should become clear right from the headline and with every piece of information within the infographic. It should be immediately obvious why you've included a certain point. If you find yourself hesitating or questioning why something is there, that means it's too complicated. Remove it or think about how you can position it in a way that will make it less complicated.

3. MAKE THE COLORS FIT IN

Colors are an important part of catching someone's eye. The colors you choose will determine the psychological response you receive. When choosing your colors, you should first limit your choices to two at the most, and one of them will nearly always be black or white. Any more colors than this can create confusion. You should consider how the colors of your infographic blend in with the background of your website. This is one part of designing an infographic that people frequently forget about.

4. STOP USING TYPOGRAPHY AS A CRUTCH

Fancy typography has its place, but it's often used incorrectly. Often, typography is used to highlight a big number, rather than any real visual design. There's a big difference between using a picture and just using an enlarged font to make a point. Sadly, the latter is what commonly happens as designer fatigue sets in. As a result, make sure you're always asking whether you're using typography as a crutch.

5. GIVE IT A STORYLINE

Think of an infographic in the same way as a short story. It should have an introduction, a middle part, and an end. The first part of your infographic should state what the issue or problem is. The middle part should detail the process by which that problem or issue is being addressed. And the end should show what can and should happen after that issue has been addressed. Here's an example: study this one and see how its storyline quickly grabs the reader's attention. You should consider adapting this style to suit the stated purpose of your infographic, but the same principle will apply practically every time.

6. LEVERAGE THE INFOGRAPHIC FOR ROI

Once you've created your great infographic, you need to think about where you're going to go next. Every infographic should lead into something else, whether that's giving something away or asking people to subscribe to your email list. Too many companies craft a fantastic infographic only to have it go nowhere. You should always think about how your infographics fit into your overall marketing campaign and sales funnel. Once you do this you'll soon see that your infographics become more valuable and they net you a bigger return on your investment.

Infographics are no silver bullet. They need to be well-placed and they have to blend into the rest of the content on your website. Always have the big picture in mind and you'll be designing infographics that give you a huge return on your investment.



Dorothy Mitchell is a freelance business writer and social media marketing consultant. She has worked as a writer, researcher, social media manager and business consultant with several companies, including Fortune 500 companies like LinkedIn, Microsoft, Cisco and PepsiCo, and startups that'll soon become big players. She has also ghost written pieces that got published in *Forbes*, *The Economist*, *Entrepreneur*, *Inc.*, *Content Marketing Institute*, and dozens more reputable publications. Connect with her on her website, DorothyMitchell.me or on Twitter @DorothyExpert.

GET YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

Here's what investors should look for in a startup

By Erkki Aaltonen

THE KEY DETERMINANT of funding for angel investors (or any investor in general) is to understand if the company they are interested in is fundable or not. The key thing to remember here is that it is *relatively* easy to raise money for a company that is fundable. It is close to impossible to raise funding for a company that is

not considered fundable. This is something important that investors need to keep in mind before moving forth on an investment, because startups typically need to go through several funding rounds before they hit it big or even become cash flow positive. So it is critical that investors evaluate and understand if a startup is

fundable in the eyes of other potential follow-on investors. Failing this, the investor faces the risk of ending up as the only investor in the next financing rounds.

So, what should investors look for in a startup? There are essentially three focus areas: the market, the product, and the team.

THE MARKET

Good investors love markets that structurally do not present a hindrance to hyper growth.

Typically, the overall global market of the startup you want to invest in should be north of US\$10 billion, and have an addressable market of more than \$1 billion on



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entry. This means that owning 10% slice of the addressable market makes a \$100 million revenue company. If the market is either a niche or totally new, you can start by evaluating the total addressable market at a few hundreds of millions (or zero), but the expectation has to be that the startup will quickly grow because of the competitive advantage, becoming an undisputed market leader.

When evaluating this particular focus area, here are a few red flags you should be aware of:

Size Some markets are simply too small to justify a VC level investment. They might still be good opportunities for a lifestyle company, or an angel-funded feature that is either sold or reaches breakeven at relatively small amount of money of less than a million dollars.

Competition Some markets are extremely overcrowded.

Readiness Some markets are not ready right now.

Risk Some markets require a Minimum Viable Product that is too large and too risky for a startup.

Flexibility Some market spaces offer tremendous potential for pivoting whereas others are too rigid. They only offer feasibility if the initial product or go-to-market angle succeeds.

THE PRODUCT

A quality product at the right time and place can make or break a company's fortune. Simplicity is key. The basic rule of thumb is that customers will initially only buy a simple product with a singular value proposition. The product shows to the team itself and the investor that this specific team can actually

build something together, beyond mere PowerPoint slides. It reduces perceived and actual risk for the investor. When developing new innovations, startups normally go through an evolutionary path from feature, to product, to company. As an investor you should not be afraid to look at startups which only have a "feature," as opposed to a full-fledged product, as long as they have a realistic evolving roadmap on how to move onwards from the initial feature towards the real product and the company.

As for red flags, be wary of a lack of laser focus in the product, business model or go-to-market strategy.

THE TEAM

Product and market are far more important determinants of a startup's meteoric success than a team; however, both these features are way more difficult to measure in the early days, thus making the team an important qualifier. Without a good and dedicated team, everything will go south quite quickly. Each opportunity is distinct and calls for a different composition and backgrounds for the ideal team. But desirable characteristics would be:

Drive The founders must have sufficient energy and conviction to carry them through the ups and downs they will inevitably face.

Communication Founders must also be able to communicate their drive and enthusiasm to their employees in such a way that it becomes contagious and part of the company's culture.

Agility They must be able to swiftly execute against the market opportunity.

Dynamicity The ideal team composition changes over

time as the company evolves and fine tunes its direction, as well as increases the maturity in the given direction.

Nimbleness The market is competitive; the team must be able to go-to-market on a timely manner against the competition.

There are red flags to consider here as well:

Team structure Team composition is lacking, for instance, a product lead is missing or is not good enough.

Division of equity The equity pie has not been divided fairly or is otherwise weird.

Corporate culture Issues with team culture, for

instance, one independent cowboy instead of a cohesive group.

At the end of the day, while going through a startup's investor deck, make it a point to evaluate if the startup can present their fundable company in a form of story with interesting narrative. A great plan is one that can be distilled to a very simple proposition, without losing its attractiveness. If a company's plan is not simple enough to be described in two sentences, it probably is too complex to be communicated effectively to customers, employees and shareholders. Substance is far more important than images and the color of the lines. ■

BE IN THE KNOW
VENTURESOUQ AND STARTAD TO HOST
ANGEL RISING 2017 IN MAY

With study after study pointing to the importance of a well-developed seed and early-stage financial support for MENA entrepreneurs, the absence of a mature angel investor class in the region's ecosystem is often raised as an issue. In order to develop "a broad, sophisticated class of investors," and to guide those with a keen interest in investing in startups, early-stage funding platform VentureSouq and New York University Abu Dhabi's (NYUAD) entrepreneurship program startAD are back with the third edition of Angel Rising on May 13, 2017 at NYUAD. Open to all, the annual symposium hosts informative sessions on key topics related to angel investing, and believes that "the investor base needs to mature and evolve in lock step with entrepreneurs," for a startup ecosystem to flourish. Com-

mencing with a welcome by Ramesh Jagannathan, MD, startAD at NYU Abu Dhabi, this year's agenda features talks by Omar Christidis, CEO & Founder, ArabNet, on state of MENA investment landscape, the linkages between fintech and angel investing explained by Angela Strange, Partner, Andreessen Horowitz, a panel discussion on the investor food chain, sessions on impact investing, among others. Vikas Shah, Visiting Professor of Entrepreneurship, MIT Sloan School of Management, Najla Al-Midfa, General Manager, Sheraa - Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center, Aby Sam Thomas, Editor in Chief, *Entrepreneur Middle East*, and Sabah Al Binali, Chief Investment Officer, CEO Credit, SHUAA Capital, are a few other speakers set to share insights at Angel Rising 2017.



SETTING STANDARDS

RASHID AL-MOHANADI AND SAOUD ALKUWARI, THE CO-FOUNDERS OF AL-SAEB, HAVE BUILT A SMARTWATCH TO SAFEGUARD QATAR'S BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS

By Aparajita Mukherjee

The idea of Al-Saeb came to us when we were obtaining our engineering degrees in the UK, and there was a great focus on the health, safety and well-being of laborers who are working on the major 2022 FIFA World Cup projects by international media outlets,” says Rashid Al-Mohanadi, co-founder of Al-Saeb. “The Middle East has a very harsh climate and the safety concerns of the project workers are real. We wanted to show to the world that we, as Qataris, are committed and have the innovative capabilities of solving any challenge that may come on the path of achieving our nation’s vision, and so we developed Al-Saeb.”

Co-founder Saoud Alkuwari adds, “Since we are very attached to our culture and history, the name [of the company] was chosen because it is the name given to the person who holds the rope of a pearl diver

at sea, and ensures his safety by pulling him out of water when he needs to breathe or needs any other help. We thought that this name coincided beautifully with the purpose of the system.”

The co-founders describe Al-Saeb as a total solution for construction workers’ health and safety. “The system consists of a smartwatch, which is connected through Global Satellite Mobile to a server which has our software inbuilt and the system monitors heart rate, movements (falling down, not moving at all, abnormal movements) and locations,” Al-Mohanadi explains. “The system also has a SOS capability for the worker to call for help if he/she needs it. We can also send a message directly to the watch, and this is critical if we need to evacuate the site. In addition, the system has labor management capabilities such as attendance and headcount.” Commenting on the current status of Al-Saeb,

Al-Mohanadi says, “We have run several trials of the system in medium-sized construction projects, and Al-Saeb will be used in several other major projects very soon. The system has shown that it is instrumental in ensuring the safety of workers and increasing their productivity, in addition to the fact that organizations have to put more focus on people, as they are the most valuable resource they have! We have installed several trial systems in Qatar as a proof of concept



Rashid Al-Mohannadi, co-founder, Al-Saeb

for the prospective buyers. The trial units were installed in two main sectors- construction and maintenance.”

Prior to actual application, the system was initially tried in small-sized construction projects, and the feedback that the duo got was positive. “The monitoring system was given to the safety officer of the concerned projects, and the construction workers felt that they had a direct connection to the safety officer,” Alkuwari notes. “This whole connection experience made the foreman very conscious of the workers’ safety, apart from contributing to increased productivity by cutting the time that is required to take attendance since all that the workers had to do was take their designated watch from the charging panel and they registered their presence for the day... This is also very critical when mustering is in operation.”

Detailing out the trial phase, Alkuwari continues that out of all the features of Al-Saeb, the SOS button has been the most used, since it gave the workers a chance to call for help when required, or if they were not sure what they were doing was safe or not, thus linking them directly to the people in charge of their health and safety and not through their work supervisor. “These trials have helped us fine-tune and optimize our system, and it has made us more confident in its effectiveness on the work site,” notes Al-Mohanadi, adding that their pricing is made on a case-by-case basis, since not all construction sites are the same. “The opportunity arises after a customer purchases Al-Saeb, and wants to use it on another site. We can very quickly adjust the system to the new site conditions, even though the system is designed and developed entirely in Qatar with the manufacturing facilities located abroad.”

Detailing out the pricing mechanism, Alkuwari mentions that a single watch is priced at less than QAR350, “but we are not selling a watch alone. What we are selling is an entire solution from the watch to the connectivity to the server, and from the server to the different monitoring options (web app, mobile and tablet app), so that this solution can be tailored entirely to customer requirement.” Analyzing their strength factors, the duo are confident that it comes from the twin advantages of having developed the entire system from start to finish which enables them to easily provide all the changes in-house and the fact that the system has been designed horizontally, defining which they say: “We have allowed place for add-ons and variations depending on the customer specifications and site conditions.”

When asked what made them work in the construction sector, when they both have a professional background in the energy sector, Al-Mohanadi says that the oil and gas sector and the construction sector are very alike in several respects—both have people doing manual work in one way or another and both are associated with risk. “The main reason why we chose construction over oil and gas to start with was because of the difference between the two sectors. The willingness to adopt new technology that might increase productivity, reduce loss and mitigate risk is higher in the construction sector, compared to the energy sector. In the oil and gas sector, new technology adoption takes more time compared to the construction sector.” Alkuwari adds, “The entry requirements for any electronic equipment in the oil and gas facilities are very high, since understandably, these facilities have a very volatile environment and require proper anti-spark and anti-explosion certifications,

which are not very easily obtainable.” Having said that, the duo is currently developing a model that is optimized for the oil and gas and the manufacturing industries with the required features and certifications.

Speaking about the hurdles they had to face, Al-Mohanadi states, “The main challenge ahead of us was securing funding, and developing the supply chain, with the high manufacturing and component costs in the GCC. This left us no option but to develop an effective and efficient international supply chain for our product and herein comes the role that our partnership with Qatar Navigator, a technology startup in the area of household appliances and business solutions, played. This is a local SME with great experience in similar projects and technology development and has been instrumental in helping us with a model to work on.”

Analyzing the reasons behind the plight of technology entrepreneurs in Qatar, Alkuwari mentions, “The policies and frameworks put in place for accelerating and encouraging technology entrepreneurship are still immature in the region as a whole. This meant that Al-Saeb was initially self-funded. We also secured a fund from Qatar Science and Technol-

ogy Park for developing the minimal viable product under the technology accelerator program, which focuses on both the technical and the business development of the venture. At the end of the program, we were able to develop a business plan which focused initially on the construction sector, and with further development we can extend the product to extend on to other sectors which require something similar to our product.”

Commenting on the next stage of their product development cycle, Al-Mohanadi says, “The next stage was to evolve from a prototype to a working product. This was mostly self-funded since most funding programs in Qatar have very rigid guidelines and unlike the local programs that have adapted from similar programs in tech startup hubs, such as Silicon Valley, it is a fact that not everything adapted from abroad will work here and I think this poses a challenge not only on tech startups, such as us, but everyone who is aspiring to get funded. Qatar needs to develop a culture of entrepreneurship that fits with the realities here and avoid copying programs from elsewhere abroad since they were developed for societies where ground realities are different.” The duo are now optimistic



Saoud Alkuwari, co-founder, Al-Saeb

since after having developed the solution to a greater extent, and winning the Best Smart Consumer Solution award at the recently held QITCOM 2017 event, they have received several funding offers. Currently, the startup is finalizing an agreement with Ooredoo, which they hope will open channels in Kuwait and Oman. “However,” adds Al-Mohanadi, “the most logical market to address after Qatar is the UAE, and we are planning to start marketing our product in the UAE by this year end.” Going forward, Alkuwari and Al-Mohanadi plan to implement Al-Saeb in several major projects in Qatar as well as to develop a newer version of it, with industry-specific applications with reference to healthcare, oil and gas and infrastructure maintenance. ■





A masterclass session that Costa Coffee organized for the media in Qatar

The customer comes first

Hassan Jawad, Divisional Manager of Costa Coffee Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia, on making the brand stand out in Qatar

By Aparajita Mukherjee

"WE [...] HAVE A STRONG TRAINING PROGRAM AND STANDARDS ON ALL ASPECTS OF THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE AND COFFEE-MAKING PROCESS FROM HOW TO CHECK THE GRINDER, EXTRACT ESPRESSO THE RECIPE FOR EACH DRINK AND THE CROCKERY IN WHICH IT IS SERVED SO CUSTOMERS GET THE SAME FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE EACH AND EVERY TIME THEY VISIT."

"WHEN IT COMES TO COFFEE, we believe in putting the customer at the heart of everything we do," says Hassan Jawad, Divisional Manager of Costa Coffee – Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia, as he explains the USP of the coffee brand, which was launched in Qatar by The Jawad Business Group in 2003. "That is why we handcraft every cup of coffee, this means that we are able to tailor each drink to the exacting needs that our customers wish, whether that be an extra flavor, a bit more of our delicious chocolate dusting, or trying our new roast – Old Paradise St No. 19. Qataris have an eye for detail and like to be able to have coffee in the way that is right for them and our skilled baristas are able to deliver this for them. Qatar is a coffee loving nation, who has a passion for great tasting coffee. We see that

customers are real connoisseurs and are looking for something new and exciting to try in their usual coffee. We thought Old Paradise Street would be the perfect addition to add to their repertoire with caramel and almond notes to give a new twist on their favorite coffee."

With respect to the Jawad Business Group's alliance with

Costa Coffee, Jawad notes that the partnership came to be because his company wanted to join hands with a brand that had the same qualities that the Group knows customers love and value. "Costa has been voted the UK's favorite coffee shop brand for seven years running now, and is synonymous for great tasting quality coffee," he explains. "Costa is a British brand with a strong heritage customers here can relate to, there are a lot of synergies with Doha and London – we know that Qatar is also a nation of coffee lovers and so we wanted to partner with a coffee brand that values the care and quality taken from every bean roasted to every cup of coffee served." Jawad notes that Costa's heritage is built on the unique Mocha Italia blend used in the espresso, which is the base for all of the core drinks. Detailing out how Costa prepares the unique and signature coffee for every cup, Jawad mentions that every bean is roasted in Paradise Street, the Costa roastery in the UK, "but we grind and handcraft each coffee locally. We tailor the store environments to suit the Qatari customers, ensure the service style fits the local customer and select locations that we know are convenient or well-loved by all customers – where else in the world can you enjoy a cool iced latte overlooking the beautiful Doha Corniche..!"

Since staffing a key requirement in all customer-facing



A masterclass session that Costa Coffee organized for the media in Qatar

businesses such as Costa, the Jawad Business Group puts a great deal of emphasis on training. “All our baristas go through rigorous training before they serve their first cup of coffee to a customer. They will then train up to our Barista Maestro program learning thorough information about coffee and how to serve irresistible coffee at speed that leaves our customers smiling. We also run coffee ambassador workshops to teach our teams how to be an ambassador of Costa and run Latte Art workshops bringing out the artistic skills of our baristas to customize drinks to different customers. We even run masterclasses for customers for those who want to learn more about coffee and the secrets of becoming a great barista.” Part of being a barista, Jawad notes, is knowing how to turn Costa’s great quality beans into an equally perfect cup of coffee for each and every customer, be it in Qatar or anywhere else in the world. “We know how Qataris like to travel and expect the same high-quality coffee from Costa, no matter where they are in the world,” he says. “We, therefore, have a strong training program and standards on all aspects of the customer experience and coffee-making process from how to check the grinder, extract espresso the recipe for each drink and the crockery in which it is served so customers get the same fantastic experience each and every time they visit.”

Narrating the Costa Coffee journey in Qatar and the lessons that the Jawad Business Group has learnt about the way a business based on customer satisfaction in Qatar, Jawad says, “Understanding our customers’ needs is imperative and acting on them to delight customers at every step of their visit to Costa to ensure that they have a positive experience. Whether this means ensuring

stores have softer seating to give a comfortable environment that customers want to relax and enjoy themselves in, greeting our regulars and remembering their favorite drink, to serving customers at speed when we know they are in a rush. Everyone’s needs are different, and the trick is understanding each individual customer, and making sure you leave them smiling each and every time.”

“ALL OUR BARISTAS GO THROUGH RIGOROUS TRAINING BEFORE THEY SERVE THEIR FIRST CUP OF COFFEE TO A CUSTOMER. THEY WILL THEN TRAIN UP TO OUR BARISTA MAESTRO PROGRAM LEARNING THOROUGH INFORMATION ABOUT COFFEE.”

Comparing Qatar to the other markets that lie under his supervision, Jawad says, “We see that across our markets while all our customers are coffee lovers, there are some unique variances, for instance Qatar and Oman, we see that customers tend to enjoy our delicious handcrafted cappuccinos and lattes as part of their mid-morning break, while in Saudi Arabia, our customers have a preference for an frothy treat in the evening. However, there are some universal trends, for instance, as we move into the hotter weather, we know that our customers across markets are looking for some refreshing and indulgent iced drinks to help them cool down.” About Costa’s Qatar 2017 plans, Jawad is of the opinion that they will continue to focus on the customers and put their needs first. “We will look to continue our growth across Qatar to make getting a great cup of Costa coffee even easier, and bring new and exciting drinks to the market. Globally, the Costa brand plans to double in size over the next five years, and we look forward to greeting new and loyal customers alike with their favorite handcrafted drink.” ■



A masterclass session that Costa Coffee organized for the media in Qatar

STANDING OUT

HASAN JAWAD LOOKS INTO COSTA’S KEY USPS

Quality of coffee

“GennaroPelliccia is the Master of Coffee for Costa, and is responsible for safeguarding the excellent standard of our coffee across the world. Our team of experts led by Gennaro who verifies the taste profile of every batch of coffee to make sure it’s true to the original recipe. Due to his expert tasting skill, Gennaro’s tongue was even insured for £10 million!”

Handcrafted- every coffee, every time

“We craft our coffee by hand by skilled baristas who train long and hard to deliver the best most personal service to our customers. Over 4,000 team members, craft one million cups of coffee per year at our 25 Costa Barista Academies around the world to ensure that the perfect handcrafted coffee is served in all our stores.”

Freshness counts

“We only ever use fresh milk used in all our coffees and not UHT, as we believe this give a superior flavor and texture to our coffees that customers love.”

The Mocha Italia blend

“Having roasted and experimented with 112 different

blends, our founders, the Costa brothers chose Mocha Italia for its rich and smooth taste. Mocha Italia proved to be so good, it’s still the blend we use today. The recipe is a closely guarded secret. So closely guarded in fact that it wasn’t until recently that it was written down. All we can tell you is it’s an irresistible blend of Arabica and Robusta coffee beans that gives it a smooth, round and rich taste.”



Hassan Jawad, Divisional Manager of Costa Coffee Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia

Heritage matters

“Established in 1971, Costa is a UK brand with over 40 years’ experience in crafting the perfect cup of coffee, we believe we have the passion, skills and dedication to deliver the best cup of coffee to all our customer around the world.”



Left to right: Democrance CTO Damiam Dimmich, COO Alberto Perez, CEO Michele Grosso, and Lead Software Engineer Aarno Tenhunen

Democratizing insurance

Democrance makes insurance accessible for MENA's low-income population

By Sindhu Hariharan

DEMOCRANCE HELPS INSURERS TO GO DIGITAL NIMBLY BY OFFERING A PLATFORM THAT DOES NOT NEED ANY COMPLEX INTEGRATION TO THEIR EXISTING SYSTEMS, WHILE UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL FOR AN ENTIRELY OVERLOOKED POPULATION OF CONSUMERS.

In the MENA region (and perhaps the world over), ask fintech entrepreneurs about their startup's core business, and chances are that it's likely to be around digital payments, peer-to-peer lending, or blockchain. While these fintech businesses have dominated investor and funding action for a while now, one can't exactly say the same for innovations happening in the insurance space. However, globally, upstarts are emerging to change this scenario, and the insurance industry is seeing increased collaborations between the old and new guard. According to *CB Insights* data, the annual deal activity in the insurance-technology (insurtech) space clocked US\$1.69 billion in 2016, with the number of deals rising 42% on a year-over-year basis. Not just that, in a positive sign for aspiring insurtech entrepreneurs,

"two of every three deals in 2016" took place at the early-stage. Be it through the application of artificial intelligence in insurance, or by facilitating microinsurance, this new breed of fintech startups are beginning to make their presence felt.

One such entrepreneur who has entered the MENA region's insurance sector is Michele Grosso, founder and CEO, Democrance, an insurtech startup based in the UAE. Given his passion for microinsurance (a model focused on insuring low-income people) and its impact on society, Grosso was surprised to learn that the concept was "simply not available" in the region. "When I moved to the Middle East, I experienced that first-hand," he explains. "And once I realized insurance companies wouldn't be able to venture in these segments by themselves,

because of lack of innovation, technology readiness and short-term priority, I had no choice but to do it on my own!" Stressing on the problem the startup aims to solve, Grosso points out that the low-income population's lack of access to basic risk protection tools, such as social security, healthcare, and personal savings, drove him to float the company. So how does the startup try to correct this issue? Grosso explains it to me from the point of view of the end-users: "They only need their mobile phone to get insured, pay for insurance and use their policies. Our technology also helps insurance companies manage those high numbers of low-premium policies by automatizing the whole value chain- they wouldn't be able to do it with their current manual and operationally heavy processes."

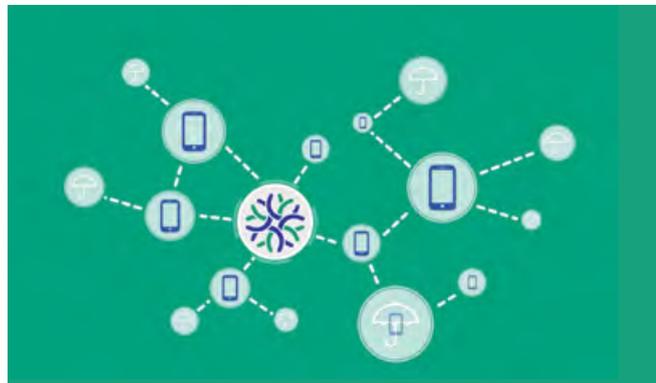
With the insurance sector (like all other industries) moving towards digitization, Grosso says Democrance helps insurers to go digital nimbly by offering a platform that does not need any complex integration to their existing systems, while unlocking the potential for an entirely overlooked population of consumers. Grosso notes that the number of SIM cards in the region is more than its population, and with that being the case, Democrance partners with insurance companies on one side, and telecom operators on the other, to utilize the mobile phone as a tool to reach the low- and middle-income segments, which can then just use their mobile phone to "buy, pay for and use insurance products." Having worked for some of the largest insurance companies in the world like AXA and MetLife in France, Egypt and the UAE, Grosso left the corporate world to launch Democrance in 2015,

and the company is now in the process of implementing their first pilot projects in the UAE, which Gross expects will bring in their first revenues. As for building the core team, Grosso met Alberto Pérez and Damian Dimmich (Democrance's Chief Revenue Officer and Chief Technology Officer) at the AstroLabs co-working space in Dubai, where the two were working on different projects and instantly "fell in love with the idea and purpose" of Democrance. "Their background and experience [Perez had previous stints with telcos in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Dimmich had experience in financial technology] are the perfect fit," adds Grosso.

And how do they create awareness about their business proposition among the target population? "We leverage on the brand they already know, and interact with [them] as customers or employees (for instance a telco, remittance house or taxi company) to market the products and to create awareness," replies Grosso. Interestingly, in taking up the role of a strategic partner for insurance companies and

telcos, Grosso insists that the model is a win-win for everyone involved—profitable for both the insurer and the mobile operator, while protecting the vulnerable population who need it the most. Not surprisingly, for ventures in the insurtech space, strategic partnerships with large corporates (be it insurance companies or other industries) are a critical requirement to scale. Luckily for these upstarts, insurance companies too seem to be realizing the value in such collaborations. For instance, Accenture's *Technology Vision for Insurance 2016* revealed that 44% of global insurers intend to "pursue digital initiatives with startups from the insurance industry over the next two years."

And it's a testament to the quality of Democrance's product that the startup has managed to win the endorsement of the insurance industry too. LumenLab, insurance major MetLife's Singapore-based innovation center, announced eight finalists for its inaugural insurtech pitch program Collab in February 2017, and Democrance was one among



the eight global startup finalists. Collab attracted over 135 applications from 34 countries around the world. "It is a great experience to be exposed to the insurtech ecosystem in Asia and to learn how startups can work with one of the largest insurance companies in the world," says Grosso, commenting on the Collab experience. Further, Democrance is also about to close their first round of external funding, with "almost all of it already subscribed by leading regional and European angels and venture capitals." Grosso expects this external funding boost to help the company fuel its "business development efforts, accelerate the implementation of our first partnerships, and constantly

upgrade our technology platform."

Even with the financial and partnerships momentum going in its stride, working with large established players in the sector is not without its hurdles, and Grosso sheds light on one such challenge he anticipates in scaling up Democrance. "One of the challenges is the speed and time to market of our insurance and distribution partners—at the end of the day, they're huge corporates and we are a small startup, so it is normal that we work on different time frames," he notes. Luckily for Democrance, the company's founder is not alien to the corporate world, and understands the nuances of working with the other side—>>>

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Members of Democrance team

a trait that has helped him grow his startup. “You’d hear a lot of entrepreneurs criticizing the corporate world, although most successful entrepreneurs wouldn’t be successful in growing their ventures if it was not for the skills and tools learnt in enterprise,” says Grosso. Admitting that it was quite a struggle for him to adapt to the startup life, he notes how “there’s no down time as you’re always there trying to make it happen, whether working, thinking or worrying about it! There’s also no rest time either, as you constantly need to drive your team, clients, partners and investors towards your vision- and that requires a lot of energy!” He advises entrepreneurs to be ready to put in “the mental and physical efforts required, [which are] similar to no other corporate job.”

As industry data and research points to a huge potential for insurtech, quite a few global companies are working to solve the same need as Democrance (such as European players Microensure and BIMA), and hence the UAE-based startup has been smart enough to focus solely on the MENA market for now,

“ONE OF THE CHALLENGES IS THE SPEED AND TIME TO MARKET OF OUR INSURANCE AND DISTRIBUTION PARTNERS- AT THE END OF THE DAY, THEY’RE HUGE CORPORATES AND WE ARE A SMALL STARTUP, SO IT IS NORMAL THAT WE WORK ON DIFFERENT TIME FRAMES.”

which they believe is getting there to be on par with global insurtech markets. Grosso says that by sticking to MENA, as one of the very few insurtech players in the region, Democrance is enjoying a lot of visibility as an early-mover. He adds that their decision is also guided by the supportive environment offered by regulators in the UAE for new innovations in general, and fintech in specific. Thus, keeping in mind that fintech requires a “longer-term approach” than other startups, Democrance has set itself a target to provide access to basic life and health insurance to “15 million low-income people across the MENA region” by the year 2020- a population segment in which majority have never been insured before. Suffice to say the company’s ambition is impressive- and its potential social impact is even more so, making it a venture to watch in this region. ■

‘TREP TALK

MICHELE GROSSO, FOUNDER & CEO, DEMOCRANCE

How has your experience been in building and growing your company in the UAE?

“The UAE was the natural choice for us to implement a product targeting emerging MENA markets and the emerging consumers of large corporates from the region. When compared to the rest of the region, the UAE gives you access to clients, investors, talent and resources you wouldn’t find elsewhere. The region holds so many opportunities and is unique in so many ways, I don’t understand why entrepreneurs would want to migrate to the West or try to implement copycats here from the West!”

the ecosystem develops. For entrepreneurs in any industry or region, I would tell them to remain committed to their passion, without worrying too much about what everyone else says. Investor interests are cyclical, but what matters at the end of the day is to bring your idea forward and stay true to your value and beliefs.”



Michele Grosso, founder and CEO, Democrance

What is your opinion on the startup-funding scenario in MENA, and globally for insurance-technology, and what would be your advice for aspiring entrepreneurs pitching for funds in this region?

“Insurance technology startups are raising a lot of interest among investors globally. MENA is catching up, and it may take a bit longer, but it will definitely get there too as

What are your top three tips for an entrepreneur to start a business here in the MENA region?

“Passion, passion and passion: passion is an ever-lasting source of strength and focus; passion can guide you through the difficult times that you’ll inevitably face during your journey as an entrepreneur. Your initial passion will be there to guide you when everything and everyone else will try to distract you!”



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Scout My Car co-founders Omar Benseddik and Alexander M. Kappes with the STEP 2017 award

Off to a flying start

Scout My Car pitches its way to victory at STEP Conference 2017 *By Sindhu Hariharan*

AS A SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR,

and a tech business executive for over eight years now, it's hardly a surprise that "launching businesses" is one of Alexander M. Kappes primary passions. However, in September 2016, the entrepreneur decided to link this passion with his love for cars by launching his newest tech startup, Scout My Car. In a large used car market such as that of the UAE, Scout My Car wants to be a service provider that helps buyers differentiate between a reliable used car, and well, a dodgy one before purchase.

Just six months into its launch, guided by positive user reviews and thanks to the founder's smooth pitching skills, Scout My Car bagged the Best Growth Stage startup title at STEP 2017's pitch competition, conducted in partnership with Cadillac Arabia. Commenting on the win (it was the startup's first time at STEP Conference), founder and CEO Kappes says: "The pitch competition itself was exciting, [and] despite working in tech startups for over six years, I've never had to pitch in front of a large audience. But the reaction to my introduction of Scout My

Car prompted so many smiles and nodding heads, that it felt easy from there on."

The idea for Scout My Car came to Kappes as a result of his own bad experience in buying his first car. "Despite the car being under warranty, and serviced exclusively by the dealership, I ended up paying almost AED10,000 within my first month to service the car," he says. The experience prompted him to research more on how the scenario could have been avoided, and that's when he noticed a real need for "a transparent and convenient way" to get used vehicles inspected before purchase. As he put his plans in motion to launch Scout My Car, it took a chance introduction followed by just a few meetings to get co-founder Omar Benseddik (a graduate straight out of the American University of Sharjah) on board, who, according to Kappes, stood out "due to his drive, enthusiasm, and work ethic."

Backed by investor Rocket Internet, the startup says it has been powering ahead with "word of mouth" as its key customer acquisition strategy, with Kappes noting that positive user reviews have helped

in service recommendations and conversions. On the company's value proposition he says: "We help the buyer understand the true condition of the car, how it's been serviced, what it will cost to repair any issues and damages, what the car is worth, and what we think about buying this car." He adds that the startup's biggest benefit is that it "provides context" to the problems uncovered helping buyers take the right decision. And if you are a seller, you can benefit from the enterprise too, since Scout My Car shares results with sellers as well, and says that the context they provide buyers is often useful for the sellers too. The founder also believes that the fact that they arrange for the "inspection, pick-up and drop-off of the car, and keep in touch with our customers throughout the inspection process via Whatsapp" is another key benefit and reasons why customers choose (and should choose) Scout My Car.

The experience of pitching in front of the ecosystem at STEP, and the ensuing victory is sure to be a shot in the arm for the upstart, which is in the process of preparing for fund raising, with potential investors already having "reached out" to them. "The fact that Scout My Car caters to an existing demand, while a lot of startups are still trying to create a demand, will hopefully help us in convincing investors that together with them, we can build a great business," says Kappes. ■

'TREP TALK

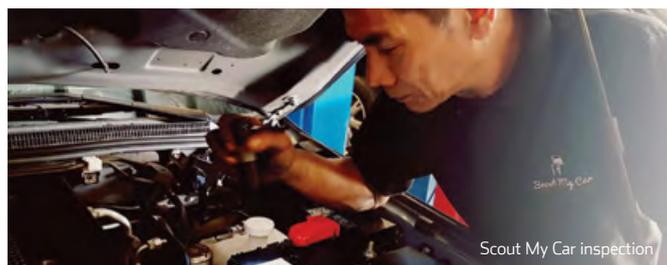
ALEXANDER M KAPPES, FOUNDER AND CEO, SCOUT MY CAR

Used cars marketplace as a business model is a crowded one, especially in the UAE. How have you differentiated yourself from your competitors?

"Our partnerships have been critical in establishing credibility, targeting customers, and growing the business. Our first partnership was with Careem, who offer the sellers a discount on Careem rides, while their car is in the garage with us. Since then we have partnered with several service apps, such as Helpbit, and MrUsta, and most recently, users and customers of DriveArabia.com and Carmudi.ae can book a car inspection direct from the car listings pages. Both sites have over two million page views per month, and we add value to their services, while they create awareness and drive traffic for Scout My Car."

What are your top tips for MENA entrepreneurs to push forward with their startup in the initial years of its launch?

"A lot of the key lessons have been out there for years, but focus all your efforts on your mobile presence. Do market research with customers and businesses to validate your idea. Always listen to customer feedback, and pivot if necessary, and be your best marketer."



Scout My Car inspection



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Learning on the job

Building a business is about growing- both the business and yourself *By Ahmed Moor*

When my good friend and co-founder Samer Atiani and I decided to start our lending business, liwwa, we had a limited understanding of what kind of commitment we'd be making. As people with some experience, we thought we'd be able to draw from prior knowledge gained at work or school.

But building this company has been unlike any other experience. Analogies exist; it's kind of like running a marathon, people say. That turned out to be partly true. It's been more like running a marathon-length relay triathlon. Or, it's like running a marathon-length relay triathlon as a small child, before you've learned how to ride a bike or swim.

But you do have two things going for you: it's a relay- so you do it with other people. And, you're totally ignorant of the racecourse, prior knowledge of which may keep you from ever crossing the starting line.

liwwa is still an early-stage company. After operating for two years, we've underwritten about 140 loans amounting to roughly US\$4 million in debt in Jordan and the UAE. Our portfolio accounts for a very tiny portion of the market opportunity we're targeting. In other words, we still have a very long way to go.

Despite that, I feel that I've learned a handful of lessons about building a business. Primarily, one has to have a love of learning, the discipline to implement new lessons over time, and the skepticism

required for questioning old lessons along the way. I've also learned that culture matters- and so does consistency. Finally, accountability grows with a growing business. When I think back on the past few years, I have no problem cataloging the new skills and facts I've learned over time. I've learned about diversification, accounting, and liquidity and cash management. I've learned about human resources, the fair price of office space in Amman and New York, and the difference between profitability and favorable unit economics.

LEARNING, PARTICULARLY FAST LEARNING, REQUIRES BOTH DISCIPLINE AND SKEPTICISM. THERE'S NO PARADOX; YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO ASSIMILATE NEW LESSONS EVEN AS YOU QUESTION THINGS YOU BELIEVED YOU KNEW.

Yet, what underpins all of these lessons is learning that, well, learning is a skill. One simply cannot go from the idea stage of a company to a point where that company is generating real revenue without developing new skills. Building a business is about growing- both the business and yourself. And learning, particularly fast learning, requires both discipline and skepticism. There's no paradox; you have to be able to assimilate new lessons even as you question things you believed you knew. It's a humbling process.

For example, in our first board meeting, I remember telling one of our most supportive investors, Ali Al-Husry of DASH Ventures, that we aimed to experiment with borrower profiles to generate more information on defaults. That would help us produce more robust statistical models highlight-

ing the characteristics of non-performing debt.

It all sounded good, but then he looked at me and said, "You want to hand out \$175,000 to strangers to generate defaults?"

His point was well taken- our ideal experiment would blow up the business (at that early-stage).

I've also learned that culture -the way you talk about and do things with other people- is a powerful technology. It's a self-replicating code of conduct (your values) that directly impacts your quality of life and the lives of those around you. For us at liwwa, a good culture is based on mutual respect, transparency, fairness and individual responsibility. That all sounds very good, but it's hard to manage in practice. The only thing that consistently guides us is our values statement.

So it's important to get your values right, and down on paper.

Finally, I was one of the people who believed that starting a business meant that I'd be independent, and I still do. Building something you love with people you admire is a wonderful way to spend your time. However, it is not a way to escape responsibility or attain total freedom (whatever that means). As your business grows, as you accept investor money, as you hire people and make good on your obligation to provide health insurance and a positive work environment, your responsibilities grow. You pay the price of growth and professional independence in a different kind of currency- responsibility and accountability to the people who've agreed to join you on your journey.

And for me, that's also been a pretty good thing too.



Ahmed Moor is the co-founder and CEO of liwwa, Inc., a technology-enabled SME lending company. He received a BA from the University of Pennsylvania and an MPP from Harvard University. He has written for *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications.

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