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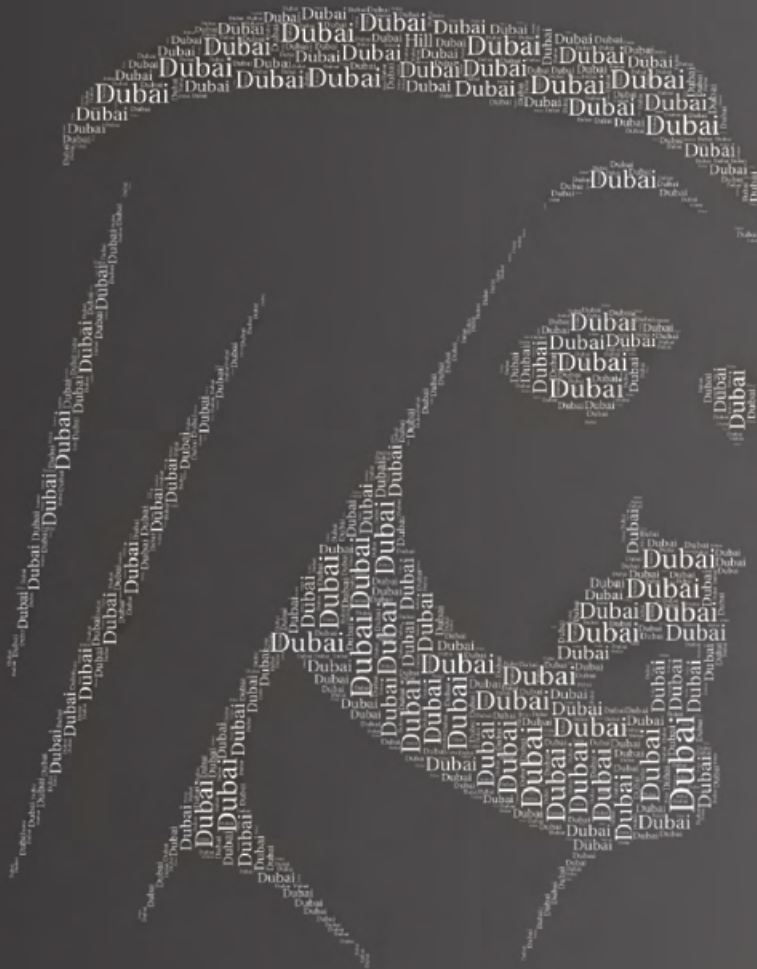
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## Come together

Startups are known to compete with contemporaries, but sometimes it's better to team up

As much as I enjoyed talking with Zomato founder and CEO Deepinder Goyal for the story that headlines this issue of *Entrepreneur Middle East*, one predicament I had with this long, free-wheeling conversation is that I wasn't able to use *all* of the chat's most interesting bits for the piece I ended up writing, given the magazine's space constraints. But one perk of being Editor in Chief is this space for my note every edition, and so, this time, I'm devoting it to reveal an additional tidbit from my conversation with Goyal.

One of the interesting factors that have contributed to Zomato's growth as a company has been the slew of acquisitions it has done to boost and consolidate the business over the years. As explained by Goyal, the majority of buyouts that Zomato did were of its competitors in markets outside of India, thereby strengthening its position in new geographies. But, Zomato has also acquired three fellow Indian startups: these include Maple POS, Sparse Labs and Runnr. When I quizzed Goyal on his thought process when it comes to Zomato's acquisition strategy, he replied, "I

deeply realize that if we *have* to build something big, we have to get other founders on our side. Like, the team here cannot actually execute everything on their own. So, [when you are] working with great teams, you actually feed off the energy of other people, right; you can't always be doing stuff on your own. So, for me, I mean, half of the deals we have done, they were for traffic in some other countries, but India-based, any kind of M&A we have done, it was more or less for the teams and the founders."

Goyal's response should be a good lesson for entrepreneurs in the MENA region who often complain about not having enough entrepreneurial talent to hire in these parts- this notion is contradicted by the fact that new startups are being founded on a fairly regular basis here. Many a time, we at *Entrepreneur Middle East* receive pitches from newly founded startups whose business ideas or models are pretty similar or could be value-adds to existing enterprises, and sure, while competition is a good thing, every now and then, I do wonder if their goals and missions would be better served if they would ally themselves with their



counterparts, as opposed to racing against each other. As Goyal put it so succinctly, there's a lot more that can be achieved if entrepreneurial teams work together- and if the Zomato story is any indication, success becomes much more likely.

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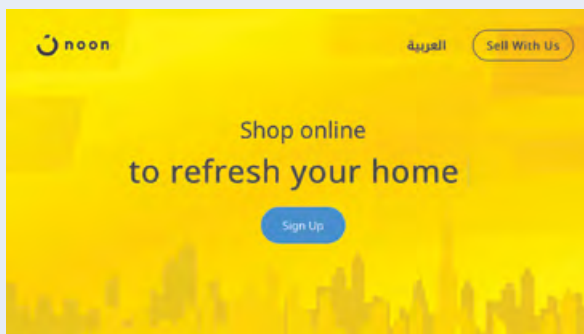
Alshaya Group makes e-commerce bet with investment in Noon.com

M.H. Alshaya Co., a seasoned MENA-based retail group, has invested an undisclosed amount in Noon.com, the region's latest e-commerce venture backed by Mohamed Alabbar and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, acquiring a "strategic stake." In addition to getting on board as an investor, Alshaya is also set to become a seller on the Noon platform with this partnership, hence opening up access to a vast portfolio of its products covering fashion, health and beauty, home and lifestyle, among other categories, to the tech-savvy online customer base of the region.

With global retail franchise operator Alshaya making digital bets of its own to adapt to the changing retail landscape, its Executive Chairman Mohammed Alshaya notes that the partnership with Noon will complement their existing online channels. "We are impressed by Noon's capabilities, and we are excited to partner with the Noon team to present a winning value proposition for the region's online shoppers," he said, in a statement. "Our partnership with Noon will allow us to expand our customer base, reach new market segments, and participate

in the next level of growth in regional e-commerce." On his part, Noon founder Mohamed Alabbar said: "It is our privilege to partner with Alshaya, and give our customers access to Alshaya's leading international brands. Noon brings a new business model for e-commerce, developing a strong supply chain that benefits regional businesses. We will work with the region's leading brands and retailers to help them grow their business through Noon."

Esanjo founder Omar Kassim, who was formerly the founder and CEO of JadoPardo.com, which Noon acquired in May 2017, noted this development to be "massive" on his Twitter feed. When asked why, Kassim pointed toward the significance of having one of the region's largest retailers enter the e-commerce arena by partnering with an existing player in the space. Whether this e-retail strategy of Alshaya pays off, however, remains to be seen—Noon's launch is still pending, though it was originally unveiled in November 2016 as a US\$1 billion e-commerce venture with plans to go live in January 2017. The latest statement says that Noon is set to launch later this year—so just keep your eyes peeled!



Kuwait's Chinwa app, the winners of the MIT Enterprise Forum Arab Startup Competition 2017

## Entrepreneurs welcome

MIT ENTERPRISE FORUM ARAB STARTUP COMPETITION 2018 IS NOW OPEN FOR ENTRIES

For entrepreneurs looking for support, if you know where to look, opportunities are rife: entries are now being solicited for the MIT Enterprise Forum Arab Startup Competition 2018. In partnership with Community Jameel, the annual startup competition, which is now in its 11th year, seeks to continue supporting startups by providing an avenue to exhibit and test ideas. Winners can have the chance to receive cash prizes of up to US\$160,000, including training, mentorship, media exposure and networking opportunities. Entrepreneurs can join three different tracks: the Ideas Track (for entrepreneurs with just an idea for a product or a service, although a team is not required); the Startups Track (for legally registered companies with a working prototype and traction), and the Social Entrepreneurship Track (for enterprises addressing social issues). The application submission deadline is November 27, 2017, with semi-finalists to be announced on January 2018, and the final event announcing the winners at a later date. MIT Enterprise Forum of the

Pan Arab Region was founded in 2005, and is one of the 28 global chapters of the MIT Enterprise Forum Global. According to its website, the competition has supported more than 2,200 entrepreneurs with trainings and also established over 430 startups. Commenting on the significant opportunities and support that startups receive with the program, Hala Fadel, Chairperson of the MIT Enterprise Forum Pan Arab, says, "Following the competition's 10th anniversary last year, we are very excited to be embarking on another decade of innovation. The region graduates over 300,000 engineers every year; that's three times as much as California. Talent in this region is here and ready to innovate, and we are here to support these talented young men and women."

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# BATTLING IT OUT OF THE PARK

DEEPIINDER GOYAL  
FOUNDER AND CEO, ZOMATO

HOW INDIA'S NOW-GLOBAL STARTUP STRUCK OUT, HIT HOME RUNS,  
AND STAYS IN THE GAME *By Aby Sam Thomas*

**L**et's start with a disclaimer: I'm a regular user of Zomato, the global restaurant discovery and food ordering platform that was founded by Deepinder Goyal and Pankaj Chaddah in India in 2008. As someone who finds cooking to be an arduous and time-consuming task, the ability to order food online on the Zomato app has been a godsend for me, especially on nights when I get home hungry (and tired) after work. As a result, there were a few moments in my Skype conversation with Goyal where I heard myself transform into an unabashed Zomato fanboy: I gushed over how useful I found the app to be, and how I go about professing its features to the people around me. Goyal, to his credit, didn't seem to mind my zeal, and he accepted all my compliments with a gracious smile; in those instances, he looked like every other entrepreneur out there who chances upon a user who loves the product he/she built. But let's be clear here: Goyal is not just another entrepreneur- he is the founder of a unicorn startup that has become one of India's most prolific brands, with a presence in 24 countries around the world. Goyal

and his team have built a company that today has over 2,000 employees, received about US\$225 million in funding, and with an operating revenue of more than \$50 million, recently became a profitable enterprise as well. That's right: Zomato is now making more money than it is spending, and for a company that started out as an online platform featuring scanned restaurant menu cards (more on that later), its profitability is an indication of how far the business has come since its founding in 2008. Zomato's growth has truly been outstanding, and while it has had plenty of hurdles along the way, the company has managed to come out of it all looking stronger, and well, *better*. But did Goyal ever foresee such a good fortune for Zomato when it started out? "Not really," he replies, quite candidly. "I think, as you grow bigger, I would say that the goal post also keeps on shifting. So, when we started off, we would have happily taken even an outcome one-twentieth of this size. And as you grow, you get to know more, you get to learn more, and then you want to do more as well. Your organization grows; you get more people, the team grows, and collectively, you want to do many more things to grow bigger. So, I think, it's a journey; it's not about the destination as such." >>>





Deepinder Goyal,  
founder and CEO,  
Zomato

Zomato's journey has been an exhilarating one to watch. The startup's origin story is almost legendary now- Goyal and Chaddah were working at Bain & Company's Delhi offices at the time, when they noted how they and their colleagues had to queue up to look at a stack of menu cards at the company's cafeteria, just so that they could decide what food to order. "The rule was that you cannot take these menu cards to your desks, because if you would actually lose them, then nobody would be able to order," Goyal remembers. "So, we just solved a very simple problem of people ordering food- we just scanned those menu cards, and put them up on the Bain intranet portal." It was a simple premise, yes, but the concept was a hit- Goyal and Chaddah saw their colleagues at Bain react very positively to their little online outing; the frequency of visits was particularly noteworthy. And that's when the duo decided to scale up their offering- there was a world outside of the Bain

**"WE LAUNCHED IN A COUPLE MORE CITIES, AND THEN INFO EDGE GAVE US THE SEED ROUND OF \$1 MILLION. THAT WAS ALMOST A TAD MORE THAN SEVEN YEARS AGO. AND YEAH, LIFE CHANGED SINCE THEN."**

cafeteria, after all. "I think we'd spent a week of traveling around Delhi, and we picked up pretty much all the menu cards that we could find from different restaurants," Goyal recalls. "And we just scanned these menu cards and put them online on a website, which you would hate to see the first version of. It had blue HTML links; there was no search, but you could use a browser search bar to look for a restaurant. And as soon as

you clicked on one, you used to get its phone number on top, and a bunch of JPEG files [the scanned menu cards]. So that was the first version of what we were called back then, which was Foodiebay, and that was the first version- people used to love it!"

Goyal laughs at this point, and it's easy to see why, when you look at the sleek, and, quite simply, beautiful interface that Zomato has today. But back then, Foodiebay's *look* didn't really matter: it may have not been easy on the eyes, but the online enterprise was solving a genuine problem in India then, and people flocked to use it. Restaurants began to sit up and take notice as well- they began contacting the Foodiebay team to advertise on the site, and that's how the revenue stream began. Goyal and his team bootstrapped for the first two years, and after seeing how their offering was received in Delhi, they began to include other cities in Foodiebay as well. At this point, Goyal was still work-

ing at Bain, and Foodiebay was something he worked on over the weekends. But given how the latter was turning into a large operation, Goyal made the decision to quit Bain and become a full-time entrepreneur. "We were making enough cash to pay our rentals, and put food on the table- that's all you need at the end of the day, anyway, right," Goyal tells me. "So, we had enough cash for that, and [for] six months, we did that." And then, a major development: in 2010, Foodiebay got its first round of funding from Info Edge, which is today a publicly listed holding company with a portfolio of several noteworthy Indian internet companies like Naukri.com, 99acres.com and others. "We launched in a couple more cities, and then Info Edge gave us the seed round of \$1 million," Goyal remembers. "That was almost a tad more than seven years ago. And yeah, life changed since then."

Changes were aplenty after that Info Edge investment- and perhaps the most impactful one

that consumer saw was with the renaming of the Foodiebay enterprise. The CFO of Info Edge then, Ambarish Raghuvanshi, told Goyal and his team how the last four letters of Foodiebay alluded to another prominent internet company, and so, changing its name now would get rid of any potential trademark issues down the line. Goyal and his team agreed with this notion, and they eventually zeroed in on two options for the company's new name: one was Zomato, and the other was... Forkwise. (Yes, dear reader, I raised my eyebrows at Forkwise as well.) Personally, I couldn't see why one would choose the staid Forkwise over the livelier Zomato- but Goyal has a sheepish smile as he explains the economics of the situation then, which was just after their seed round. "Zomato.com, the domain name was \$10,000. And Forkwise.com was \$10... So, I mean, that was a big deal for us- like, how do we spend \$10,000 out of the million dollars that we just raised!" As a result, Goyal and his team were leaning toward choosing Forkwise- but that's when Raghuvanshi intervened and made his voice heard. "He was quite pissed at us for dropping Zomato.com, which is such a cool domain name, and wanting to buy Forkwise.com," Goyal remembers. "He actually offered to buy it for us personally! And then, I was like, if you have that much confidence on this to buy it personally, we will buy it ourselves, so, don't worry about it. And that's how we bought Zomato.com."

And thus began Zomato's growth story. The startup decided to focus on India as a market, and as more and more people visited the Zomato website, they also added new cities in the country to their platform, which was now becoming more than just a listing of restaurants- users were reviewing these outlets as well. The company also launched an app;

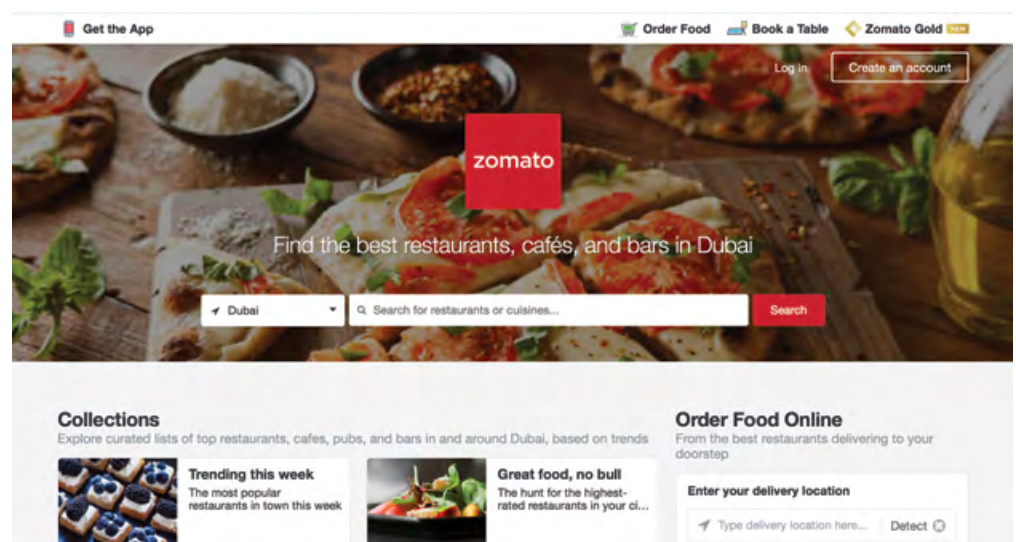
**"WHEN WE STARTED OFF, WE WOULD HAVE HAPPILY TAKEN EVEN AN OUTCOME ONE-TWENTIETH OF THIS SIZE. AND AS YOU GROW, YOU GET TO LEARN MORE, AND THEN YOU WANT TO DO MORE AS WELL."**

Zomato was one of the first in India to do this, and Goyal says that this enabled them to onboard a lot of users back then. The startup had more rounds of funding as well: \$3 million in 2011, and \$2.3 million the next year, both of which was led by Info Edge. By 2012, Zomato had come into its own as a restaurant discovery platform in India, and it was making good revenue as well- but now, Goyal and his team were thinking about how to further grow the enterprise. Zomato had made a name for itself in the business of food in India, and now it had to decide what to do next. "There were two choices in front of us: one was that we could get into other verticals within the country- so,

for example, we could start doing spas, salons, plumbers, all of those things, become a horizontal classifieds business," Goyal explains. "Or we would have taken the food business to other countries outside of India, i.e. the restaurant listing business. We thought that learning new geographies is going to be easier than learning new businesses. And therefore, we took a call that, okay, we'll stay focused." The UAE was the first country they chose to take Zomato to (Goyal recalls one of the factors influencing this decision being the cheap flight tickets from India to there), and started getting the business off the ground in this new locale.

This move into new markets outside of India was a massive step for Zomato, and it was one that worked out extremely well for the business in the long run. While the UAE may seem like a smaller market when compared to India, Goyal points out another factor that makes the former a very attractive market for a company like Zomato. "The ticket sizes in the UAE for your meal are almost 3-4x the size of ticket sizes in India," he explains. "So that makes the UAE alone a market which is almost the same size as India for us. So, people don't

see that, because all you see is a billion and a half people in India, and you think the size of the country is big. But when it comes to our sector, I mean, like, the UAE is almost the same size of India." And Goyal points toward Zomato's UAE business to prove his point: four months after it was launched, its operations here broke even, and it also became the market leader by traffic. "That was very, very fast," Goyal says. "That gave us the confidence that we have a good product on our hands, and we should probably take it to more countries." Soon enough, Zomato was making inroads into countries all around the world (these include the UK, Turkey, Brazil, New Zealand, Portugal, and many more), which was buoyed by new funding- a \$10 million round from Info Edge, followed by a \$37 million round by Info Edge and Sequoia Capital. Goyal proudly declares that users always loved the product, regardless of where they were- of course, there were some markets where Zomato didn't work, because the local competition was already strong there. And that's how the company began on its acquisition strategy: it simply bought out its competitors. In July 2014, Zomato made its first >>>



>>> acquisition by buying Menu Mania in New Zealand, which was followed by the buying out of Lunchtime in Czech Republic, Obedovat (Slovakia), Gastro-nauci (Poland) and Cibando (Italy). Following a sixth round of funding of \$60 million by Vy Capital alongside Info Edge and Sequoia Capital again in late 2014, Zomato made headlines in 2015 when it acquired Urbanspoon, the leading player in the restaurant discovery platform space after Yelp in the United States. But Goyal tells me now that it wasn't the US market that was the key target for them in this acquisition- Urbanspoon's presence in Australia, where it was the lone player, made it a very attractive investment for Zomato.

As all of this was happening for Zomato, the online food delivery space was garnering a lot of steam back at home in India, and around the world as well- Goyal says the first quarter of 2015 saw a crazy number of investments being made into the food tech space in India. The market was hot, so to speak, and Goyal and his team decided that they had to get into this sector as well, and they launched online food delivery in India in June 2015, the same month Urbanspoon got switched to Zomato. As you can see, it was a period that was filled with a number of changes at Zomato, and given the multiple priorities requiring the team's attention at the time, Goyal admits that they weren't really focused on revenue then. They had scaled massively, but they were also being spread thin- and they were, as Goyal later put in a blog, "losing focus on what matters and what works." But then something happened that caused them to reevaluate- the market suddenly turned. "It was almost overnight, and fundraising suddenly became 100x harder," Goyal remembers. "And then, we were like okay, we are not going to be able to raise money in this kind

**"AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE ARE WIRED TO BE NON-CONFRONTATIONAL. EVEN THOUGH IT CAN FEEL LIKE DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS IS WAY MORE COMFORTABLE, HAVE THE HARD CONVERSATIONS, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT THEY SEEM IN THAT MOMENT."**

of an environment, so [let's] start cutting down losses. We pulled our teams out of a few countries where we had just started, because, I mean, there was no meaningful traffic back then, and we had just started- it was pure cost. So, we shut down some of those countries, and we started focusing on revenue." Layoffs also happened, and Goyal still grimaces as he talks about it. "When we look back at that [period], I think doing all of those things was necessary to save the rest of the organization," he says. "We're not particularly proud of what we had to do. We had to let go of a lot of people who we had hired ourselves, and they are actually still good friends. So, I mean, that was never an easy thing. And I think going through that, I mean... There's a thing, they say that 'great companies only get built once they have seen the value of death.' So, if you don't know that, you don't really appreciate what it feels like being there. So, I think that phase made us learn a lot, and we hope we never repeat those mistakes again."

According to Goyal, the strategy that Zomato took then -which was to focus on their core advertising business, as well as their new but rapidly growing online delivery arm, and bring them together- saved the company. Investors continued to back the com-

pany- April 2015 saw Info Edge lead a seventh round of \$50 million, and later in September the same year, Temasek led a \$60 million round alongside existing investor Vy Capital. The company got working on reducing its burn rate, and at the same time, it focused on raising its revenue numbers in all of the markets it is in. Zomato's international expansion efforts paid off as well- today, it is the market leader in 22 of the 24 countries it is in, with 82% of its total traffic and about 60% of its revenue coming outside of India. This is not to say that Zomato didn't have hurdles post the 2015 downturn- in May 2016, HSBC came out with a report that slashed the unicorn startup's \$1 billion valuation down to \$50 million. This led to a slew of bad press (one noteworthy but undoubtedly painful headline said: "From Unicorn to Unicorpse: Zomato Flounders"), and Zomato found itself once again under scrutiny from everyone around it. For his part, Goyal defended his company, and called into question the veracity of the HSBC report- a point that is now bolstered by the fact that a new report released by Japanese financial services company Nomura pegged Zomato's valuation at \$1.4 billion. "Valuations, I don't care about them much, because it doesn't really affect anyone, right?" Goyal says. "None of these things are real, except for a percentage up or down in the gap table, and it doesn't really matter in the long-term. What the HSBC thing did to us- HSBC did not know the business, right. It wasn't even an investor in Zomato. It's like my Uber driver telling me that Zomato is half the value I mean, come on... You don't even know what we are doing. You don't even know the strengths of the business, and you'll go around telling people whatever you want to. So, I think it hurt us quite a lot, in terms of inves-

tor sentiment, employees' own morale. And I think it made the value of death even harder to get out, because, suddenly, hiring good people became harder. So, that was hard. But I think, even that [experience] was a lot of character building for a bunch of us. And that helped us. That has definitely helped me become who I am right now. I'm very calm and patient; none of these things affect me... Like, stay on course, and everything shall pass. And, I mean, even Nomura- while the Nomura report is really well researched, and they spoke to us, they actually took the time to understand our business, it doesn't change real life, except for the fact that now people want to join us, and want to invest in us."

There are rumors aplenty now that Zomato is in talks with the Chinese company Ant Financial -the payments business arm of e-commerce giant Alibaba- to raise a new funding round of \$100-\$200 million. Goyal doesn't directly address these reports, but tells me that raising new funds isn't out of the picture for Zomato. "So, we don't need the money," Goyal says. "But, we would like to build a war chest of sorts, for a rainy day, although we hope it never comes... There are a bunch of new initiatives that we want to fund, but I think that our revenue will be able to fund all of them going forward. So, I mean, yeah, raising money will not be bad for the company, in the short-term or the long-term." The company is also continuing with its acquisitions- in 2015, Mekanist, NexTable and Maple POS became a part of Zomato, which was followed by Sparse Labs and Runnr in 2016 and 2017 respectively. In the meantime, with his company becoming profitable, Goyal and his team are now concentrating on making investments in Zomato's future. "Almost 20% of our cost is actually being spent on new things," Goyal



Deepinder Goyal,  
founder and CEO,  
Zomato

says. “So, you can really say that 20% of our revenue is actually on research and development, to put it in conventional terms. And that gives us the comfort that we’re on our way to building something good and great.” Proof of this is already showing: Zomato Gold and Zomato Treats are new subscription-based offerings that the company is offering its user base today. “There are a couple more things that are coming up,” Goyal says. “We are actually piloting it in a couple of neighborhoods here; let’s see if they shape up into something worthwhile.” At the same time, Goyal and his team are eager to make sure Zomato benefits from the lessons they have learnt over the company’s tough phases. “I think the team has really matured a lot, and any problem that we try to solve,

**“VALUE YOUR GUT- WHEN YOUR GUT FEELS LIKE SOMETHING IS WRONG, THINK HARD ABOUT IT, AND DON’T LET DATA TAKE OVER THAT DECISION.”**

money is actually not even a part of the solution set,” he reveals. “We just keep money out of the whiteboard, and ask people to solve problems without them. And that’s when people come up with the most creative, sustainable answers to building and growing the

business. If you have money, it can actually spoil you. So that’s my biggest learning over the last few months, that, I mean, good work can easily replace capital- I mean, not always, or maybe always, but yeah, it can definitely do wonders.”

As for Goyal himself, the entrepreneurial journey he has been on over the last nine years has transformed him as a person- but the essential principles that tie him to Zomato remain the same. “I think I used to love working on the product; I still love working on the product. So, I think, the biggest part of me that has changed is that I am more thoughtful about stuff. And thoughtful is not just that you end up taking the right calls- like, it’s not about making less number of mistakes, but doing things in a better way... And I think I used to lose my temper a lot, and now, you are going to have to try really hard to make me lose my temper. And, it’s not like that I try to do that; I’ve just actually become that person.” Of course, this doesn’t mean that Goyal’s passion for Zomato has diminished- on the contrary, he remains extremely committed to the enterprise and seeing it move ahead. “I think what’s driving me, and a lot of other people at Zomato, at least in the senior management, forward is that it’s not about the size of what you build- it’s about how much meaningful impact you can create in other people’s lives. And we’re in that space which is so close to people’s hearts: food. And there is so much to be done here. And, I mean, we genuinely think, and I’m not saying it in, like, any clichéd manner, but I genuinely think we’re just getting started. There is so much more to do, and I don’t want to spoil your fun for the next few years looking at us- but there’s so much more coming.” Goyal is excited about Zomato’s future, I can tell- and for the record, so am I. ■

**‘TREP TALK**

ZOMATO FOUNDER AND CEO DEEPInder GOYAL’S ADVICE FOR ENTREPRENEURS

**GET YOUR PRIORITIES**

**RIGHT** “Focus on building a business that solves a real problem. There’s a very apt quote from Warren Buffett: ‘Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked.’ If you believe you aren’t naked, then you shouldn’t worry about the tide going out.”

**LISTEN TO YOURSELF**

“Value your gut- when your gut feels like something is wrong, think hard about it, and don’t let data take over that decision.”

**EXECUTION MATTERS**

“Execution is extremely under-rated. All the big things (strategy) are a sum total of small things (execution).”

**CONTINUE YOUR EDUCATION.**

“Have a learning mindset. The three hardest words in the world are: ‘I don’t know.’ Don’t be afraid to say them in front of people, and work hard to learn and get better.”

**GET ON THE GROUND**

“Customer surveys are overrated. Send your product guys to the field- make the user your biggest priority.”

**DO IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME**

“Don’t put processes around problem solving- take as long as it takes to get to the right answer. And once you get to the answer, give it everything to get it done.”

**KEEP AIMING HIGH** “Stakes should always be high, not personal- don’t be afraid of personal failure.”



Sami Al Daud,  
Managing Director,  
Al Daud Group

## LEADING THE CHANGE

SAMI AL DAUD

MANAGING DIRECTOR, AL DAUD GROUP

After forays into his family business and F&B, this Omani businessman is now looking into the education sector, with a focus on children with special educational needs *By Tamara Pupic*

Omani businessman Sami Al Daud still remembers the day when he first learnt that about 20% of school age children in Dubai have special educational needs (SEN), or require additional learning support. To his dismay, those children had to be either home schooled or involved in dedicated special needs centers, while enrolled in one of the city's mainstream schools. It was the only option their parents had, he explains, shaking his head in disbelief as we chat

at his office in Dubai Media City's Business Central Tower. "Historically, it's been a taboo to talk about it or to say that a family member has special needs," he notes. In the following few minutes of our conversation, he doesn't boast about his charitable activities aimed at solving this societal issue, as one may expect from businessmen of his ilk. To add some context to this observation—Al Daud is the Managing Director of the Oman-based Al Daud Group, a private business conglomerate founded by his father in 1964. Apart from his family business, Al Daud has built a success-

ful business of his own of note—he is the founder and Executive Chairman of Gourmet Gulf, a food and beverage company owning franchise rights for seven international F&B brands. So, when he came across the problems children with special educational needs face, he was dubious about whether a generous donation to some of the relevant initiatives would foster the positive changes he wanted to see in society. Instead, Al Daud did what he knew best—he built a business to solve the problem.

In 2014, he partnered with the Belhasa Group to set up Tarbia—meaning "education"

or "training of the spirit" in Arabic—an education-specific joint venture company that now operates in three education sub-sectors: early childhood education, special needs diagnostic and therapy centers, and international schools. Today, it is an umbrella company for the Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs, opened in Umm Suqeim earlier this year via a joint venture with the Riverston Group, a London-based provider of services for children with special educational needs, and Busy Bees Tarbia, a joint venture with Busy Bees Childcare, a UK nursery provider. Al Daud plans to own and operate 20 nurseries by 2021. Lastly, a SEN-focused K-12 school is now also in the pipeline. "We decided to establish an education company, and bring in the best in class," Al Daud says. "I was thinking about the different verticals I wanted to be in. I chose a school and a nursery, both to be the best in class, and a special needs center, also the best in class. We've never been in the education business, so I'm not going to try to reinvent the wheel here. I have partnered with big names. The Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs has taken off really well. The feedback I'm getting from parents whose children have enrolled in the center is that now they have seen a difference in their child. For me, that is a huge tick."

And what's next? "The next phase is that we are close to closing a property for a SEN school," Al Daud continues. "It will be a full-time school. For now, there are no such schools here. This one will be up to the eighth grade, and after that we will open another one for the eighth to

the 12th grade. Today, if your kid has special needs, where can you take him/her? To a mainstream school. But they will not be able to learn at the same pace as others in the mainstream school. Very quickly and easily, they will fall behind. So, what do you do? My idea is to provide them with a school to enable them to graduate and go to a university. So, the idea is not to forget the kids with special needs. In our region, historically, they've been forgotten." Coincidentally (or not), earlier this year, H.H. Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched a six-part national policy for empowering people with disabilities -referred to as "the determined ones." Praising the Ruler's efforts, Al Daud sees his own work in this field as a means of paying it forward. "It is going to be a for-profit school but the directives I've given are that we are not going to run it as our other businesses in which we try to maximize profits," he explains. "If it takes me 40 years to get my investment back, that's okay.



The Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs

**“THE RIVERSTON CHILDREN’S CENTRE (RCC) FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS HAS TAKEN OFF REALLY WELL. THE FEEDBACK I’M GETTING FROM PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN HAVE ENROLLED IN THE CENTER IS THAT NOW THEY HAVE SEEN A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR CHILD. FOR ME, THAT IS A HUGE TICK.”**

The key to this school is not how much money it will make. If it doesn't make me any money, that's also okay. The region, the UAE and Oman have been very good to us [the Al Daud family], and if we are going to give back a little, I think that is our duty. To me, that is very clear."

The importance of providing children with the best education possible, Al Daud says, is a lesson he learnt from his father, the family patriarch of the Al Daud Group. Sami Al Daud graduated from Boston University Questrom School of Business before joining the family

business in 2000. "There was never ever any pressure to join the family business, but in my mind, there was no doubt about what I was going to do over all the years of me growing up," he says. "I knew I would go into the family business. Actually, it was all I knew. All lunch and dinner conversations with my dad and my brothers were always about our business. For example, I went to a boarding school in the UK, and in the last year we would all go to see a counselor. All my friends spent half an hour or an hour in his office, and I was wondering what they were talking about. I was there for a maximum of 10 minutes. I knew what I wanted to do after school. My father's mentality was that his job was to give us a great education. If he threw us in the middle of New York City, we should be able to survive on our own, he thought." The four Al Daud brothers -one based in Oman, one in London, and two in Dubai- now run the Oman-headquartered business conglomerate, covering food and consumer item distribution, restaurants, retail, real estate development, construction, oil and gas services, building materials and telecommunications, among others. >>>



In 2014, Sami Al Daud partnered with the Belhasa Group to set up Tarbia -meaning "education" or "training of the spirit" in Arabic- an education-specific joint venture company.

With 1,350 people on its books, the group operates in the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, India, Turkey, and Taiwan. This year, the group is projected to have a 6% growth over the last year. Al Daud started off in the company's construction equipment business, and is now managing and overseeing its F&B, education, and trading divisions. However, he was eager to carve out his own entrepreneurial path. "It is really nice to join a family business, have a nice, cushy job, and just go along for the ride, but for my brothers and I, it was not enough," he says. "It was important not just to run the companies our father had started, but to do something from zero. Was it to subconsciously prove to myself that I could do it on my own? Maybe. But, it was really important to me."

In 2003, he ventured into the UAE's food and beverage market by opening a branch of Yo! Sushi, a UK conveyor belt sushi restaurant franchise, in BurJuman, one of the oldest shopping malls in Dubai. Nearly 15 years later, Al Daud cites the exact date of the opening: September 3, 2003. "I remember that at the time my dad was not very pleased with it, but he is also the type who will say it, and that's it. He is not going to hold it against you if you don't do what he says," he says. "I opened in BurJuman against everybody's advice in terms of location, but I was very confident in terms of the site. When we opened, it did really well, and I realized I liked that business. For me, what was great was that people would buy and pay straight away. It is because in our construction equipment business, you would



Gourmet Gulf employs 1,250 people and enjoys a 75% year-on-year growth

**"OPEN AT THE RIGHT PLACE WITH THE RIGHT OPERATIONS AND MAKE SURE THAT EVERYTHING IS RIGHT, BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T, IT WILL TAKE THE BREATH OUT OF YOU. I'VE DONE THAT WITH ALL OUR OTHER BRANDS."**

wait 60, 90 or 120 days to get paid. And half of that time you need to chase them for that money. It is usually such a pain."

This success has had a cascading effect. In 2006, Al Daud established Gourmet Gulf, owned by the Al Daud Group and Majid Al Futtaim Ventures, as an umbrella company that now holds the



The Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs

exclusive development and franchise rights in a number of MENA markets for seven international brands—California Pizza Kitchen (eight stores), Hummingbird Bakery (five stores), TDB (four stores), Panda Express (four stores), Dalloyau (three stores), Azkadenya (five stores) and Yo! Sushi (ten stores). The company employs 1,250 people and enjoys a 75% year-on-year growth. “If Yo! Sushi had not been that successful, I wouldn’t be in the business today, and my advice to all people entering this sector is to take their time for the first unit, if they need six months or a year more, they should take it,” he says. “Open at the right place with the right operations and make sure that everything is right, because if you don’t, it will take the breath out of you. I’ve done that with all our other brands. I always say that the first unit is the most important because that is what gives you the confidence in the brand. You may think that you’ve got the best brand in the world, you open the first unit, it doesn’t do well, and then you start doubting it.” Al Daud’s plans for Gourmet Gulf are ambitious, to say the least. By 2020, he aims to have 114 operating units for all the seven casual dining brands under the company’s belt.

When asked whether he has considered developing an original F&B concept, Al Daud explains that his approach is more pragmatic despite F&B being his true passion in business. “If you show me this and that, I can tell you what I like, but, if you tell me to create this, no,” he says. “I have neither the time nor the brain that can create a concept. Frankly, it [a homegrown F&B concept] is a pain, you

**“I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO STAY GROUNDED AND BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF BECAUSE THAT WILL ALSO HELP YOU IN HIRING. YOU CANNOT HIRE GREAT PEOPLE AND THEN MICROMANAGE THEM.”**

will make so many mistakes until you get it right. There is a winning formula that I can just take, tweak slightly and that’s it. Yet, I would encourage everybody who has that creative spark to do it. I don’t, and I’m the first one to say it. Also, I’ve never been a brand collector, as I pick my brands very carefully. I have to make sure that there is a gap in the market and that what I am bringing is the best in class. If there isn’t any gap in the market for a brand and the competition is already there, I then check whether the brand is the best in class. Can I come and beat the competition? What is also important is that the brand I’m thinking about is big enough, and structured enough to franchise, meaning are they ready to support you? I gave up a big brand in the past, because they were franchising just to get money and not because they believed in it.”

One of the secrets to his success is making the right hires, he says. “You have to be honest with yourself,” Al Daud notes. “It is easy for somebody to have their head grow big as their business grows. I think it is important to stay grounded and be honest with yourself because that will also help you in hiring. You cannot hire great people and then micromanage them. The great ones will not stay with you. We have separate teams



The Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs, opened in Umm Suqeim earlier this year



The Riverston Children's Centre (RCC) for Special Educational Needs

for each of our companies, but I’m able to have time for my personal life because I have hired well and because I have been able to delegate.” Towards the end of our conversation, he recalls a chat with a friend in Los Angeles last summer. The friend proposed they opened a restaurant in this Southern Californian city, but Al Daud immediately asked who would run it. “You cannot do it by remote control,” he explains, adding that every entrepreneur needs to put in his/her sweat first. “Don’t live life with ‘what ifs,’ take calculated risks, but do your homework,” he advises young entrepreneurs. “Business is not easy. For example, my restaurant business is most probably my most difficult business because when you are a restaurant,

you are a manufacturer, a retailer, and so on. Also, the reality is that three people have different tastes. But, in this business, you have to satisfy all three of them. You will have thousands of people coming through your door and you have to make sure that everyone is happy. It is a difficult business, but get involved and get your hands dirty. There’s no shame in it.”

It seems that Al Daud’s entrepreneurial journey rests on three pillars—his family business, which is a reflection of his pride in his ancestors; his restaurant business, which is his passion; and his SEN-focused initiative, which appears to be his legacy. “No child should be left behind,” a statement he reiterates a few times, before I turn off the recorder. ■



Ime Archibong

## Partners in progress

Ime Archibong, Vice President of Product Partnerships, Facebook, on how the social media network is laying the groundwork for new MENA leaders to emerge and grow

By Tamara Pupic

**B**usiness is not just about the numbers, and no one made it clearer than Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg when he revealed the company's new mission statement earlier this year. His initial plan—to make the world more open and con-

nected—needed an upgrade as it struggled to provide a much-needed sense of purpose to about two billion people already actively using the platform. The new mission statement—announced at Facebook's first Community Summit last June—is to bring the world closer together, meaning to empower

people to create and join meaningful communities online, forging deeper friendships and civic ties both online and offline. “The traditional sources of community as from where people get their meaning, identity and support have slowly started to erode, over the last three or four decades,” says Ime Archibong, Facebook's Vice President of Product Partnerships, during his recent visit to Dubai. “We thought that our technology could help reverse that trend, and bring people closer together. The hypothesis here is that there are about 100 million people that we see across Facebook right now, who we believe have found a meaningful community on Facebook. They have found a group that they feel connected to and that gives them purpose. We believe that there is no reason why that number should not be one billion people over the next couple of years. Now, the question is how can we connect more people to these meaningful groups and these meaningful experiences. The strong hypothesis that we have is that each one of these communities is underpinned by a leader or a group of leaders, who have emerged and said: ‘We are taking it upon ourselves to actually make sure that this community stays vibrant, meaningful, and safe for the people using it.’ We are now empowering community leaders.”

Archibong's visit to the Middle East proves that Facebook's new goals are not just part of an empty statement of ideas relegated to paper, but an action plan being implemented with a detailed step by step approach. Prior to our interview, he had met with Sumayyah Sayed, a Dubai resident who created a Facebook group to launch the nonprofit Ramadan Sharing Fridge initiative. It grew into a city-wide phenomenon, inspiring Dubai residents to regularly fill more than 170 fridges for those in need during this year's Ramadan. Sayed's Facebook group now has nearly 24,000 members. Archibong also met (and went on a run around Dubai Marina) with Manal Rostom, the founder of Surviving Hijab, a women-only Facebook group created to empower and support veiled Muslim women, counting nearly 460,000 members to date. Both Sayed and Rostom, Archibong explains, are “emerging and unexpected leaders” that the Facebook team wants to discover and support. “I'm trying

**“THEY ARE LOCAL PEOPLE TRYING TO SOLVE PROBLEMS WITHIN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES. FOR FACEBOOK, THESE ARE THE EXACT TYPES OF ENTREPRENEURS, OF BUILDERS, THAT WE WANT TO SUPPORT.”**

to understand how we can empower people like Manal, so that she can continue to build this supportive community for half a million people or more,” he adds. “They are local people trying to solve problems within their local communities. For Facebook, these are the exact types of entrepreneurs, of builders, that we want to support and figure out how we can continue to produce innovative infrastructures for them to take their communities to the next level.” Launched in 2010, Facebook Groups have now become the tool of the social media platform’s further expansion.

However, prior to announcing the new mission statement, Zuckerberg published a 6,000-word letter stating that the Facebook community should be supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged and inclusive. “We are trying to understand what type of leadership training we can give them [the emerging leaders], how they are scaling their leadership, how they are attracting and training other admins, and to hear their pain points,” Archibong explains. “For years, we have spent time with developers and startups to understand what Facebook can build from a more tech perspective to help them grow and monetize their applications, for example. In the same way, we now want to hear from these folks [non-tech builders] about their pain points. For example, when they say that they don’t understand 500,000 people that are in their group, what their demographic breakdown is, where geographically they all are from, or what their gender breakdown is. If they knew that, they could serve the group better. So,

for example, we launched Insights for Groups, and people saw value in that. Also, some leaders can have a queue of 80,000 people who want to join the group, and they [the admins] need to go through them one by one. So, we launched Filtering. For example, Manal’s group is women-only, and if we give her an option to filter out all men in one click, that will save hours of her time. Also, they all have stories of trying to figure out how to keep their community safe. We launched a bunch of tools to let the admins identify the bad actors fairly quickly and pull them out of the group fairly quickly. So, I’m spending a lot of time with them to hear what else is broken.”

In parallel, Facebook continues to build the capacity of coders, programmers and engineers, including those in emerging markets. At this year’s F8, Facebook’s annual

developer conference, two MENA-based startups -InstaDeep, a Tunis-headquartered Artificial Intelligence startup, and Mind Rockets Inc, an Amman-based tech startup assisting the hearing impaired with voice recording, book reading, and viewing online videos- were chosen by Zuckerberg to attend the F8 2017 VIP roundtable. The Facebook MENA team has already hosted F8 Meetups in five regional cities -Dubai, Amman, Casablanca, Beirut, Cairo- where participants watched live streams of the sessions in San Francisco. Furthermore, at this year’s F8, the company announced Developer Circles, a community-driven program that is free to join and open to any developer willing to connect, learn, and collaborate with other local developers. To date, there have been eight Developer Circles in the MENA region- Casablanca, Algiers, Tunis, Cairo, Gaza, Amman, Beirut, and Baghdad. Keeping the Middle East firmly on its radar, Archibong says, is part of Facebook’s mission to identify other ecosystems around the world that “have the same DNA as Silicon Valley.” He adds: “What I >>>



Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Facebook



During his recent visit to Dubai, Ime Archibong went on a run around Dubai Marina with Manal Rostom, the founder of Surviving Hijab

IMAGES COURTESY IME ARCHIBONG | MARK ZUCKERBERG IMAGE © SHUTTERSTOCK



Ime Archibong,  
Vice President,  
Product Partnerships,  
Facebook, and  
Manal Rostom,  
founder, Surviving  
Hijab

mean by that is that they all have the right ingredients and elements that have made Silicon Valley successful in terms of breakthrough innovation. The entrepreneurs and companies there have that idea of being able to build something new, to maybe fail, and then start building something new again. The capital and resources there enable people with great ideas to bring them to fruition.

**“I’M TRYING TO UNDERSTAND HOW WE CAN EMPOWER PEOPLE LIKE MANAL, SO THAT SHE CAN CONTINUE TO BUILD THIS SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY FOR HALF A MILLION PEOPLE OR MORE.”**

“Over the last few years, I have probably spent more time outside Silicon Valley than being there, really just trying to understand these communities a bit better. I’ve spent quite some time in the Middle East as well, whether it’s in Egypt, Jordan, or Dubai, trying to understand and really connect with those communities. One of the things that I consistently find, including here over the last 48 hours, is the talent, creativity and curiosity of people to come together and build something that is a challenge for them, or to seize an opportunity and build breakthrough products or services. In this region, there is nothing that is unique and different and that stands out vis-à-vis other ecosystems around the world, but I would say that everyone’s approach to what the problem is and what

opportunities they are trying to seize for their communities is fairly specific. We at Facebook meet people who are building tech-enabled businesses, people who are building apps, or whatever it might be, and often times the real value we can add to them is not necessarily how they can build a more compelling product to serve their local market, because they know it best, but how to apply that idea to the globe, and that is where we can add unique value to some of them.”

Last February, Facebook launched the Bots for Messenger Challenge in 64 cities across the wider Middle East and Africa to recognize and reward developers who could create the most innovative new bots on Messenger. Developers were asked to build new bots focused on three categories- gaming and entertainment, productivity and utility, and social good. Top 60 finalists were selected to be paired with a Facebook mentor and given three weeks to iterate on the best versions of their bots for the final judging. Facebook selected three winners from the region who won a prize of US\$20,000 and three months of Facebook mentorship, while three regional runner-up teams won \$10,000 and three months of Facebook mentorship. Messenger Challenge meet ups are now being held regularly across the MENA region, from Casablanca to Baghdad. To add to that, more established regional companies have already recognized the role bots can play in growing their businesses. Mercedes-Benz Cars Middle East is the first automotive brand globally to go live with Facebook’s Messenger Chatbot service, which allows their users to book test drives, explore the

latest model range and more, just by chatting. Another example is Mashreq bank’s e-banking Messenger bot -an Artificial Intelligence agent or chatbot- which enables customers to display Mashreq products and perform cardless cash transactions, low-ticket local transfers and inquire about balance and recent transactions on an account. Lastly, the MENA’s largest transportation and logistics company Aramex hopes that their recently launched Messenger bot will largely reduce SMS and phone call costs, while improving the company’s customer experience.

However, Facebook is not forgetting smaller businesses either. “One of the patterns that we have seen emerging is that more and more businesses are becoming tech-enabled,” Archibong says. “There is no one industry right now that is not thinking about the way digital and tech are impacting and influencing their business. So, as we have been witnessing that shift over the past decade or more, we have tried to figure out the ways that we can make sure that we are not just servicing people who are building web pages or apps, but someone who is starting a food delivery service or a food truck around the corner, truly all those SMEs. How we can help them have leverage with not just Facebook, but the whole concept of social infrastructure, including Whatsapp, Messenger, Instagram, and one day it will be Oculus, and all these other tools that we are building to connect people with other people, to now connect businesses to people.” One example of Facebook’s support to young businesses comes from Egypt. Elves, founded by Karim Elsayh and Abeer Elsisy, a husband-and-wife

entrepreneurial duo, allows people to ask human agents for mainly travel-related requests. It has become a featured app on Messenger. The support from the Facebook team means that Elves’ engineers now have access to Facebook’s new features and code which results in, for example, a plus sign leading to the Elves app every time MENA users open up Messenger. The 18-month-old Egyptian startup is now generating about \$80,000 in monthly revenue.

Facebook is regularly revealing a growing host of tools and services to keep up with the demand from its users, and especially from coders, programmers and engineers, as well as community leaders- the two groups are often referred to as tech and non-tech builders. Persistently carving new avenues to better serve entrepreneurs globally, Archibong says, is a way of ensuring that Facebook’s past and current success will have a matching future. “The reason why we started all of this very intentionally a couple of years ago was two-fold,” he explains. “One, when we were a smaller company, we realized how the likes of Microsoft in Silicon Valley helped us out along our journey, and really gave us some guidance. We wanted to make sure that we could do that for the communities that were coming up after us. Two, there is a symbiotic relationship between big and small tech companies. We wanted to make sure that over time, small tech companies continue to see us as allies on their journey. And vice versa- there are many things we can learn from them, such as how we stay at the forefront of what is happening in tech, or make sure that we are not losing track of trends.” ■

# BUILDING YOUR STARTUP TEAM

A guide to finding the perfect hire

By Suhail Al-Masri

First of all, hiring for a startup often times means hiring for the first time. It could be that the company is a one-man show that has reached the point where one person can't do everything on their own. This is when the company is ready to transition from one multitasker to a team. It could also be that the company has a small group of co-founders who are ready to grow. In either scenario, hiring with little to no experience in the recruitment field can be very challenging.

There are several steps that need to be taken to complete a successful hire, such as creating job descriptions, determining which recruitment methods to use, creating a talent acquisition and retention strategy, determining salary and compensation packages, etc. All of these steps can be hard to crack when a company is still in infancy.

Second of all, entrepreneurs and startups have very specific talent requirements. When a company is still in the kick-off phase, it requires the type of talents who are:

- Malleable and can easily multitask
- Flexible and are able to adjust to constant change
- Entrepreneurs by nature and have the passion for new businesses
- Highly dependable and natural leaders

Because smaller companies are always changing, growing, restructuring, and experimenting, they require employees who have the ability to adjust and grow along with the company. At the same time, they also require employees who are fond of the idea of startups and have the determination and the passion to see their companies excel. In a sense, entrepreneurs hire (aspiring) entrepreneurs, and that's not always easy to come by.

Third of all, the fact that smaller businesses and entrepreneurs do not have the time and the resources to dedicate for talent scouting and screening poses another dilemma. In-house resources for startups are often limited and tied up to other functions of the business. The process of searching, screening, shortlisting, interviewing, assessing, and hiring candidates can be quite time-consuming and demanding. Startups may simply lack that time.

## SOURCING, SCREENING, AND SHORTLISTING STARTUP TALENT

To address these challenges, companies of all sizes, industries, and locations are putting recruitment technology to use and making great strides. In fact, over three-quarters (76%) of respondents to the Bayt.com *Hiring Practices in the Middle East and North Africa Survey* report that online recruitment has facilitated the process of hiring talent in the region.

Without doubt, technology can do wonders even in the fields of recruitment and talent management. Startups are making use of a multitude of tools that include the classic and highly effective job postings tool, in which they are able to provide detailed job descriptions; set up automatic filters and screening questionnaires; and segment their applicants based on the specific needs they have for their business.

Other startups are using a highly powerful CV search technology, which affords them access to millions of quality candidates at a click of a button. Along with this, a multitude of tools and features, such as the ability to pre-set filters, save CVs in customized folders, and use boolean and advanced search functions, is making it much easier and more efficient for companies to quickly find their talent needs.

Startups are making use of a multitude of tools that include the classic and highly effective job postings tool, in which they are able to provide detailed job descriptions; set up automatic filters and screening questionnaires; and segment their applicants based on the specific needs they have for their business.

## TECHNOLOGY CAN DO WONDERS EVEN IN THE FIELDS OF RECRUITMENT AND TALENT MANAGEMENT.

When companies are in a real pinch and they just need to quickly hire high-caliber talent, they can complement such technologies with a talent sourcing service, such as Source2Hire from Bayt.com. This service provides a shortlist of candidates who are qualified, interested, and available to start the job. This way startups with limited resources can focus on other critical functions in their business and only get involved in the interview and hiring steps.

The point is, numerous tools and technologies are available for startups across the Middle East and North Africa to put to use and effectively hire talent. Hiring nowadays does not need to be a complicated process or an extra burden for companies.

### INTERVIEWING STARTUP TALENT

At this point, conducting a job interview can seem quite simple: use the shortlist of candidates, meet them, ask them questions, and compare them with other applicants. But how can you guarantee that a good

## IN ORDER TO SUCCEED, STARTUP FOUNDERS NEED OVERACHIEVERS ON THEIR TEAM WHO WILL AGREE TO PUT IN 200% AND BE FULLY DEDICATED TO THE COMPANY.

interviewee will translate into a good employee for your startup? The cost of a bad hire is very high. Keeping aside salary expenses, the cost of training, customer complaints, and hiring replacements that keep adding up in the long run.

To prevent this from happening, here are the five things you should look for when interviewing candidates for your startup:

### 1. A PASSION AND A DREAM SIMILAR TO YOURS

Statistically speaking, most startups have funding issues and could ultimately fail. In order to succeed, startup founders need overachievers on their team who will agree to put in



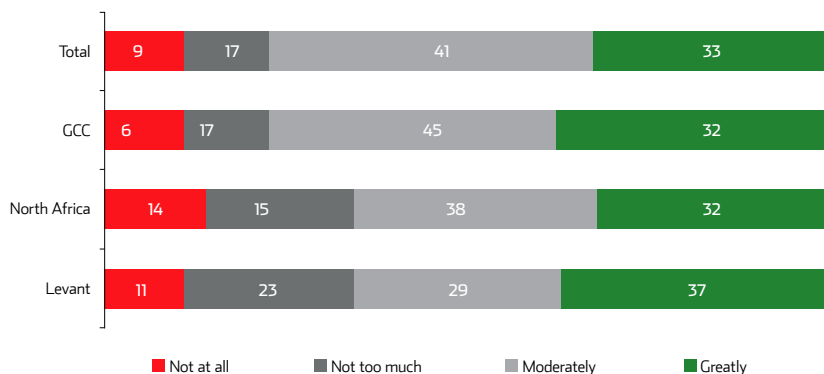
200% and be fully dedicated to the company. Ideally, you need people who believe in your vision and are passionate enough to want to help transform this vision into a reality. In the Middle East, five in 10 professionals would want to work for a company where they feel their work is part of a greater purpose, as revealed in the Bayt.com *What Makes a Company an Attractive Place to Work?* poll. So “passion” is already a common point of interest with many job seekers out there.

The best test during the job interview is to ask candidates to speak about something they are passionate about and see if their passion aligns with yours. You could also ask them how they have pursued their passion up to this point in time and how they plan to keep pursuing it when they join your company.

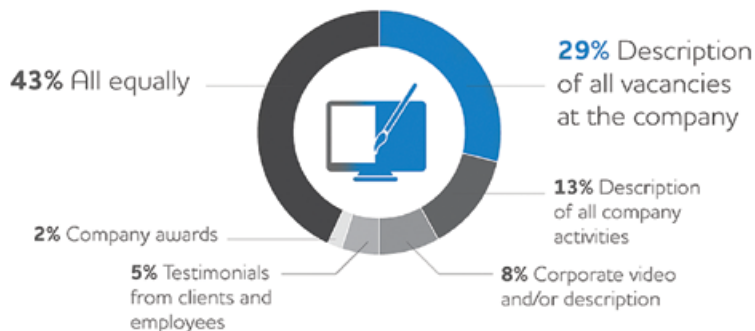
### 2. THE SKILLSETS YOU VITALLY NEED

With a naturally small team, you have to hire people who are, one, multi-skilled and, two, skilled at something your team lacks and needs critically. You should already have an overview >>>

EXTENT TO WHICH ONLINE RECRUITMENT HAS FACILITATED HIRING PROCESS



What do professionals want to see when researching a company online?



of their skills from their CV and application, but you can always ask them to elaborate during the interview.

To verify their skills, look for past achievements; areas where they have used these skills to benefit a previous employer. It also wouldn't hurt to test them on these skills, as evaluating someone in action is much different than hearing them talk about it. This way, you will avoid hiring someone who appears to be confident and skilled but, in reality, isn't as competent as they claim to be.

**3. FLEXIBILITY**

Startup founders don't usually follow a structured process in their work as they're probably still figuring it out themselves. They often change their initial assumptions about the market as they learn more about their customers and the industry in which they operate. On top of that, they are simply much more susceptible to change as they introduce new products and experiment with different tools and strategies. As a result, their business model could also be frequently altered to suit these changes.

As a growing startup, you'll want to look for flexible people who are comfortable with change, are willing to adjust their workload and habits, can focus on implementing new processes without getting distracted, and are ready to learn from their failures.

**4. AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT**

Startups are risky and you need to gauge whether your candidate is brave enough to take the leap of faith in your business. Their entrepreneurial spirit can be associ-

Look for flexible people who are comfortable with change, are willing to adjust their workload and habits, can focus on implementing new processes without getting distracted, and are ready to learn from their failures.

**WITH A NATURALLY SMALL TEAM, YOU HAVE TO HIRE PEOPLE WHO ARE, ONE, MULTI-SKILLED AND, TWO, SKILLED AT SOMETHING YOUR TEAM LACKS AND NEEDS CRITICALLY.**

ated with their willingness to bring new and innovative ideas to the table.

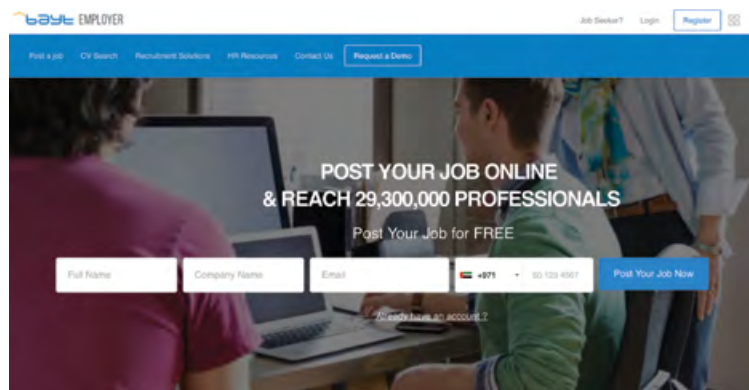
Along with this, your employees would need to have a sense of ownership towards the business by being as passionate as you are to solve problems, develop your products and offerings, and see every project or task they handle through completion.

During the interview process, you could assess this area by giving the candidate a series of hypothetical (but relevant) situations and see how they would tackle them while maintaining an eye on your business objectives and vision.

**5. CURIOSITY AND A WILLINGNESS TO LEARN**

Dedicate some time at the end of the interview for candidates to ask you questions. This is a good time to judge how well the candidate knows your startup and how interested they are in learning more— not just receiving information and instructions.

Apart from this, having a curious mind is an extremely important quality in a fresh company. This is because everything is new and everyone is experimenting and learning on-the-go. The more intelligent and thought-provoking the candidate's questions are, the more you should consider hiring them. ■



Suhail Al-Masri is the VP of Employer Solutions at Bayt.com. Al-Masri has more than 20 years of experience in sales leadership, consultative sales, account management, marketing management, and operations management. His mission at Bayt.com goes in line with the company's mission to empower people with the tools and knowledge to build their lifestyles of choice.



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Turab Saleem,  
founder,  
Perfetti Hospitality

## Staying ahead of the game

TURAB SALEEM, FOUNDER, PERFETTI HOSPITALITY, GIVES HIS TAKE ON WHAT MAKES FOR A WINNING FORMULA IN THE LOCAL F&B SCENE

By Tamara Pupic

**T**o leave a mark on the UAE's local hospitality scene, should one take a leap of faith by developing new dining concepts, or stick to importing tried-and-tested international brands? It's a question many are eager to find the *right* answer for. However, Turab Saleem, the founder and owner of Perfetti Hospitality, a Dubai-based hospitality company, has gone down both routes and found success in each of them.

The local dining public might not have heard of Saleem, but he knows them all too well, having pleased them on many an occasion with both his homegrown concepts (Indian restaurant Ushna, and Persian cuisine-based Anar), as well as Michelin-starred chef-powered restaurants (Asia De Cuba Abu Dhabi, Gary Rhodes Abu Dhabi, and the new Toro Toro Abu Dhabi).

As Saleem starts talking about his latest opening—the Latin restaurant concept Toro Toro at The Jumeirah at Etihad Towers in Abu Dhabi—he appears confident that his long-standing cooperation with the brand's owner, award-winning Mexican chef Richard Sandoval, will again be a fruitful one.

Of course, this belief might stem from Saleem's more than two-decade-long hospitality career that has seen him working on over 68 projects valued at US\$4.2 billion. Or it might be due to him possessing a solid knowledge of the industry—his route into hospitality was a conventional one that included obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Hotel Management from Swiss Hotel Schools, and Master's degrees from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration as well as New York University.

Or it might be a certain personal trait—leniency—especially required when working with genuinely talented, but often unpredictable, celebrity chefs. “There are some celebrity chefs you cannot even talk to,” Saleem says. “They do what they want and that's the end of the story. I remember working with a chef a couple of years back who wanted everything silver-plated and gold-plated, and something handmade from Italy, and something from Japan. He got everything that he wanted, but when he had to deliver, he failed to understand the market, and thus delivered a menu that was not successful here at all. That was despite all our guidance, because he did only what he wanted to do. It was too difficult to communicate with him. Six months later, he was out of the hotel. Owners here are

**“THE LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE DOES ADD A LOT OF CHALLENGES TO A NEW BRAND. YOU NEED TO DO YOUR HOMEWORK WELL, AND GET AN EXPERIENCED TEAM ON BOARD. EVEN IF YOU GET YOUR FOOD AND BEVERAGES RIGHT, YOU ARE STILL HALF WAY. THE REST IS ABOUT YOUR PR AND MARKETING.”**

much nicer. Anywhere else in the world, they would sue the guy. So, here, restaurants are very young, and owners are nice, so they [chefs] get away with this. Otherwise, it is a crime. They will not listen to you until you make more sense than them. You should know more than them. That means that you need to travel more than them, and open more venues than them.”

Working with those known for being able to ruffle a few feathers obviously requires a lot of patience, and Saleem displays just that. During our conversation in a noisy café at the Media One Hotel in Dubai, his attention is undivided—not for a moment does he scan over my shoulder in search of something more interesting. Discreet and clearly highly competent, he is focused solely on talking about his restaurants. Saleem goes on: “If you just copy and paste their knowledge from one market to another, it doesn't work. What works in New York might not work in Hong Kong or Dubai. They [chefs] come here, they are not prepared, and they don't know the local market, so they just copy paste the concepts from wherever they are coming from. That does not work in Dubai, when it comes to flavors, portions, finishing, plating, and so on. Every city has its own habits, likes and dislikes.”

“One example is from one of my restaurants, Asia de Cuba,” he says. “If you look at their plates and portions in New York and here, they are different. They are much bigger there, and the whole presentation is different. Here, people want a little bit more action, drama, sophistication. So, we literally modified the whole presentation. What happened then was that it was so successful that they implemented it in other markets. To achieve that, you need to know where your local market is right now and what the future trends are. However, it is not an easy adjustment, it is a very risky one. Most of those chefs will not listen to you. Due to [them] being overconfident, a number of them have failed miserably. To make them believe in you, you need to know a lot. We are lucky that we have been in the industry for so long, and we now understand this. We have a wealth of local market knowledge that is hard to bring on the table.”

But Saleem notes that Richard Sandoval is different – “he goes with the market” – and that is the key to his success, he says. With respect to the locale, Saleem points out that it is the UAE’s ability to advance the foodie conversation, and place its stamp on the world’s culinary map that has lured many



Toro Toro Abu Dhabi was opened at The Jumeirah at Etihad Towers in September

Award-winning chef Richard Sandoval –dubbed ‘the father of Mexican food’– partnered with Turab Saleem, founder of Perfetti Hospitality, to open Latin restaurant concept Toro Toro in Abu Dhabi.

**“WE HAVE UP TO 25 WORLD CLASS CHEFS WORKING IN THE UAE. THAT HAS A BIG IMPACT ON TAKING THE STANDARDS, QUALITY, AND IMAGE OF THE FOOD AND BEVERAGES SECTOR HERE TO A DIFFERENT LEVEL.”**

celebrity chefs to this part of the world. “There was a time when I used to travel to these destinations to learn something about my field, but now we are there,” Saleem says. “Today, if I go to Singapore or Shanghai to learn something, there is not much I can get out of it. Basically, now they are asking questions. We are among the top destinations, people here are very international, they love to try new things because they travel a lot. Also, we have up to 25 world-class chefs working in the UAE. That has a big impact on taking the standards, quality, and image of the food and beverages sector here to a different level. They would never come if Dubai wasn’t a happening place. They are here because they see that their image is well-polished in this city.”

Looking at statistics, this comes as no surprise– the region’s hospitality industry is booming. It should reach a market value of \$36.7 billion by 2020, according to Euronmonitor International. In the UAE alone, much of that growth is driven by increasing population and rapidly

growing tourism industry, with just one international event, Dubai Expo 2020, expected to draw in 20 million visitors. KPMG’s 2016 UAE Food & Beverage Report predicts that at least 19,000 F&B outlets will open by 2019. According to Saleem, the fate of many of them will depend on one decision –the choice of location– and if they take note of the fine print. “I would say that waterfront locations are doing well,” he says. “The reason is that because for half of the year, you can’t go out, but once the weather is good, people like to sit out and next to the water. But you also need to take into account your neighborhood, your accessibility, and so on. Any location that has a liquor license is more expensive, and all the locations with high footfall are expensive, but that is also a trap. You look at the footfall and end up paying high rent, but the day the market goes a bit slower, you then start working for those landlords only. You don’t make money at all. Also, the people who are new to this don’t know how to read the contracts which are >>>



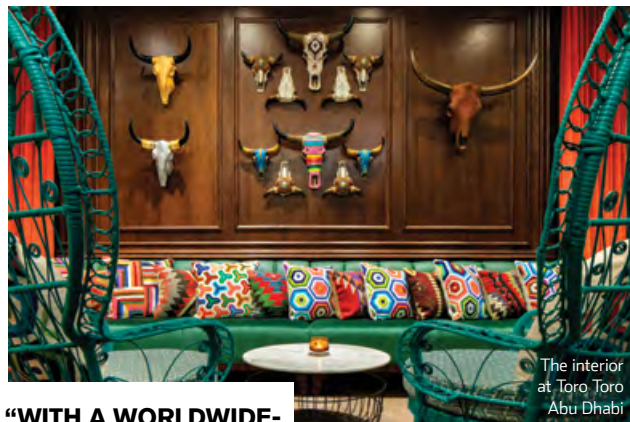
The interior at Toro Toro Abu Dhabi

so tricky. They will show you a low rent, but then there is a 2% fee for this, 1% fee for that, and so on. When you start paying the rent, you realize that you are literally paying double because you could not understand the contract. I've just read a contract for my new project which states that for an opening party, I need to pay them AED50,000. Why should I pay something to them when it's my opening party?"

Saleem notes that in the UAE, opening a five-star quality restaurant with a Michelin-starred chef costs north of AED20 million. To open his last three restaurants, the bills amounted to AED25 million each. When it comes to profitability, however, today's market is tough, he says. "With some of our restaurants, we managed to breakeven in the third year," Saleem adds. "They were open in good times, but now it is a bit challenging. I believe it will take longer, four or five years. Yet, if you click with the market well, the ROI can come much quicker. If you don't click, there is no ROI, you just pack and go home. The failure rate in our industry is extremely

high. About 50% to 60% of new restaurants cannot cross the first year." Over the past few years, chef-driven restaurants have faced an additional threat- the rise of homegrown concepts. "Most restaurants located in hotels, are suffering big time because free-standing restaurants are taking over at the moment," Saleem says. "The entrepreneurs behind these restaurants are very direct, they are aware of new trends, their approach is aggressive, so hotels are losing to them."

This trend will continue. The country's most anticipated event -Dubai Expo 2020- will open further opportunities for F&B entrepreneurs and SME owners. From October 2020 to April 2021, the event is expected to generate AED2 billion in onsite food and drink sales. Participating vendors are expected to serve 85,000 every hour at peak times, while additional five million meals will be required by the Expo 2020 Dubai workforce. As we conclude the interview, Saleem speaks at great length to share a piece of advice for all of them. "With a worldwide-known brand, the immediate recognition



The interior at Toro Toro Abu Dhabi

**"WITH A WORLDWIDE-KNOWN BRAND, THE IMMEDIATE RECOGNITION FROM THE MARKET IS THERE, WHEREAS WITH HOMEGROWN CONCEPTS, IT TAKES A LITTLE BIT OF TIME TO MAKE IT RIGHT, TO TWEAK IT, AND INTRODUCE IT TO THE WORLD."**

from the market is there, whereas with homegrown concepts, it takes a little bit of time to make it right, to tweak it, and introduce it to the world," he says. "For example, Sandoval has been in business for nearly 40 years. He has refined his concept to a very high level. It is not easy for a new person to get that knowl-

edge and experience. When we combine his and mine experience, it is a bonus to us. So, the lack of knowledge and experience does add a lot of challenges to a new brand. You need to do your homework well, and get an experienced team on board. Even if you get your food and beverages right, you are still half way. The rest is about your PR and marketing, that is extremely important. Overall, it is a complex set of activities to put everything together in the right way. My advice is to take advice from somebody who has done it, to walk you through the process."

"A very important point is: don't listen to your personal likes and dislikes," Saleem adds. "That is the last thing you want to do. Restaurants fail, because owners follow this. If one was a chef before, he tends to forget other important parts, and focuses only on food. If one was a designer before, he focuses on interior design, and forgets everything else. If you do follow your own likes and dislikes, make sure that you have a solid reason for that, and that it is connected to your target market. Otherwise, your restaurant will be empty. But once you have established one or two successful restaurants, then it is about copying what proved right." ■



Toro Toro Abu Dhabi

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## POWER UP

### BELKIN BOOST UP WIRELESS CHARGER

Apple's recently released smartphones support wireless charging, and Belkin has readied itself to support this new development. The company worked closely with Apple to develop the Boost Up Wireless Charging Pad, specifically for iPhone 8, iPhone 8 Plus and iPhone X. It features a non-slip surface, supports charging up to

7.5W, and charges through most lightweight cases under 3mm thick. And, the minimally designed, circular device is easy to use. Simply lay your smartphone on top of the device and an LED light indicates when the phone is properly aligned for charging. The Boost Up Wireless charger works by way of Qi inductive technology, and it

will charge any Qi enabled device. If you're a Samsung user, there's a Boost Up charger for you too. It's compatible with the latest Samsung devices, and it charges up to 15W- the fastest wireless charging solution possible. Whatever your preference, there's a wireless Belkin charging pad to help you cut the cord, and stay powered up.



iPhone 8 on Belkin Boost Up Wireless Charger



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Linksys Velop

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**VELOP BY LINKSYS**

Linksys Velop is a modular Wi-Fi mesh system of nodes built to provide Wi-Fi coverage throughout your home. It sets up in minutes, and delivers a full-strength signal from one end of your home to the other, no matter its size. Simply add additional nodes to work around walls, problem areas, or multiple stories. Each Velop node is a powerful Tri-Band connection point offering up to 2,000 square feet of coverage. With Dynamic Tri-band

technology and a combination of three Wi-Fi radios, Velop provides faster speeds and load balancing. Whether you're streaming 4K content, gaming, or video chatting, Velop delivers fast, dependable Wi-Fi to ensure optimal performance even when multiple Wi-Fi devices are connected. Moreover, its modern design allows Linksys Velop to blend with your home decor to keep the aesthetic clean, and you, connected.

Linksys Velop



**SNAP IT UP**  
**LG AIRPORT ROBOTS**

LG is rolling out airport robotics with an eye to helping frequent fliers with its technology. Each robot in this repertoire solves a specific problem, and performs tasks that would traditionally require human interaction. For instance, the Airport Guide Robot connects to the airport's central server, and roams around the space to provide you with estimated distances and walking times to locations of restaurants, shops, and other destinations within the airport. It can scan ticket barcodes and tell you boarding time, flight and gate information, as well as the time and weather of your destination, in a matter of seconds. Don't have your boarding pass handy? No problem. The robot has voice recognition, and it can speak four languages: English, Korean, Chinese and Japanese. The Airport Guide Robot is intended to reduce the hassle associated with flying, by giving you quick, accurate information on-the-go. On the other hand, the Airport Cleaning Robot is a super-sized robot vacuum equipped with a large capacity dust canister, as well as multiple brushes and motors. Capable



LG Airport Guide Robot

of cleaning everything from tiles to carpet floors, this robot is equipped with the latest in smart sensors and multiple cameras to ensure a safe, effective, and powerful performance in even the most crowded airports. Multiple sensors using light detection and ranging (LIDAR) as well as sensitive bumpers which detect obstacles are used to help the robot function. Thanks to the use of simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM) technology, the robot is always aware of its location- and yours.



LG Airport Guide Robot



**#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](http://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 our selections from a notable timepiece for your collection, the Brunello Cucinelli Autumn/Winter 2017 range, and a must-try fitness regime.



Rado  
DiaMaster  
Grande  
Seconde

Rado DiaMaster Grande  
Seconde



## WATCHOUT

### RADO

As a watchmaker renowned for its ceramic cases, Rado is upping its game in the luxury watch world—and the brand wants its aficionados to indulge with the new additions to the DiaMaster Grande Seconde line. The timepieces feature Rado's plasma high-tech ceramic case and the noteworthy asymmetrical dial design of two stacked sub-dials, running on an ETA 2899 automatic movement. Cool new touches (and a reminder that details can make a difference) are the added Roman numerals and a sunray pattern framing the sub-dials. An ideal timepiece for men and women, the timepieces come in blue dial with a black leather strap, or brown dial with a light brown leather strap. [www.rado.com](http://www.rado.com)



Rado  
DiaMaster  
Grande  
Seconde

IMAGES COURTESY RADO

## WINTER IS COMING

### BRUNELLO CUCINELLI AUTUMN/WINTER 2017

Is that a hint of a cool breeze? We'd like to think so too. If you're as hopeful as us, have a look at Brunello Cucinelli's Autumn/Winter 2017 line. Founded in 1978, the Italian House stays true to its signature of blazers, colored cashmere sweaters and tailored suits. Dominated by a palette of earthy tones of blue and beige, the collection blends in denim shirts and polo necks, adding in loose and cropped matching trousers. Hustle through your business meetings with a distinctive look that can easily be switched up to a casual ensemble for the weekend.

[www.brunellocucinelli.com](http://www.brunellocucinelli.com)



Brunello Cucinelli  
AW17



Brunello Cucinelli  
AW17



Brunello Cucinelli  
AW17

BodySmart



## EDITOR'S PICK

### A MULTITASKER'S DREAM

UAE-BASED BODYSMART IS OFFERING YOU AN ALTERNATIVE WAY TO GET FIT

As many Dubai-based professionals who work hectic hours, have busy lifestyles, and often deal with everyday stress, and occasionally fall into "emotional eating," I have also started to struggle to reduce fat in certain areas, such as the stomach, hips, buttocks and thighs. Then, I met Allison Pickford, founder and Director of BodySmart, a targeted body shaping studio based on HYPOXI technology, with four branches across Dubai. Invented by sport scientist Dr. Norbert Egger, HYPOXI is a stationary exercise bike machine that combines compression and vacuum technology to help you achieve your fitness results- faster and easier. I was eager to try it, of course- wearing just a comfortable gym t-shirt and knee length tights, I went for my session at a BodySmart center at The Meadows Town Centre. There, I was asked to wear a compression skirt and to have a heart rate monitor strapped around my ribcage and a thigh, before entering a vacuum chamber from the waist down. During the following 30 minutes, I was not only pedaling -which was what I had come for- but also checked my emails and made a few phone calls. Several lifestyle adjustments are required, of course, such as drinking a lot of water, not eating carbs a few hours after the session, or skipping dinners, but I wouldn't have achieved similar results by hitting my gym's treadmill. In a couple of sessions, not only did I achieve my body shaping goals, but the whole experience seemed as a multitasker's dream. BodySmart offers free trials, after which you are encouraged to subscribe to some of their membership packages that are often offered at very attractive discounted rates. To busy entrepreneurs eager to get fit, our tip is to book a session and try it out yourself. -By Tamara Pusic [www.bodysmart.ae](http://www.bodysmart.ae)

## Lights! Camera! Action!

The *Esquire Guy's* guide to media interviews

By Ross McCammon

**F**irst, a few things that people who've done broadcast interviews know: it's more casual than you think it will be. It will be over way faster than you think it will be. And after the interview airs, people will get in touch with you- people you haven't heard from for some time. Also, it's kind of a big deal. You and your company are better off for having done it. A broadcast interview is like minor surgery- but without the recovery time.

The mistake people often make when preparing for an interview is thinking about how to talk to an audience, instead of thinking about how to talk to a single person. If you're consciously thinking about the audience, then your attention is misguided. The audience indirectly affects the tenor of the conversation, of course, and the whole thing

wouldn't be happening if it weren't for the audience, but the audience should be dismissed.

The only person to think about is the interviewer. And your interaction with the interviewer -your respect for the person, your smiling, and not openly mocking the person's ignorance- is more of a determining factor for success than any other.

### HAVE A CONVERSATION

"With our program, you're on it because we want you to be on it," says Robin Young, host of *Here & Now*, a daily show on Boston's NPR news station, WBUR. "Be conscious of that. It's not as if you have to push something."

There's a lot of indirect advice in what she's saying. Because, one, you really don't have to work. And two, *you* are the most interesting person



in the world. It helps to think of yourself as the most interesting person in the world, because if you do, that's how you'll be treated. If the interviewer isn't treating you

## KEY TECHNICAL MATTERS

After asking the producer what the interviewer is going to ask you and rehearsing possible answers and picking out some clothes to wear, start smiling. And keep smiling until the interview is over. Unless the interview is about a grave subject, smile like you mean it.

Not a hopeful beaming. Not a slight grin. A confident smile- somewhere between a smirk and a simper. (The simper is underrated.)

When you're being interviewed for broadcast, speak slowly. But not too slowly. You want to talk like this.

You don't want to talk like this. And you don't want to talk like this. And you don't want to talk like this! And, like, you, um, don't want to, like, talk like, um, this.

- Stand or sit up straight. And make

eye contact. And listen. Really listen. Because you're having a conversation- a stilted one, but a conversation nonetheless.

- Have details ready. An answer isn't interesting unless it involves details.
- Never interrupt an interviewer. You'll seem impatient and nervous.
- Never stare down an interviewer. You'll seem scary and weird.
- Wait a half beat before answering a question. You'll seem measured and authoritative. Anything longer than that and you'll seem confused and lonely.

For the purposes of your time together, the interviewer is your friend. The interviewer might surprise you with questions you hadn't prepared for, but the interviewer is your friend. The interviewer might belittle you

and make you feel awful, but the interviewer is your friend. (The interviewer might punch you in the stomach, but the interviewer is your friend- and also a psychopath. But still, your friend.)

And remember that your performance is always going 30% less than however you think it's going. If you think it's awkward, it's 30% less awkward than you think. If you think it's fascinating, it's 30% less fascinating than you think. If you think it's boring, it's 30% less boring than you think. If you think it was a total disaster, it wasn't.

If you said during the interview, "This is a total disaster," then it *probably* was a disaster. But 30% less than you think. As long as you're smiling.



like the most interesting person in the world, then the interviewer isn't doing a good job. What makes for a good interview -on both sides- is focus and engagement.

The best part about being the most interesting person in the world is that the bar is set incredibly low. Whatever comes out of your mouth is going to be great. It's hard to suck at being interviewed, is what we're saying. You almost have to willfully suck. Because all you have to do is talk.

Talking is a tricky thing, of course. Especially when the stakes are high. But we know how to do it. The key to doing it on camera or over the radio: talk with the person across from you and forget about the many other people listening to you. Sit up straight and lean forward slightly. You want to seem as interested in the questions as you are in your own answers. You want to seem like you love the sound of the interviewer's voice. You want to respond as if the interviewer is highly intelligent, but isn't particularly aware of you or what you do. You want to seem like you're on a great first

date, now that we think about it.

Mainly, you want to listen, which is the most important part of talking. Listening forces you to allow the interviewer to control the conversation. And you have to cede control. Young says to speak not as if you're selling something, but as if you're trying to make people understand something: "You may be an entrepreneur when you're coming on the air, but in real life, you also play the role of the consumer. So, as a consumer, what would you want to hear?"

What a consumer wants to hear is civility and authority and jargon-free wisdom. Confidence and effortlessness. Easy- unless you or what you're representing is in a little trouble.

#### THE ART OF THE DIFFICULT MESSAGE

Everything up to now has assumed you're going to be interviewed in friendly territory. But what if you're being called upon to answer uncomfortable questions? What if you're being asked to defend certain practices? What if you're being taken to task? What if you are effectively the spokesperson for a huge mess?

"If something is bad, it's bad," says Om Malik, founder of San Francisco-based technology and media company GigaOm. "Instead of trying to spin it too much, just answer the questions. People are scared to speak the truth."

Media trainers will say, "Answer the question you wish they asked." Politicians do this. It's an interesting move because it makes you seem self-possessed and stupid at the same time. Rule: if you're asked a question, you have to answer it. You might answer it with an "I don't know," or an "I can't tell you," or some other lame, readymade answer, but you need to answer the question.

Another interesting move? The "pivot," where you sort of answer the question, then construct a verbal bridge to the thing that you really want to talk about. That move has been rendered moot by the thousands of pundits and politi-

#### THINGS YOU SHOULD NEVER\* SAY DURING AN INTERVIEW

- It all started waaaaay back in ...
  - Like ...
  - Um.
  - Ya know?
  - Like, um, ya know?
  - Is this thing on?
  - Hold up. I'd like to do a shout-out to ...
  - I have no idea what the answer is.
  - Who do you think you are?
  - Would you like to have dinner sometime?
  - Just who do you think you are?
  - You know how when you have a word on the tip of your tongue?
  - That's happening to me right now.
  - Why are you being so mean to me?
  - "I can't be cool. I can't be laid-back. Something happened, and I want to celebrate it." (For the uninitiated, that was Tom Cruise to Oprah in a now infamous TV moment from 2005.)
  - Stop staring.
  - If you'll allow me to read a passage from my new book entitled ...
- This interview is over.

\* almost never

cians who practice it every day, over and over again. It's a transparent, tired, greedy technique. Leave the pivot to the basketball players and the ballroom dancers.

It's easy for an audience to detect fear and discomfort and manipulation. And once these are detected, your message becomes irrelevant. So, when the circumstances are tricky, do the same thing you'd do under better circumstances: listen, smile, and sound authoritative. Also -and this is underrated- sound humble. (There is almost no business situation in which this formula does not work.)

Being interviewed is talking. And talking is easy -fun, even- when you know what you're talking about. Fortunately for your company -and the interviewer and the audience and the people waiting to congratulate you and your own sense of pride- you do. ■



## To boost happiness, stack the pain

This tactic will help you master your habits even when the day-to-day grind gets frustrating

By James Clear

**B**efore I became an entrepreneur, I went to business school. While studying for my MBA, there was one lesson that I learned which has proved to be useful over and over again in my life.

I was sitting in a marketing class and we were discussing ways to design a wonderful customer experience. The goal was not merely to provide decent service, but to delight the customer.

Behavioral scientists have discovered that one of the most effective ways to create an enjoyable experience is to stack the painful parts of the experience early in the process. Psychologically, we prefer experiences that improve over time. That means it's better for the annoying parts of a purchase to happen

early in the experience. Furthermore, we don't enjoy it when painful experiences are drawn out or repeated.

Here are some examples. If you're at the doctor's office it's better to combine the pain of waiting into one segment. The wait will feel shorter to your brain if you spend 20 minutes in the waiting room, rather than spending 10 minutes in the waiting room, and 10 minutes in the exam room.

People enjoy all-inclusive vacations, because they pay one lump sum at the beginning (the pain) and the rest of the trip is divided into positive experiences, excursions, and parties. In the words of my professor, all-inclusive vacations "segment the pleasure and combine the pain."

**■** If you choose to pursue things where the pain of the experience is largely in the beginning then you will tend to look back on those experiences fondly because they improve over time.

**IT MIGHT BE PAINFUL NOW TO BATTLE THROUGH THE UNCERTAIN EARLY YEARS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP, BUT AS YOU LEARN TO BUILD A STABLE BUSINESS YOU'LL REMEMBER THE EXPERIENCE AS A POSITIVE ONE.**

If you're a professional service provider (lawyer, insurance agent, freelancer, etc.) it is better to give the bad news to your clients first, and finish with the good news. Clients will remember an experience more favorably if you start weak but finish on a high note, rather than starting strong and ending poorly.

These examples had me thinking: if you can make a customer experience more delightful, why not make your life experiences more delightful? How can you take advantage of the way your brain processes painful and annoying experiences, and use that knowledge to live a better life?

### TO BOOST HAPPINESS, STACK THE PAIN

A delightful customer experience combines the painful experiences into a single segment that occurs early in the process and then improves over time. If you want to increase your happiness and have a more delightful day, you can do the same thing.

Here is an example. On a normal day, you might have something annoying or painful to do (like paying the bills). And you also might have something good happen to you (like a friend sending you a thoughtful email).

If you read the email on your lunch break and then pay the bills when you get home from work, you will remember your day as going from a good experience to a bad experience. That's the opposite of what you want.

However, if you decide to stack the pain early in your day—for example, if you pay your bills in the morning before you go to work, and then read the email from your friend on your lunch break—



James Clear writes at [jamesclear.com](http://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](http://jamesclear.com/newsletter). To have James speak at your entrepreneurial event contact him [jamesclear.com/contact](http://jamesclear.com/contact)

you will remember your day as going from bad to good. As a result, you'll feel happier because your brain likes it when experiences improve as time goes on.

This same principle can be applied in dozens of ways throughout your day.

When you're working on a project, cleaning the house, or doing homework, start with the task that you dislike the most. Once that is out of the way, your experience will improve and you'll finish with a more satisfied feeling.

When you're trying to start a new habit, combine the pain of starting into a small segment. For instance, when you go to the gym, start with the exercise you dislike the most. With the hardest exercise out of the way, your experience will improve throughout the workout and you'll be more likely to remember your workout as positive. And when you remember your workouts as positive, it's more likely that you'll show up next time and workout again.

### STACKING THE PAIN FOR THE LONG-TERM

It's easy to worry about making the right choices with your life. However, if you choose to pursue things where the pain of the

experience is largely in the beginning—like building a business, losing weight, or creating art—then you will tend to look back on those experiences fondly because they improve over time.

By comparison, doing things like trying to beat the stock market or become a professional gambler are very inconsistent. They can provide big wins, but they can also provide big losses at any time. The pain isn't necessarily in the beginning. Because of this, these experiences are less likely to make you happy over the long run. Of course, that can be easy to forget when you're struggling to succeed with other goals. In the beginning, it can be easy to feel like, "Building a business is so hard, why shouldn't I try to beat the stock market?"

Understanding this difference can help you stay on track, and continue to master your habits even when the day-to-day grind gets frustrating.

It might be painful now to put in the work required to get in shape or become a better athlete, but as your skills improve over time you'll remember the experience as a positive one.

It might be painful now to create bad art, but as

you master your craft and your work gets better you'll remember the experience as a positive one.

It might be painful now to battle through the uncertain early years of entrepreneurship, but as you learn to build a stable business you'll remember the experience as a positive one.

Choosing to frontload pain and discomfort isn't just a choice that applies to daily tasks and errands. It can also be used to nudge you toward the goals you have that you tend to procrastinate on.

### WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

If you're anything like me, you want to get to the end of your life and remember it as being joyful and happy. Given what we know about behavioral psychology, we are more likely to remember our lives as happy if they improve over time.

This is one reason why working through the pain of learning new skills for your job, training to become stronger and healthier, and putting in the time required to master your craft is worthwhile. In the beginning, you may feel stupid while learning a new skill or frustrated while sacrificing current pleasure for a future payoff, but when you make the choice to go through the pain early, you get to enjoy the benefit of delight later on.

The path to a delightful life looks a lot like the path to a delightful customer experience. It starts off with a few painful experiences and improves over time. Using this strategy allows you to move toward happiness even when there are annoying or painful things you have to get done.

All the more reason to stop procrastinating, get the bad experiences out of the way early, and take on the hard stuff now. ■



## 'TREP TALK ME

### THE BUSINESS

Yoginfinity  
www.yoginfinity.com

### THE 'TREP

Founder, Stefania Brunori

**Q** Does entrepreneurship make you a happier individual?

**A** "It most certainly does! I have created a company that is 100% aligned with my personal values and professional standards that are important to me. My startup is a reflection of who I am, giving me a great deal of fulfillment and satisfaction. I work hard, but I can do it on my time and my terms— not slowed down by rigid corporate structures, or nine-to-five routines. In addition, I derive a lot of passion and energy from having created a brand that gives others happiness and contributes to a healthier, more fulfilled lifestyle: it is incredibly rewarding to know that in addition to launching a successful company and being profitable, we can also have a vital impact on not only our own but our customers' happiness."





A workspace designed by Steelcase

## A new way to work

Today's executives need workspaces that foster an adaptive culture *By Xavier Fuchs*

**T**oday's leaders must navigate an economic environment that is far more complex and unpredictable than in the past. Traditional hierarchy-based management practices that previously propelled success can no longer keep pace with the constantly shifting business landscape.

The risks and rewards inherent in times of change are well known to senior leaders, who have to seize opportunities for growth, while sidestepping pitfalls. But there's a big difference between being aware of a rapidly evolving business landscape and taking successful action to leveraging it—especially when the ground beneath them seems to be constantly shifting.

Progressive leaders are embracing the chaos by reshaping their organizations to operate as complex adaptive systems. They are fundamentally dismantling the orderly processes and protocols of the past to

create more inclusive and connected organizations. They are building organizations that are better able to attain the big-picture intelligence and purposeful engagement that are so necessary for successful adaption to the disruptive realities of today.

Employees play a fundamental role in this evolution. They must act as resilient, agile “agents”: interacting, learning, adapting and responding to change. Yet leaders face a major barrier—a workforce in which the largest employee segment, 37%, is disengaged, simply doing enough work to get by, according to a study by Steelcase and global research firm Ipsos called *Engagement and the Global Workplace*. But there is good news: 34% of employees are engaged and want to work in new ways, seeking meaningful work and workplaces that enable them to make meaningful connections. And the 29% of employees wavering between engagement and disengagement

can be within reach for leaders who take proactive steps to address what employees really want and need in their work experiences.

Deep diving in to the challenges leaders encounter and how they need to work differently, a team of Steelcase researchers and designers conducted a two-year study of executives' behaviors. The research followed the Steelcase Human-Centered Design Process—a simple but rigorous approach to research, analysis and design development that puts human beings and their needs at the core. Through the observations, Steelcase researchers identified common and expected behaviors of top executives, as well as key challenges that executives face today.

**1. INFOBESITY** Executives are facing the same onslaught of information that most employees are experiencing—only more. Leaders are coping with “infobesity” and need to quickly winnow out extraneous data to find information of value. They can't rely on information making its way up and yet know that they can't fall into the trap of trying to know everything themselves, so they need to rely on their expert networks, internally and externally.

**2. RAPID CONTEXT SHIFTING** The breadth of leaders' work results in rapid context shifting, requiring a mental reset for each new meeting that fills their jammed schedule.

**3. NEED TO PROTECT BRAND INFLUENCE** Executives today need to protect their brand and influence, span organizational and geographic boundaries and manage a large number of external and internal relationships.

**4. EXTREME NEED FOR PRIVACY** Dealing with information that is often sensitive or confidential causes a balancing act for leaders who also need to be accessible and visible.

**5. HIGHLY FRAGMENTED SCHEDULES** The pace of work has accelerated for everyone and, for global executives who are in constant demand,



A workspace designed by Steelcase



Xavier Fuchs is the Sales Director in Middle East & Sub-Saharan Africa for Steelcase Inc., the global leader in office furniture industry. He joined Steelcase in 2000 to lead sales and distribution strategy in Scandinavia. Since joining Steelcase, Xavier has regularly engaged with leaders from the most dynamic industries in fast paced cities like Dubai, Riyadh, Paris, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Milan and Moscow. He has used proven methodologies and an insight-led approach to drive focus toward business development and innovation in these markets. Xavier holds a degree in Business and Marketing from Clermont-Ferrand in France.

schedules have become even more fragmented and extended to span multiple time zones. A frequent casualty is the loss of connection with people— not only their employees, but with their executive peer group. Rather than working collaboratively as a leadership team, they risk inadvertently working at cross-purposes.

**6. HIGHLY MOBILE** More than ever executives are getting out of the office to enable better information flows. However, being highly nomadic can actually undermine their reasons for doing it. Instead of gaining energy, insights and inspiration from others, they risk becoming cognitively overburdened as they strive to heroically work longer and harder.

**7. DEFENSE ON ASSISTANCE** Executives rely on connections with their assistants to manage their dynamic schedules in the face of changing contextual information needs.

**8. HEIGHTENED LEVELS OF STRESS** Executives are facing high levels of stress as they manage high performance expectations and constant demand for their time.

Leadership spaces can be designed to help facilitate better connections between people and information.

Observing the gap between expectations, behaviors and the reality, Steelcase researchers identified opportunities for the office to better support leaders in their new roles and reinforce new ways of leading. Based on this analysis, the Steelcase team identified three key principles for designing leadership spaces that can foster an adaptive culture.

### 1. Nurture the individual

There is a link between physical health, mental health and cognitive performance. Executives need to manage significant stress from the performance pressures they face. Environments that help executives manage stress and promote their wellbeing can enhance their cognitive processes.

### 2. Space as synapse

Executives face even greater challenges in maintaining relationships and informational connections, especially in globally integrated organizations. Leadership spaces can be designed to help facilitate better connections between people and information, while providing remote executives with a virtual presence more similar to the experience of leaders who are physically present in the space.

### 3. Enable transitions

Executives are challenged with the need to constantly switch informational contexts throughout the day. Time is also a critical resource. Physical spaces can help accelerate contextual immersion and support leaders getting into flow faster.

While networked organizations can be more agile than traditional hierarchies, they require leaders to shift context rapidly, working on a broader range of issues than ever before, jumping from one meeting to the next. Leaders have more information to absorb and more relationships to manage than ever. They are highly mobile, hopping time zones and always “on.” It’s crucial these modern needs are supported by a workplace that promotes social interaction, offers accessibility to employees and organizational happenings, and is designed to offer a range of private and collaborative spaces for whatever the task at hand. ■



## Dubai’s hub ‘for the startup, the SME, and the multinational’

The vision for District 2020 was unveiled at Cityscape Global 2017

Planned across 65,000 square meters of residential space, and 135,000 square meters of commercial space, the plan for District 2020, “an integrated, inclusive and diverse community” that will come into being after Dubai’s hosting of Expo 2020, was unveiled at this year’s edition of Cityscape Global in September.

Visitors to the annual exhibition got a peek into the design and infrastructure behind the futuristic development area, which is a key part of the legacy of Dubai Expo 2020, and is expected to be operational from the fourth quarter of 2021. Some of the USPs of the District 2020 site include LEED gold standard constructions, state of the art architectural designs, smart digital services, sustainable amenities, advanced telecom services, and around 44,900 square meters of greenery.

Dubai World Trade Center is also said to be working on a conference and exhibition center to build on Dubai’s standing as the region’s destination of choice for major events. According to a statement, District 2020 is expected to take forward the Expo’s mission as a destination to “Connect, Create, Innovate,” with it set to become an eclectic environment for all concerned, comprising of collaborative office spaces, modern residential areas, cultural attractions, and more.

Expo 2020 also anticipates that the area would help accelerate the Emirate’s development, and will be “a long-term economic contributor for the UAE as a home for innovators, original thinkers and pioneers, creating jobs and attracting investment.” District 2020 is keen to function as an innovation hub, and aims to be a place where enterprises working on emerging technologies can collaborate. “It’s for the startup, the SME and the multinational,” says Expo 2020.

Commenting on the legacy site, H.E. Reem Al Hashimy, UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation, and Director-General of Dubai Expo 2020 Bureau, said: “H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and the Ruler of Dubai, instructed us to build a site for a permanent legacy, and therefore we had to think of ways to capitalize on what was being built for Expo, as well as for post-Expo. We have created District 2020 to achieve that goal. It has been a key part of our planning from the very start, not just for our legacy team, but the entire Expo organization.” [www.district2020.ae](http://www.district2020.ae)

# Business in the Baltic

Latvia, a small northern European state, has started forging strong business ties in the GCC region, and especially in the UAE

By Tamara Pupic

Over the last few years, the UAE and Latvia have taken their relationship to the next level. In fact, the UAE was the first Arab country to open an embassy in the Baltic region in 2014, and soon after, Latvia appointed its first ambassador to the country, following the opening of its embassy in Abu Dhabi. An exchange of visits of highly-ranked government officials has brought forth negotiations on a number of sectors, which has been further bolstered with the launch of a direct flight by the Latvian airline airBaltic between the Latvian capital Riga and Abu Dhabi. The imports and exports between the two countries have been on the rise as well: last year alone, the export of Latvian goods to the UAE amounted to EUR76.8 million, while the import value reached EUR4.8 million.

The subsequent increased promotion of economic ties between Latvia and the UAE has attracted entrepreneurs in both nations to consider each other's backyards more closely, which is a development I got to witness first-hand on a trip to Latvia that was organized by the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia. Consider

the example of Ilze Zaharane, the founder and CEO of CheeksUp, a Riga-based startup that has developed a motivational computer game to be used by speech therapists for children. Her startup was one of the finalists for the Expo 2020 Dubai's bi-annual Expo Live's Innovation Impact grants program. Following her stay in

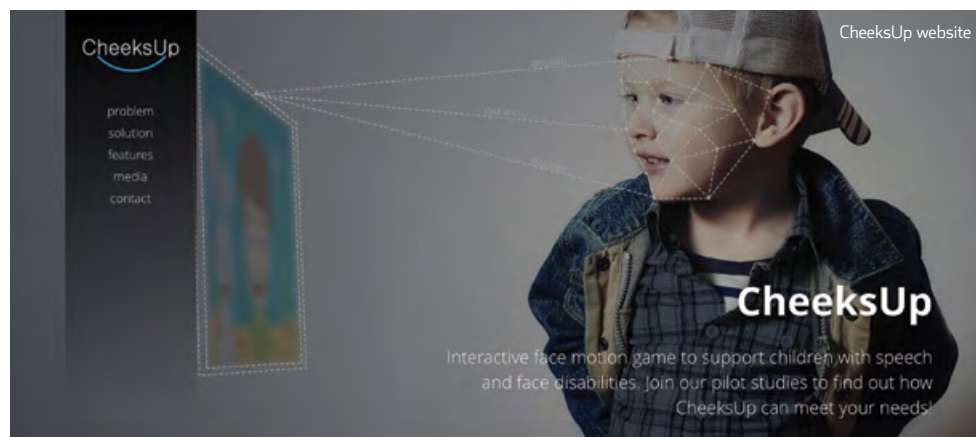
the UAE, Zaharane believes that the country offers many opportunities to entrepreneurs of her ilk. "The population is growing, and people in the UAE are always eager for the best things you can get," she says. "The biggest strengths of Latvian entrepreneurs are analytical thinking and creativity, but our biggest weaknesses

are that we often undervalue our importance, the quality of our projects, and their ability to grow. This low self-esteem, and in combination with being shy, which is due to our Nordic mentality, can sometimes be a deal-breaker for the business. On the contrary, entrepreneurs in the UAE definitely don't have this 'quality.' From what I have seen, they are great traders, which means that they are courageous and excellent communicators. Latvians need to stop being shy and pessimistic, and entrepreneurs from the UAE are definitely a good inspiration for us to overcome our struggles."



Ilze Zaharane, founder and CEO, CheeksUp

Latvia has been increasingly making its name heard in the European Union's (EU) startup scene. Last year, the Latvian parliament passed a new law that has created a favorable tax regime for new businesses. Other elements that make the country and its businesses attractive to foreign partners are a large pool of educated and talented people, low living costs, developed internet infrastructure, among many other benefits. Voldemars Bredikis, Board Member, Latvian Business Angel Network (LatBAN), explains that most of Latvian angel investors are local entrepreneurs who had previously developed and scaled their businesses. But achieving commercial success despite the country's



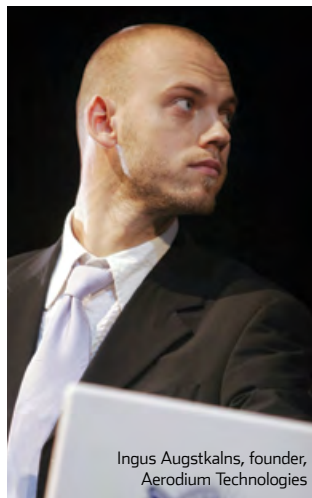


Voldemars Bredikis, Board Member, Latvian Business Angel Network

**“BOTH GROUPS OF INVESTORS’ STRENGTHS ARE HIGH INTELLECTUAL AND PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY, ANALYTIC APPROACHES, AND COMMITMENT.”**

previously difficult and traditional business environment has left its mark by turning them into conservative and risk-averse investors. “In developing our angle investor community, we also have to deal with the specifics of our unique mentality –Latvians have pretty high individualism concept– which sometimes lead to poor collaborative capacity,” Bredikis says. “Another side of this is competence and responsibility- since we rely only on ourselves, we try to have enough knowledge and skills for what we do, and then we also see ourselves responsible for that. Venture capitalists here are more regulated, and driven by international practices. In general, I would say that both groups of investors’ strengths are high intellectual and professional capacity, analytic approaches, and commitment.”

Another Latvian entrepreneur eager to expand into new markets is Ingus Augstkalns, founder of Aerodium Technologies, a Latvian company building vertical wind tunnels for human flight. An experienced skydiver and a wind tunnel flyer, Augstkalns created a successful business from his passions- among the company’s many projects



Ingus Augstkalns, founder, Aerodium Technologies

## FORGING BONDS

ARVILS ASERADENS, THE MINISTER FOR ECONOMICS OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA AND THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, ON THE TIES BETWEEN LATVIA AND THE UAE

Relations between our countries have never been so intense and dynamic as they are today. Latvia opened the diplomatic mission in the UAE in 2014, and a year later [in 2015] the Foreign Economic Representative Office of Latvia in the United Arab Emirates, promoting ever closer cooperation between businesses of our two countries. Moreover, this year [2017] Latvia welcomed the posting of the first resident Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to Latvia, and Latvia also appointed its first resident Ambassador to the UAE.

On May 8, 2016, the Agreement on Economic Cooperation Between Latvia And The UAE was signed. We hope that very soon we will welcome delegations from the UAE to our capital Riga to hold the first session of the Joint Economic Committee.

To promote stronger business cooperation between Latvian UAE-based entrepreneurs, representatives from almost 70 companies visited the UAE in February 2017, during the visit of President of Latvia H.E. Raimonds Vejonis. The visit was an important step for our entrepreneurs to establish contacts and agreements on cooperation with their Gulf counterparts, especially in food, information technologies, tourism and medical tourism, pharmaceuticals, as well as construction and educational areas. During the visit, the Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of the Latvian Arab Business Council of Entrepreneurs was signed.

Furthermore, we are very glad that Latvia has already been successfully represented with a national stand at international exhibitions taking place in Dubai- Gulfood, Gitex, The Big 5, Arab Health and Downtown Design.

Arvils Aseradens, Minister for Economics and Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Latvia



Over the past few years, Latvia has been rapidly developing its startup ecosystem to attract companies from all over the world, including the UAE which is an important partner for Latvia. As a result, Latvia has become an attractive choice for startup businesses, offering various advantages: a special tax regime for startups; an opportunity to receive a residence permit up to three years under The Latvian Startup Visa program; funding from three new accelerator funds and two venture capital funds for seed, and two for growth stage businesses, with a total of EUR60 million public financing available in 2018; access to the EU market and benefits of Eurozone member country; comparable low living costs; and an easy connection to the rest of the world.

SMEs are the backbone of the Latvian economy, thus strengthening their competitiveness is crucial to job creation. One of our top priorities is to facilitate startup and SME development- Latvia has implemented more than 540 activities, reduced costs of establishing a business, introduced a one-stop shop principle for starting up businesses, introduced property online registration, and simplified regulation for tax accounting and payment, among other activities. – By Arvils Aseradens

are taking part in the Torino Winter Olympic Games Closing Ceremony of 2006, Expo 2010 Shanghai China, and the Jackie Chan movie, *Chinese Zodiac*. Having had a few clients in the Middle East, Augstkalns explains that Latvian entrepreneurs can learn ambition and scale from GCC/UAE-based entrepreneurs, while their Gulf counterparts can benefit from the creativity and price-quality ratio delivered by Latvian businesses. “The first thing that I would suggest is to understand who

are you talking to,” he says, sharing his experience of partnering with Gulf-based businesses. “If you talk to the highest-level executives or business owners, make sure that you are as concise as possible. If you are presenting, use images, and make sure that you answer straight away ‘what’s in it for me.’ For management level, you should present exactly as you will deliver. Keep your word. If you are selling, pay attention to emotional aspects- the latest, the biggest, the greatest.” >>>



Rīga, Latvia

One of the more established Latvian businesses making their presence felt in the Gulf is Riga-based Primekss, a patented system for making ecologically-friendly concrete solutions. Its founder and CEO Janis Oslejs explains that negotiating a deal in the GCC region involves developing deeper trust and personal bonding, whereas

avoid spending time on re-negotiating. The cost of this behavior is that sometimes the contracts do not match the reality, and things are not done in the most super optimal way, although they are predictable in the future. In the GCC region, however, signing a contract is just a good beginning for further negotiations to adjust it to real life. That is sometimes confusing for Northern Europeans. The benefit of this is that things are perfectly adjusted and optimized.”

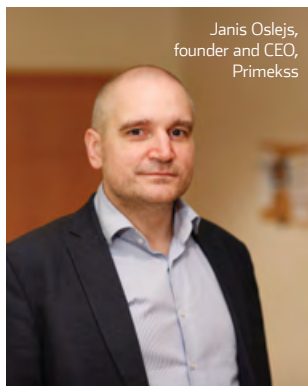
When looking at the management style of Latvian and GCC-based business owners, a difference can be seen in that Latvians accept delegating their work, whereas their GCC counterparts prefer to hold the reins of power more strongly, Oslejs adds. “For Latvians, the rank of the person making the deals does not matter so much,” he says. “It is not unusual for a quite low-ranking person to hold power to sign agreements and negotiate the details, to which the boss will just nod and accept. In GCC, the system is to have the boss enter negotiations in a much more hands-on manner. Indeed, in the GCC it is important to talk boss-to-boss. It can happen that a Northern European company sends a lower-ranking employee, as it is their habit, whereas a GCC company sends the boss to negotiate. This may lead

for the GCC partner to feel he/she is not respected, and not taken seriously enough. We have to accept that for negotiations in the GCC region, a high-ranking official or owner must be present to avoid inadvertently insulting the GCC party. I would say that Latvians can learn the speed of decision making and flexibility in the face of problems, whilst our colleagues in the GCC region can learn how to involve more people to make meaningful improvements to the company processes and products.”

Another important development is the recent adoption of the Latvian Startup Visa program, a Latvian government initiative to ease visa requirements for foreign entrepreneurs, which is expected to attract the best-and-brightest to come and develop their ideas in Latvia. “On September 12, 2017, we announced Latvia’s first ever Startup Day,” says Andris Ozols, General Director, Investment Development Agency of Latvia (LIAA). “Last year, LIAA established 15 business incubators across the country. In municipalities where no incubators are available, entrepreneurs will be able to use a virtual incubation service, including co-funding for renting premises. Latvia has EU and Eurozone membership, a good legal framework, openness to foreign investments,

and a strategic position as a natural gateway between the EU and Russia. We are also constantly improving our tax regime—starting from the 1st of January 2018, corporate income tax on retained earnings will be 0%. So, our country is especially attractive for investors who are interested in the Baltic countries, Scandinavia or CIS markets, or those companies that are looking to establish manufacturing operations in the European Union.” With offerings like these, Latvia is stacking up all its cards in its bid to become known as a place for thriving businesses, throwing its doors open for entrepreneurs—regardless of where they are from—to house their next great startup idea in. Could Latvia soon become a Baltic haven for new business? We’ll have to wait and watch. ■

**“OUR COUNTRY IS ESPECIALLY ATTRACTIVE FOR INVESTORS WHO ARE INTERESTED IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES, SCANDINAVIA OR CIS MARKETS, OR THOSE COMPANIES THAT ARE LOOKING TO ESTABLISH MANUFACTURING OPERATIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.”**



Janis Oslejs, founder and CEO, Primekss

Latvian entrepreneurs take a more pragmatic approach to business. “When negotiating with GCC clients, a strong feeling emerges that heart and soul have far higher importance,” he says. “In the GCC region, business is more than business; it is also a deep connection, friendship, and family. That is good, because it makes life richer and more meaningful. Another key difference is that for Northern Europeans, it takes longer to negotiate the contract to which, once signed, people don’t try to make changes, in order to



Andris Ozols, General Director, Investment Development Agency of Latvia



**Tonye Cole**

Nigerian oil tycoon & member, UN advisory board for SDG fund.

Went from bankruptcy to co-found energy giant Sahara Group.

Founder of Nehemiah Youth Empowerment.

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**naseba**



Badir has served more than 200 startups since it launched

## Bolstering entrepreneurship

Badir CEO Nawaf Al Sakhaf believes that Saudi entrepreneurs, when properly empowered, can deliver extraordinary innovations—and his program’s results are proof

For an initiative that was launched in 2007 by the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) in Saudi Arabia, the Badir Program for Technology Incubators has come a long way since its inception. Commencing operations with just one incubator on the ground, ten years later, Badir now has five incubators spread across the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Taif— and that number is only set to increase in the future. In terms of impact, the program—which aims to promote and enhance the culture of innovation and independent business amongst Saudi youth—has served more than 200 startups since it launched, with Badir CEO Nawaf Al Sakhaf noting that the program has incubated 127 technical projects, and just 34 of these have generated a market value of SAR331 million (US\$88.26 million). “We are very

proud of our entrepreneurs’ achievements,” Al Sakhaf says. “We are also delighted that they were able to prove themselves as developed and successful startups, thanks to the hard work they have put in, and the practical expert training they underwent in the program’s incubators.”

This, by all means, is an achievement in itself, but Al Sakhaf makes it clear that Badir has bigger goals ahead of it. “Today, Badir is focusing on expanding its innovation and entrepreneurial hubs across the Kingdom in order to achieve its KPIs of creating 600 startups and 3,600 jobs by 2020,” he says. “That plan falls within the policy of KACST, which consists of encouraging, supporting and promoting the cognitive economy and entrepreneurship. It also constitutes a positive step in the government’s thrust to diversify sources of economy, by developing non-oil techni-



Nawaf Al Sakhaf, CEO, Badir

**“BADIR PROUDLY MADE STEPS IN CREATING THE MISSING LINKS IN THE ECOSYSTEM. IN 2009, IT CREATED THE SAUDI BUSINESS INCUBATOR NETWORK (SBIN) PAVING THE WAY FOR UNIFYING THE REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS FOR OPERATING THE BUSINESS AND ACCELERATORS IN THE KINGDOM.”**

cal industries, and promoting innovations and creations.” Al Sakhaf points toward Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 as being a guiding force to what Badir has set out to do. “In 2016, the government released Vision 2030, an economic blueprint for national long-term economic growth,” he explains. “The plan aims to move away from centralized planning and state-led growth towards open market policies, where entrepreneurship and the private sector can take a leading role in economic development, through job creation and competitiveness.”

With encouraging (and supporting) entrepreneurship being the main area of focus, Badir has been structured in such a way that it tackles all of the key aspects relating to starting up a business. “The Badir Program covers four main roles: incubation, acceleration, funding facilitation, and entrepreneurship awareness,” Al Sakhaf explains. “We provide services to startup companies in the idea stage, as well as those that have ready products and can enter the market. We help them with shared working spaces, private offices, infrastructure support, legal support, accounting and bookkeeping services. Additionally, we provide workshops and courses to develop the skills of the entrepreneurs.” However, this doesn’t cover the full scope of work that Badir does to support the Kingdom’s business ecosystem—in fact, it has been spearheading several pioneering efforts to bolster the entrepreneurial mindset in the Saudi society. Al Sakhaf points toward one instance in 2007 when Badir launched: he remembers that there was no angel investment network, no network for incubators and

accelerators in the Kingdom, and none of the regulations now in place existed then. “Badir proudly made steps in creating the missing links in the ecosystem,” Al Sahhaf claims. “In 2009, it created the Saudi Business Incubator Network (SBIN) paving the way for unifying the regulations and standards for operating the business and accelerators in the Kingdom; down the line, Badir also created the Saudi Angel Investors Network (SIRB), which filled a big gap between the entrepreneurs and the investors.”

According to Al Sahhaf, the Badir program has received a good welcome in Riyadh, where it focuses on three major verticals: advanced manufacturing, information communication technology, and biotechnology. In Jeddah and Taif too, the incubator has seen strong demand for its ICT programs, he adds. As for the sectors that he is most optimistic about, he feels “a period of greater opportunity and integration” is on the cards for Saudi Arabia’s healthcare, utilities, industry, tourism, and ICT sectors. At the same time, the solutions emerging from



Qoyod, an accounting platform for entrepreneurs and SMEs, is part of the Badir Technology Incubator Program

entrepreneurs who are part of Badir are also as wide-ranging as the program’s benefits itself. “Certain examples of innovation that we have seen at Badir include a bandage lined with extracts from shrimp shells that enjoy natural wound healing properties, which could primarily benefit diabetics. Others are the design and manufacture of CNC machines at ultra-low costs. We have also witnessed other achievements of innovation in IT applications, like Morni, which revolutionized the roadside assistance

experience for vehicle owners; Quant, which achieved amazing strides in data analysis and actuary sciences selling advanced software to big companies to organize and assess big data.” If these innovations are any indication, then Al Sahhaf is right in his contention that “Saudis, and Saudi companies, when properly empowered, can deliver quite extraordinary innovative solutions to local and regional problems.” And with Badir along for the ride, the Kingdom’s entrepreneurs can be confident about the road ahead. ■

## ‘TREP TALK

Badir CEO Nawaf Al Sahhaf’s tips for entrepreneurs

- 1. Know your target segment** By knowing your target segment you can think like them and know what they really need in a product, let them tell you what they need. Plus, by gauging the size of your target segment you will have a better way of evaluating your returns.
- 2. Ask those with previous experience** No one can succeed alone; the least help you can have is advice from those who have succeeded before you, and those who have failed. Learn from them, and gain an advantage.
- 3. Always work on your added value** The market is very competitive. Even if your product is revolutionary, someone will step in and compete with you. Your added value is going to be the main driver for customers. This is an ongoing process though, don’t delay anything because it’s not perfect, deliver with what you have, and work on improving as you go.
- 4. The team is the backbone** Your startup is as strong as its team. Make sure you partner with, or hire people who believe in creating, building and innovating because your first few years are all about that. Focus on the principles as much as the skills.
- 5. Know your people** Networking with people in your industry can open doors for investors and partners both can help elevate your product or service. If you can, utilize booths at events and expos to both acquire and retain customers.





# The future is now

SIX DIGITAL TRENDS YOU NEED TO EMBRACE FOR 2018

By Ema Linaker

**A**daptability and constant curiosity will be the hallmarks of successful communicators and marketers in 2018. So how do we make sure we're creating the appropriate strategies?

For a start, customer demand for best in class experience and personal appreciation will only come to the fore in the context of increasingly fierce competition. Marketers will need data (lots of it), automated processes, and analytical intelligence. High time-to-market pressures will only get more intense as digitalization lowers market entry barriers, enables new business models, and shifts the value chain.

Companies will be under growing pressure to deliver profitability by meeting the increasing demands of customers who are mobile, always on, linked, social, prepared to switch, and accustomed to a best in class user experience. So, they'll be expecting you to achieve results fast in a high-speed,

## MARKETERS MUST STUDY THE INSIGHTS AND MICRO-MOMENTS OF THEIR TARGET AUDIENCE, AND THEN EXPERIMENT WITH THEM BY PROVIDING TARGETED ADVERTISING BASED ON USER INFORMATION.

complex digital environment—and that's a challenge every marketer will face sooner than later.

The successful digital marketer in 2018 must be ready to experiment, pivot, break the rules, even step so far out of their organization's comfort zone that they stand alone. Social and video marketing, analytics, native ads, programmatic, in-store mobile offers, content marketing, and other digital techniques are changing the ways we reach our customers, and we can only do this if we are fearless in the face of this new world.

Based on my own experience in MENA markets, I believe there are six key trends the region's communicators and marketers need to wrap their heads around now in order to succeed in 2018.

### 1. SPEED OF FEED: PERSONALIZED CONTENT AT THE SPEED OF SOCIAL

Consumer-centric content is not new, but it needs to get a lot more personal. Smart Insights tells us that 61% of customers place more trust in, and are more likely to make repeat purchases from, companies that deliver personalized content. *Recode* reports that mobile video ad spend will grow 49% to roughly US\$18 billion in 2018, while non-mobile video ad spend is expected to fall 1.5% to \$15 billion.




Facebook and Instagram Creative Strategist Kat Hahn has calculated that we scroll through 300 feet of content

- every day. Here's how she believes brands should craft their communications to stand out from the crowd:
- > **70% "on-the-go"** Short and snappy content that consumers will view and like immediately, but not be too invested in.
- > **20% "lean forward"** Interactive content that catches the attention of consumers looking for something to watch.
- > **10% "lean back"** Immersive content that goes into more detail for consumers willing to watch something for a sustained period of time.

### 2. FACEBOOK IS SOCIAL MEDIA

The Facebook ecosystem will dominate the social media—and social commerce—landscape for the foreseeable future. In June 2017, Facebook had over 2.01 billion monthly active users worldwide, up 17% over June 2016—and more than half were mobile. This is hugely significant—mobile advertising revenue represented around 87% of all Facebook's advertising revenue in Q2 2017.

The company is even more dominant as a driver of traffic to news websites—a direction that cannot be ignored given the ongoing debates about fake news. Traffic from Facebook can make or break news publishers' social media success, accounting for over 85% of the traffic from social networks. Twitter's contribution as a primary driver is surprisingly low, given the platform's emphasis on news, and all other social media channels combined play a marginal role at best. Between them, Facebook and

Search    



Ema Linaker is the Director of Digital at Edelman, MEA. She is a digital native who has been working on integrated communications for leading brands and agencies for over 20 years. She has worked at Google, Nuance, Ogilvy & Mather, and prior to her current role at Edelman, she used to head up Leo Burnett's team of social, mobile and digital experts, working on multinational brands like McDonalds, Samsung and P&G. Talk to her on Twitter @emalinaker.

Twitter account for 98% of social media-generated traffic to news websites.

### 3. VOICE-POWERED SEARCH

The voice interface has really come into its own this year, with voice search traffic now exceeding 10% of all search traffic, according to Mind Source. Virtual assistants respond to 50 billion voice searches every month, and Amazon Echo is currently the fastest-selling Bluetooth technology of all time. By 2020, over 200 billion searches will be voice-driven.

The technology is only just beginning to impact the Middle East market, but the rapid growth of social marketing and commerce here will soon change that. For some really interesting uses of Amazon Echo in marketing communication, look no further than Just Eat. When Alexa first appeared, users were limited to ordering a Domino's pizza, and that was about it. But through a partnership with Just Eat, more than 27,000 food sellers are right in their living rooms— just tell Alexa what you want, and she does the legwork, finding the outlets with the best customer feedback, and placing your order.

### 4. CHATBOTS AND SOCIAL MESSAGING

With an estimated two billion users receiving messages through over-the-top (OTT) apps by 2018, social messaging is likely to be embedded in every online interaction. Couple that with the prediction that 75% of developer teams will include AI and other self-learning functionality in at least one app or service, and it's no wonder chatbots top many companies' wishlists.

62% of millennials are more loyal to brands that engage with them via messaging applications that deliver that personal touch, transparency,

and collaboration of one-on-one communication. Facebook's making those people's lives even easier by enabling them to click on ads that will take them directly into a chat with the brand. It's a fast, personalized response that ensures a better experience every time.

### 5. MICRO-MOMENTS

The average mobile user owns six devices, uses them three times a day, and opens their phone 200 times a day to read emails, go shopping online, or check social media feeds. In doing so, they are bombarded with push marketing that is, quite frankly, ignored. This is exactly where the strength of "micro-moments" comes in— that snapshot in time when a user turns to a device to answer a question, or decide where to go, what to do, or what to buy.

96% of users reach for their smartphones to conduct research on the spot. The most successful brands will be those that have the ability to anticipate and address



**TRAFFIC FROM FACEBOOK CAN MAKE OR BREAK NEWS PUBLISHERS' SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS, ACCOUNTING FOR OVER 85% OF THE TRAFFIC FROM SOCIAL NETWORKS.**

those impulses with micro-moments that deliver the right information at the right time to that user.

For this kind of just-in-time communication to work, marketers must study the insights and micro-moments of their target audience, and then experiment with them by providing targeted advertising based on user information, like the search terms they're using or their recent browsing activities. Armed with that data, marketers can deliver an interactive experience that offers truly personalized value— deals, discounts, insight, experiences, and more. Micro-moments are set to be the 2018 sweet spot for mobile-first websites.

### 6. GEOFENCING

For many, mobile devices are becoming extensions of their bodies. Wherever they go, their devices go. Users trigger on average 75 separate mobile sessions every day, so they're engaging with the devices throughout their day across multiple locations.

Marketers can collect information about and target their customers as they enter, leave or stay in specific areas, known as geofences, which prompt mobile notifications when a customer is active in those areas. During those key moments, marketers have the opportunity to engage with users by sending contextually relevant promotional messages. Bear in mind, however, that customers have to "allow" your app to track their location, so you'll need to highlight how location sharing will improve their experience.

### THE FUTURE IS NOW

The future of digital marketing is approaching at blinding speed. This is no time to rely on what's worked in the past— you need to engage with the future today. ■

| IN THE LOOP |

## Get the Google advantage

GOOGLE LAUNCHPAD ACCELERATOR EXPANDS TO EGYPT, MOROCCO AND ALGERIA

If you're looking for a way to scale your tech startup, here's your chance to get a boost from a tech giant. Google Launchpad Accelerator, the company's accelerator program for startups in emerging markets, is now welcoming growth stage startups from Algeria, Egypt and Morocco, and 17 more countries worldwide. Launched in 2015, it was initially open to a handful of countries in Latin America and Asia, and has since expanded earlier this year to include countries from Africa and Europe. The accelerator program invites tech startups with a traction record looking to increase their development, with its application considering the startup's impact to its country or region, market value, management team, fundraising status and monetization, among other factors.

As part of the six-month program, startups would receive equity-free support and two weeks of all-expense-paid training at Google HQ in Silicon Valley, where they can have access to Google engineers, resources and mentors. After which, startups would also receive support from Google for six months, PR training and media opportunities, and credits to use Google products. With its equity-free incentive, Google's offer might call for a second look: after all, what does the tech company get in return? Besides supporting startups globally, the program will inevitably gear towards Google's products— when it initially launched, Launchpad's Global Lead Roya Glasberg told *VentureBeat* how the program can provide an avenue for feedback on Google's products, and how they can be improved.

<https://developers.google.com/startup/accelerator/>



## Driving growth

How to achieve (and sustain) triple-digit growth for your online enterprise

By Sherif ElRakabawy

When we launched Yaoota in late June 2014, it was a unique moment of excitement. We had been building the product day and night, focusing on small details, striving to build a shopping engine that adds value in the fragmented landscape of ever-increasing online shops.

One number has likely become of significant importance in our lives since: user traffic. Post-launch, in August 2014, Yaoota attracted roughly 25,000 visits. Fast-forward 36 months, and the number stands at more than 6,000,000. Together with the recently acquired phone comparison platforms Mobilesgate and Mobihall, Yaoota has become the largest product discovery platform in the Middle East and Africa by traffic.

Growing at a high rate can easily backfire if your technical infrastructure cannot handle the increased load associated. Therefore, we designed our technical architecture early on for scalability in order to grow hand-in-hand with increased traffic.

**RECOGNIZING YOUR SERVICE IS KEY FOR BUILDING A CORE RECURRING USER BASE. BUILDING A STRONG BRAND BY BUILDING A COMMUNITY AROUND YOUR SERVICE FOSTERS SUCH A RECOGNITION, AND HENCE, TRAFFIC NUMBERS.**

Three years post-launch, it's moving Gross Merchandise Volume (GMV) worth more than EGP100 million (which is around US\$5.5 million) annually, with an average year-on-year traffic growth of 600%+, serving users in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and Kenya.

Hitting triple-digit growth is challenging, but sustaining it even more so. Particularly in e-commerce, with fierce competition from well-funded big players who spend millions of dollars in marketing each month, a well-rounded strategy is required to grow at such rates. Here's how we went about doing it at Yaoota.

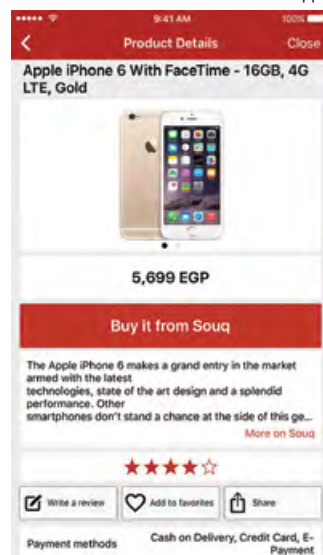
First, we prepared our infrastructure for growth. Growing at a high rate can easily backfire if your technical infrastructure cannot handle the increased load associated. Therefore, we designed our technical architecture early on for scalability in order to grow hand-in-hand with increased traffic.

Second, we focus on the product. While this might not seem to have a direct correlation with high growth, it is—in fact—the core of it. Growth is spurred by loyal users who keep coming back to use your service. This can only happen if you listen to their feedback, and do your best to keep improving their experience.

Third, we are building a brand. Recognizing your service is key for building a core recurring user base. Building a strong brand by building a community around your service fosters such a recognition, and hence, traffic numbers.

Fourth, we do not purchase traffic. The vast majority of

Yaoota app



user traffic is organic and direct, and we do not spend on direct traffic acquisition. When we spend on marketing, we rather spend on brand and community building, in addition to SEO. Direct click acquisition produces traffic with high bounce rate and barely returning users. Plus: you will hardly be able to match heavy spending by deep-pocketed big players.

Fifth, we have grown by acquisition. In mid 2017, Yaoota has acquired Mobilesgate and Mobihall, the two largest phone comparison platforms in the Arab world. The acquisition has, in essence, increased Yaoota's footprint six-fold, and doubled revenue and GMV. ■



Sherif ElRakabawy is co-founder, CEO and CTO of shopping search engine Yaoota, which raised US\$2.7 million in growth capital from foreign investors in 2005. Prior to founding Yaoota, Sherif was a full-time assistant professor at American University in Cairo, which he joined after two years with consulting firm Booz & Company as part of their business technology practice.

## Understanding acquisitions in the online space

Buyouts can boost your website's traffic- but you need to be smart about them *By Sherif ElRakabawy*

**A**cquisitions usually fall under two categories: horizontal and vertical. A horizontal acquisition involves a case in which acquirer and acquiree both operate in the same market -being potential competitors pre-acquisition- for the purpose of increasing customer base, leveraging synergies, and/or expanding product portfolio. A vertical acquisition describes a case in which a company integrates with one or more entities in its supply chain (e.g. one of its suppliers) as part of a process to streamline operations, and improve efficiency and cost structure.

In the online domain, horizontal acquisitions are more common, as they provide the acquiring online platform with access to users of the acquired website/application, typically with the aim of rapid growth. As it is the case with Yaoota's acquisition, we managed to serve a new audience that

is keen to get price and product information online, hence adding value for both entities: Yaoota and the acquired portals.

This type of buyouts, as opposed to gradual investment in brand and user acquisition, provides a near-instant growth in traffic. This does not, however, assume that every acquisition is bound to be a successful one. You can hardly predict whether the anticipated growth effect would kick-in as planned, as there exist several unknown variables in the equation. Here's what we did at Yaoota to minimize acquisition-related risks.

First, we took time analyzing the targeted portals. In fact, we took over a year following their numbers closely, analyzing their audiences, and connecting with them in person to understand their business and operation in detail.

Second, we made sure that we are targeting the right audience. That is, as part of the process of understanding the busi-

ness of the targeted portals, we focused on answering the question of whether their audience fits as part of Yaoota's user portfolio, or whether such an audience would feel alienated when using Yaoota's services. More importantly, we asked ourselves the question of whether Yaoota would add value for such audience, or not.

Third, we conducted a cost-benefit analysis. We constructed a model to predict projected growth figures post-acquisition, in addition to projected cost, to calculate whether -and if yes, when- we would see a positive return. Within this context, it's paramount to study the effect of the extra traffic on key performance metrics.

Fourth, we started with the smaller acquisition. Mobilesgate was clocking in a fraction of Mobihall's traffic. Hence, we chose to acquire it first, and took time to analyze the impact of the acquisition on our key metrics. Subsequently, we fed our cost-benefit model with the results, and inflated the numbers to reflect the difference in size as compared to Mobihall. As both portals attract a similar audience, this way, we had a good projection on what to expect if we acquire Mobihall, the bigger brother.

### ADVERTORIAL

## FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

An outlook on Dubai's Real Estate Market by H.E. Hesham Al Qassim, CEO, wasl Asset Management Group

Attendees and exhibitors at Cityscape Global 2017 witnessed the resilience of Dubai's property market in action at the World Trade Center recently. At the exhibition, investors from across the world showed greater interest and confidence in Dubai real estate, which is testament to the exceptional reputation that Dubai enjoys as a safe haven for investors.

This positive outlook is confirmed by the latest research from Dubai Land Department, which shows that real estate transactions for the first half of 2017 reached a total value of AED 132 billion across 36,000 transactions.

This is a value jump of 16.8% compared to the first half of 2016, while transaction numbers also grew by 26% over the same period. In addition, 5,400 completed residential projects have been sold in the first five months of 2017, and a further 78,000 residential units are under construction and due for completion by 2020 - a very important year for Dubai.

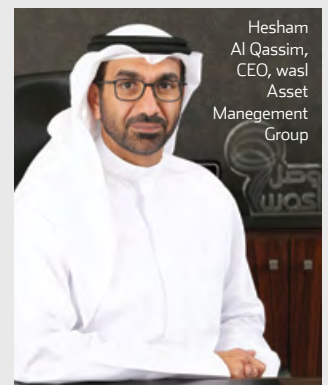
As a semi-government organisation, wasl Asset Management Group is heavily involved in the development and progress of Dubai itself, and in supporting our leadership's vision for sustainable real estate growth, particularly in the run-up to Expo 2020 but also well beyond it. Our vision is to make Dubai the world's favourite destination to live, work and visit. We have been proud to contribute to the city's skyline and help to drive its thriving real estate sector, which has played a major role in Dubai's transformation over the past 30 years and continues

to not only maintain its performance, but in fact grow year by year thanks to the ambitious and progressive culture of the Emirate.

wasl has supported the market's growth by launching flagship projects such as the MGM Grand, wasl1, wasl tower, and many other developments where work is still progressing. These will bring hundreds of new residential units to the market, each of which offers a contemporary, cosmopolitan and integrated lifestyle that reflects our high aspirations for Dubai. By providing our tenants with a new way of life, we are making a significant contribution to the real estate sector by attracting new investors and residents to the city.

According to the latest estimates from the United Nations, the current population of the UAE is approximately 9.1 million. Euromonitor predicts that by 2030, this figure will have grown by 21.9% from 2015 to a total of 10.5 million. The world is recognis-

ing Dubai as a safe and secure haven where residents can enjoy a modern and happy lifestyle. This atmosphere of security extends to Dubai's real estate sector, where transparency, credibility, quality and investor confidence have never been higher. As we embark on new projects and prepare ourselves for Expo 2020 and beyond, I am confident that our real estate market will continue to go from strength to strength.



Hesham Al Qassim, CEO, wasl Asset Management Group



## SETTING A PRECEDENT

NOW MONEY'S RECENT RAISE OF FUNDS FROM AMERICAN VC FIRMS IS GOOD NEWS FOR THE MENA FUNDING LANDSCAPE

By Ian Dillon

**N**OW Money, the company I co-founded in 2015, recently raised funding from US venture capital (VC) firms Accion and Newid Capital. NOW Money provides accounts and remittance options to low-income migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This was the company's second round of funding following seed funding in June 2016. Accion and Newid Capital are VC investors with a specific mandate to invest in fintech startups that help solve the global problem of financial exclusion. Although they are based in Washington, they invest globally. Accion and Newid invested in this funding round alongside Myrisoph Capital, a prominent local VC and private equity fund, and Women's Angel Investment Network (WAIN). Both are prominent investment firms that invest frequently in the region.

The startup scene in the GCC is relatively new. When we founded NOW Money in 2015, support for startups was virtually non-existent. However, support for innovative new technologies and companies has grown quickly, so much so that now there are a range of support networks from co-working spaces, regulatory sandboxes, and legal support, amongst others. However, availability of capital, such a vital element component for the success of early-stage companies, has remained lacking. The reasons for this are

threefold. First is the number of quality companies that potential investors are presented with. There is no one quick fix for this— but already across the GCC, support networks and the quality of entrepreneurs are starting to rapidly evolve and improve.

The second is the attitude towards failure in the region's culture. Unlike in the West, where failure is often seen as a learning experience and a badge of honor, in Arabic culture, failure is not seen so kindly. Venture capital investment theory is built on a portfolio model,

where if a VC investor makes 10 investments, seven will fail, two will be moderately successful and breakeven, and one will make a 10x-20x return or more. It is this big success that covers the losses of the others. This is important, as investing at an early-stage is more of an art than a science, with the large amount of variables and future unknowns making it virtually impossible to put a scientific probability of success on any single early-stage investment. This means that in order to capture the one investment that achieves the

huge returns VC investors are looking for, they have to make a relatively large number of investments, and be prepared to see a large number—potentially the majority of their portfolio— fail.

The third is attitudes towards investment into early-stage companies in the GCC. Given the previous two factors, there has been a preference for safe and understandable investments. In the GCC, this has led to huge volumes of investments in property and gold. We shouldn't forget that the modern economies in the GCC are relatively new— the Western economies have been a constantly evolving model over hundreds, if not thousands, of years, whereas the economies in the GCC went from subsistence economies to some of the richest in the world over the course of a very short space of time. Attitudes and business models cannot change overnight, so there is naturally a lag whilst some elements of the economy catch up with others.

Given these factors, one would have thought that there would have been a flood of Western capital coming in to fill the capital funding void— but there hasn't. So, the question arises: why not?

The GCC is often misunderstood. Many in the West don't realize how advanced and comprehensive some of the economies in the region are, and the depth of industries and cultures that are represented. There is also an assumption that there's plenty enough oil money that floods into funding anything and everything. In addition, business environments are seen as relatively hostile, with Arabic-based law hard for Western business people to understand, and a perception of corruption and



NOW Money founders  
Ian Dillon and  
Katharine Budd

The Accion and Newid investments into NOW Money, plus the later stage American VC investment into Fetchr, and a US\$650 million Souq.com exit to US corporate Amazon, could be the catalyst to the early-stage investment market that the startup industry in the GCC is desperately craving.

politics having widespread influence.

However, the business environment and the opportunities available to those willing to put the time and effort into understanding the region are actually highly conducive to profitable businesses and investment.

Accion and Newid, unlike most other VCs, are sector specific— they only invest in fintech startups. Due to this, they understand fintech as an industry, and have plenty of experience investing in similar companies to NOW Money. This meant that they had little fear or uncertainty around the industry, our business model, or the opportunity open to us; their only hurdle was to get to understand investing in the region.

Thankfully, they did put a lot of time and effort into doing so. They came out to the United Arab Emirates and spent time with individuals in our target market, local corporates and SMEs, lawyers, other startups, investors, and UAE nationals. Like us, they came to understand that doing business in the

GCC is not more inherently risky, corrupt or culturally removed from that in the West— it's just different, and with a little understanding, it's as potentially profitable and exciting an opportunity as investments anywhere else in the world.

The Accion and Newid investments into NOW Money, plus the later stage American VC investment into Fetchr, and a US\$650 million Souq.com exit to US corporate Amazon, could be the catalyst to the early-stage investment market that the startup industry in the GCC is desperately craving. Startups in the region have relied on angel investors —primarily individuals— to help them in the very early-stages, but angel investment doesn't last long or set the path towards significant growth. The VC funds that exist in the region already, for perfectly understandable reasons, are increasingly investing in a later stage, PE-like manner, and not supporting the number of early-stage startups the economy needs to sustain a vibrant and innovative sector that makes a serious

contribution to the local economy. Local VCs have had it all their own way for too long. This means there is a big funding gap in the region for seed and early-stage investments— the most crucial stage for the success of a startup.

A key element of making VC investments is the opportunity to get the big exit that gives 10x-20x returns, and the recent sale of Souq.com has given a big credential of just that. This added to the recent credentials of American VCs investing into NOW Money and Fetchr should give comfort to other VC investors. The opportunities are present, and the business environment is supportive enough to make early-stage investments. With global investment opportunities into traditional sectors, such as real estate and listed equities, becoming ever lower yielding, and VC funds in the West looking outside of their traditional markets to gain access to new opportunities, we hope the increased inflow of capital made available to early-stage investments, and increased competition for VC investments, will compel existing and potential investors make early-stage capital available to more companies in the region than has traditionally been the case.

The benefits to the local economies in the GCC of this

happening could be profound and far-reaching. In London, the fintech ecosystem alone employs more than 60,000 people and contributes \$60 billion a year to the economy. SMEs are the powerhouse of job creation (40% of GDP and 42% of jobs in the UAE are created by SMEs), and today's startups are tomorrow's SMEs and big corporates. As an example, Souq.com directly employs over 3,000 people, indirectly employs many more, and has contributed billions of dirhams to the UAE economy— and this is just one local startup.

Startups are also responsible for driving innovation and positive change far more comprehensively and quickly than corporates or governments ever could. Innovations always end up giving the biggest positive effect to the consumer— just look at Uber (and Careem), which have given us on-demand convenient taxis, and Souq.com that gave us online shopping. Souq.com and Careem are just two examples of innovations that have benefitted the local economy and its consumers— imagine the effects of many more. The next billion-dollar GCC success story is likely out there already, and the next few could currently be receiving the early-stage backing they need to get there. ■



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



Ian Dillon is the co-founder of NOW Money. Ian was educated at Cambridge and Exeter Universities, and whilst at Cambridge, he started a successful e-commerce business which has recently been sold. Ian's former banking career was spent at HSBC, working in retail and corporate banking and FX, before taking a management role within investment banking capital markets. In 2015, he co-founded NOW Money, an accounts and remittance service for the unbanked population of the Middle East.



# ACHIEVING CENTURIES OF SUCCESS

The essential qualities every family business needs to survive

By Mohamed Hareb Al Otaiba

A YOUNGER LEADERSHIP TEAM BRINGS WITH IT A WEALTH OF NEW KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE. THE QUESTION IS THE BALANCE OF RESPECTING THE PAST WHILE STILL DRIVING FORWARD WITH NEW MARKETS AND MEANINGFUL WAYS TO EXPAND THE BUSINESS.

Few companies survive and flourish based on their good fortune alone. It's a great shame that fewer than one third of family businesses make it as far as their third generation of leadership. Clearly, what sets the successful ones apart is not simply one single thing. So here, given my role as the Chairman of my family business, the Mohamed Hareb Al Otaiba Group, I would like to look at how one can go about building on the past to succeed in the future. Because every decision made today, is also part of the legacy that belongs to your company—and family—for years to come.

## CONTINUING THE LEGACY

Generation on generation, the business grows, changes, and adapts. As CEOs age and have the will to step away from the daily management of the business, we must be ready to appoint new heirs. Yet, with each new leader, there should be a level of transformation of the company.

In fact, appointing new leadership can help not only revitalize strategy but assist the company with future growth and profitability. As new CEOs take the helm of a company, the winds change. A younger leadership team brings with it a wealth of new knowledge and expertise. The question is the balance of respecting

the past while still driving forward with new markets and meaningful ways to expand the business.

So, succession planning is something that should be front and center— it's crucial we take the time to fully comprehend the impact of handing over the reins of any business empire.

## INNOVATIVE IDEAS FOR THE COMMUNITY AND NATION

A truly successful and sustainable family business is much more than a mere commercial entity— it is an integral part of the country, region, and community. There are many ways a family company can help boost the quality of life for the nation as a whole, but few are as effective as offering innovations that may be currently lacking.

Bringing in known brands that deliver much-needed products or services to our region is something that benefits both the holding company in question, as well as the nation as a whole. Whether in transport, trading or technology— the right move in any of these sectors means a positive direct impact on the economy and wider community, and the progress of the nation.

Delivering new products and systems to a region will surely yield profitable results. Consumers will be willing to pay what's sometimes called an "innovation premium" in exchange for goods that they cannot get elsewhere; meanwhile, in offering a unique service to the community, our businesses become essential to the nation and those who reside in it.

## A SENSE OF FRUGALITY AND SACRIFICE

Family businesses have a unique quality in that every member of the family needs to play their role. There will inevitably be slowdowns— this is the very nature of a modern-day enterprise— but

how we handle these periods is fundamental to our survival and ongoing success.

The rule here is that we must all be willing to make sacrifices in both our personal lives and in terms of our finances. Contrary to popular belief, it is the former that gains the most notable results, and it's those business owners who make personal sacrifices for their companies that see better growth.

Understanding that the venture as a whole is bigger than any individual is the easiest way to put this into a greater context. Each family member must be willing to sacrifice their own desires or needs in order to further the progress of the business and ensure the security of the family in the coming years. It takes a noble leader to understand the gravity of their role in these terms.

**TIMES CHANGE, AND SO MUST OUR BUSINESSES. TO STAY RELEVANT IN THE EVER-MOVING WORLD, IT'S ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL THAT WE UNDERSTAND EMERGING AND DECLINING INDUSTRIES. SHOULD A SECTOR BEGIN TO DIE OFF, WE MUST BE READY TO ADAPT AND BRING SOMETHING NEW TO THE MARKET.**

### CONSTANT REINVESTMENTS IN THE BUSINESS

Expanding on the above quality, sacrificing finances in the short-term may allow us to reinvest in the venture, thus allowing it to flourish in the long-term. Retaining some of the capital for this purpose will allow us to continuously develop the business and safe-

guard it against instability.

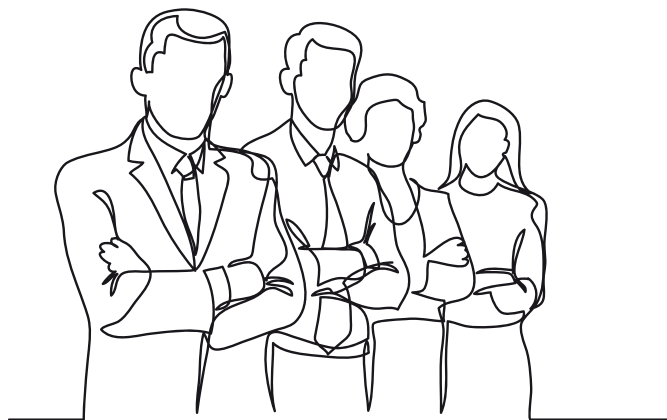
In theory, this process ought to be direct. However, it may bring challenges to a family business—especially if family members take money from the company for their own purposes. This action not only weakens the enterprise as a whole but can lead to a multitude of negative emotions—jealousy, greed, pride—all of which can have a further impact on your business.

### AN AIM TO DIVERSIFY THE BUSINESS

To diversify is to enter new lines of business which stray from the current offering. This type of planning means that in times of economic downturn the finances and profits can be better protected. For this reason, we should have an aim to diversify our portfolio as a key element of our long-term family business strategy.

Clearly, diversifying can be a risky financial move—but it's one that every businessperson must make if they hope to progress within their industry. Expanding a commercial portfolio only serves to create a stable platform—working across a myriad of sectors and industries creates a solid backdrop.

Each area in which you operate may be unique, but if they form a direct response to consumer needs in the UAE at large, you are doing your job. This diversification is not only across industry but also territory, expanding into other Emirates. Of course, to di-



versify successfully, we must understand the modern market.

### AN URGE TO MOVE WITH THE TIDE OF TIME

Times change, and so must our businesses. To stay relevant in the ever-moving world, it's absolutely essential that we understand emerging and declining industries. Should a sector begin to die off, we must be ready to adapt and bring something new to the market.

Keeping our fingers tightly on the pulse is crucial. While no one can predict what will happen, staying up to date with business trends, cycles, and patterns can inform our strategy. Searching out the various growth rates of sectors in the region is important. So, armed with this information, we may have the finest tools to ward off any threats that changing times may indeed bring our way.

### VALUE AND RESPECT FOR EMPLOYEES

Loyalty is the core of any family business. This is a theme that needs to run throughout the company, not just among the family members. Hence, respecting and valuing our loyal employees is a worthy cause. These are the individu-

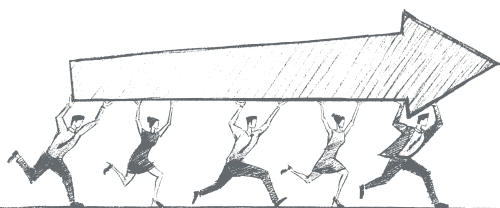
als who enable us to sustain the company—and without their ongoing support and service, we would face further challenges.

Rewarding the very professionals who aid us in our business functions can be as simple as giving back. In fact, those leaders who are more concerned about others (than themselves) ultimately gain the best results from their workforce. The lesson is that appreciating our team members ought to be at the heart of business ethos.

### CREATING A MASTER PLAN AS WE GO FORWARD

The qualities we've examined here are not inherent in each family business, and yet may be implemented over time. As CEOs and leaders, it's our duty to create a wider master plan for the future of our companies, so that it may continue for many centuries to come.

In some respects, having this foresight is perhaps one of the greatest and most valuable characteristics any businessperson may have. Regardless of the current standing of our ventures, we ought to be always looking to improve stability and sustainability—for both our companies and families. ■



Mohamed Hareb Al Otaiba has been the Chairman of Mohamed Hareb Al Otaiba (MHAO) Group since 1995. Since taking over the family business, he has led the company with the focus and drive to further accelerate its upward trajectory of MHAO, securing additional big name brands for the company's portfolio. Today, Al Otaiba has a wealth of experience in sales and operations management and boasts many prestigious and long-lasting business relationships with top global organizations, including Avis, Bosch, and Xerox. Looking to the future, Al Otaiba's goal is clear: to make MHAO a household name synonymous with high-quality, throughout the UAE and beyond.



## Raising (entrepreneurial) kids right

Five ways you can foster a hunger for innovation in your children *By Helen Al Uzaizi*

If there is one common denominator amongst the world’s most successful entrepreneurs, it would be innovation. Not just in the sense of inventing a new technology or product, but finding creative solutions to age-old problems or a new way of looking at the world. Looking at it from another perspective, innovation is also key to business growth and sustainability. It’s the innovative entrepreneurs who keep their businesses ahead of the game and adapting to the world ahead of them. Being innovative isn’t a gift bestowed on a lucky few, but a muscle one needs to exercise as early as possible. If you would like to foster this hunger for innovation in your children, there are some simple yet proven methods that can really help them in the future.

### 1. ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY

Why is curiosity so important? Being inquisitive is one of the cornerstones of innovation. It takes a special mindset to keep questioning and wondering “How can I do this better?” or “How do I solve this problem?” By encouraging this curiosity

around the house, you are in essence associating questioning positively. Hobbies are a great starting point, especially ones with a deeper scientific or artistic component, such as astronomy or even poetry. The more children are exposed to new ideas and perspectives, the greater motivation they will have to continue learning and diving deeper into the subject. In general, encouraging children to ask questions and positively reinforcing their natural curiosity will give them a life skill that can set them apart in any job or when they start their own business.

### 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING FOR THEMSELVES

Critical thinking requires conceptualizing, analyzing, and evaluating information, then putting it into a greater context. At school, our kids may get into the habit of memorizing information from a book for the sole purpose of repeating back on a test. This comes at a price however, and that is accepting all information that is presented in front of them. Innovators are able

to look at long-held beliefs and question their validity, coming up with their own views which can lead to important technological developments. If we want our kids to think critically then we can help them by asking open-ended questions, giving them space to discover how things work, and develop their own hypotheses and ideas on the world around them,

### 3. GIVE THEM A CREATIVE AND MENTALLY STIMULATING DIET

Innovation does not come out of the blue, it requires some sort of inspiration to get things started. Much like we need fruits and vegetables for a healthy diet, young minds need healthy mental stimulation. Creating an environment where your children are exposed to inspirational sparks, whether it be literature or nature, can get them hooked on seeking these triggers. Today’s constant barrage of readily accessible media can seriously sap creativity and critical thinking. Instead of reading a book with complex thoughts, social media can provide that instant gratification we all seek. Getting your children to putting their phones down and taking them out on nature walks or encouraging them to read can give their young minds much needed mental stimulation. Any activity that requires utilizing all of their senses and thinking caps will shape their mindset for years to come.

### 4. THE POWER OF PRACTICAL POSITIVE THINKING

Where would all the world’s greatest inventors be if they gave up on the first try? With a

negative leaning mindset, many young people can get stuck in the rut of “I can’t.” However, those with a more positive outlook will look at a problem and say, “It can be done, if...” When confronted by a problem, encourage your children to find a solution for it instead of giving up or saying it can’t be done. Without providing too much of a crutch for them, when children learn to solve problems, it builds their self-confidence. The same self-confidence will make them positive thinkers who always look at challenges as problems to be solved versus obstacles that can’t be overcome. Even if they do fail in their attempts, they will look at failure as something to learn from, rather than be defeated by it.

### 5. NURTURE AN APPETITE FOR RISK

Innovative entrepreneurs are risk-takers; they stood by their ideas when everyone else warned them otherwise. It takes more than a strong sense of self-confidence and positivity to take risks, it also requires a healthy relationship with failure. When our children face failure in their lives they can either learn from it and do better next time or let it overcome them, creating a self-fulfilling cycle that is difficult to escape. When our children go through difficult times or when they’ve made a decision that failed to pay off, we need to guide them to help realize there are valuable lessons to be had. This will help them develop a better grasp of the concept of risk taking. This must be done at a healthy distance so they can come to this realization independently and better weigh their decisions in the future. ■



Helen Al Uzaizi is the CEO of BizWorld UAE, and founder of the entrepreneurship education platform for the MENA region, Future Entrepreneurs. With a 15+ year career in the corporate and startup worlds, Helen directed her passion to the entrepreneurship education field, working to instill the entrepreneurial mindset in the next generation of leaders.



# SKYLINE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

مرخصة ومعتمدة من وزارة التربية والتعليم  
دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة  
Licensed & Accredited by Ministry of Education



What you see is *not* always the whole story.

## SUCCESS

Skyline students' true success is determined not only by nurtured learning and quality education but also by providing professional growth and personality development.

## What Does Skyline Provide In Order to Achieve Success?

### EXTENSIVE EDUCATION

At Skyline, students' education is the primary concern, which stems out from the core mission of achieving academic excellence. Skyline houses faculty members with expertise in business education and a comprehensive resource materials and facilities, which are available at students' reach. Skyline also provides Professional Skills Development Program (PSDP) that enhances students' soft skills.

### REAL-LIFE TRAINING

Skyline persistently works in collaborating with the government and private sectors through MOUs and Articulations in order to provide real-life platforms for students to highlight their talents, hone their skills, and express their ideas in the business world.

### CHARACTER BUILDING

Lastly, Skyline involves its students in various CSR activities to teach them the value of giving back to the society, helping the needy, and reaching out to different communities in the UAE and abroad. Skyline builds students' character as true professionals with a conscious mind, body, and heart.



Clinton St. Baking Company at City Walk, Dubai

## Building up a business

It's one thing to start up an F&B enterprise- expanding it is a whole other story *By Hisham Samawi*

HAVING ASSUMED CONTROL OF A MASTER LICENSE FOR THE ENTIRE MIDDLE EAST, GEOGRAPHICAL EXPANSION WAS ALWAYS A KEY COMPONENT OF OUR LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES FOR THE ENTERPRISE.

For us at Clinton St. Baking Company, as nascent restaurateurs within the UAE, it certainly took us time to hone our instinct in the food and beverage (F&B) business. Having assumed control of a master license for the entire Middle East, geographical expansion was always a key component of our long-term objectives for the enterprise. Yet, despite our ever-present desire for expansion, we wanted to take our time to not only build our brand, but to also reinforce our corporate infrastructure, so as to attain sustainable growth.

When establishing our first outlet, our foremost challenge

was to not only find, but more importantly, secure a suitable spot for the business- the reason being that there was an undersupply at that time, and as we were a relatively unknown brand, we didn't have access to prime locations. Even though our first location was at Burj Views in Downtown Dubai, our choice was a risk at the time, since the location was set back from the boulevard, thus passerby visibility was minimal. Furthermore, the entire sub-development was relatively new; so, we were unable to draw upon historical records to understand customer traffic to pre-existing F&B outlets.

In hindsight, we were quite fortunate in terms of having

successfully launched with a bang; we've been busy from the day that we opened. But when considering the long-term viability of our brand, coupled with the aforementioned challenges of establishing ourselves in a relatively new sub-development, I realized that it would be difficult to replicate the level of traffic we saw at Burj Views, without the benefit of casual footfall. I had always hoped to secure a location that would deliver incidental footfall in a more tourist-friendly development, especially when considering that tourism accounts for a relatively substantial portion of Dubai's population at any given time.

Two years on from launching our Burj Views outlet saw us in discussions with master developer Meraas. We were eventually offered a location in City Walk; a location we believed would offer us access into another market on the other side of Sheikh Zayed Road. Incidentally, establishing our second location gave us the valuable experience of managing multiple locations, an experience that has become invaluable as we take Clinton Street Baking Company through the motions of geographical expansion through sub-licensing.

Another revenue stream we explored as part of our expansion efforts was the use of food trucks. Just a few months after we opened, we were invited to launch a pop-up at the very first edition of the Sole DXB event. This was well before Dubai's food truck boom, and we subsequently leased a container, and fitted it out with the necessary equipment. Fortunately, we discovered that our food travelled very well. Admittedly, we made it up as we



Hisham Samawi is the co-owner of Clinton Street Baking Company & Restaurant in Dubai. Recognizing an opportunity and gap in the regional landscape, Hisham brought over the famous New York restaurant, Clinton Street Baking Company, to Dubai, and opened its first location at Burj Views in Downtown Dubai. His first endeavor into the food and beverage industry, the restaurant has quickly established itself as Dubai's go-to place for all day breakfast and high quality casual dining. Signing the master franchise for the MENA region, Hisham is looking to grow and develop the brand across the region.

went along, but ultimately found the entire project to be a phenomenal exercise in marketing.

Since then, we initiated many more of these pop-ups, but never made substantial returns, since our revenues simply paid for the rental of our equipment. Having successfully completed enough pop-up food truck events and seen enough light at the end of the proverbial “financial tunnel,” we then chose to move forward with a substantial investment in our food truck. The mobile food truck market has since exploded in Dubai, and Clinton Street’s truck has now evolved into a very convenient channel of reaching our intended target market.

We also moved into the catering market, which we found to be massive in Dubai. We are still quite new to it, and are constantly developing our offerings. We originally began with a Thanksgiving promotion—given that Dubai’s culinary jet set is always on the hunt for a traditional taste of Americana, we delivered it in the form of a wholesome turkey meal. As for the road ahead, the third and fourth quarters of the year are when Dubai’s social calendar typically comes alive. We do quite a bit of catering during this time of the year, which is why we hope to leverage off of this experience by promoting our catering services well into the slower months of the year. During the slower months of the year, catering helps make the most of what would otherwise be underutilized resources.

F&B is always an attractive business for anyone from the outside looking in. It may look like a simple process when one witnesses a well-oiled restaurant running smoothly, but there is so much plan-

ning and training that goes into it. What is more, Dubai’s F&B space is hyper competitive in all aspects, which is why we believe that given the sheer level of F&B options the city offers, we foresee an inevitable reduction in supply coupled with a reduction in mainstream F&B investors as they pivot into more niche markets. We have already seen a shift from luxury dining to venues packing more punch, in terms of price, quality, and value.

My biggest piece of advice for entrepreneurs wanting to get into this sector would be to make sure you have the right team and systems in place before you get started. As people who delved into this business without prior experience, we initially focused all our energy on merely opening on time, given the innumerable challenges that arrive hand in hand with the design and fit-out of a restaurant. Yet, once the doors actually open, work progresses so fast that it is often difficult to quickly get things done. Having the right team and operations from



Incidentally, establishing our second location gave us the valuable experience of managing multiple locations, an experience that has become invaluable as we take Clinton Street Baking Company through the motions of geographical expansion through sub-licensing.

**ONCE THE DOORS ACTUALLY OPEN, WORK PROGRESSES SO FAST THAT IT IS OFTEN DIFFICULT TO QUICKLY GET THINGS DONE. HAVING THE RIGHT TEAM AND OPERATIONS FROM THE GET-GO THEREBY SIMPLIFIES MATTERS.**

the get-go thereby simplifies matters.

At the end of the day, if you hope to be involved in the F&B space, be ready to go all in. I recall launching deliveries without having enough drivers to meet our initial demand. In those cases, I would often have to leave the restaurant to deliver food myself. I even had situations wherein I would knock on a door to deliver food, and the customer would turn out to be a friend of mine. When it comes to the service business, one must always be humble and willing to get down and dirty; it shows that your team cares, and is dedicated to their goals. ■





Left to right: Kashif Hameed, Senior Technology Manager, Nader Amiri, CEO, and Mickael Costache, Country Manager UAE

## WORKING THE CROWD

Dubai-based e-grocery app el Grocer raises record amount of funds on Eureeca *By Sindhu Hariharan*

Launched in 2015, el Grocer is one of the earliest grocery e-commerce apps launched in the MENA region, with the brand managing to carve a pretty strong identity for itself within its core market of the UAE. Even with such a market standing, when the startup recently decided to raise funds to scale up further, el Grocer chose to step away from the venture capital route, and instead tried crowdfunding to help fuel its growth. Aiming to “stay light as they scale,” el Grocer started in April 2017 a 12-week campaign on Eureeca, a pioneering equity crowdfunding platform in the MENA, setting a target to raise US\$300,000. And, to its credit, the company realized its goals in a matter of just four weeks. The company closed the campaign in July 2017 as a “190% funded” company on the platform, with it being declared as the highest raise (and one of the most overfunded Middle East businesses) on Eureeca, at the time of writing. In terms of actual figures, el Grocer hit their initial \$300,000

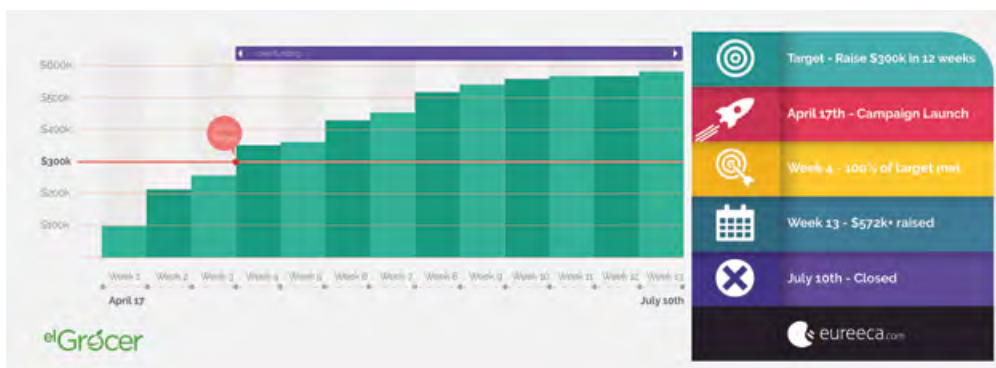
target by week 4, their next \$400,000 target in six weeks, and by week 9, they had closed the funding just above \$550,000. As for why crowdfunding seemed as the best option for el Grocer, CEO Nader Amiri says, “We had a couple of strategic individuals who loved the idea [of el Grocer], and wanted to get involved from an investment as well as support perspective. So, we thought, why not involve key individuals and many smaller ones through a reputable, modern, regulated platform in a simple way all in one go... It gives access to right amount of capital, smart network of investors who can be very helpful as we grow,

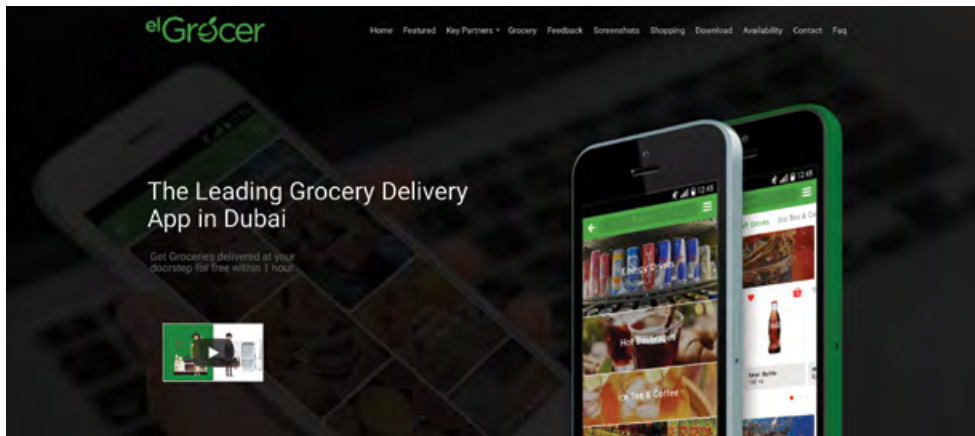
and all with the same flexibility of running the business the way we see fit, until we scale further.”

Hailing from an FMCG background (having worked with large enterprises such as Unilever, Kraft Foods, and Coca-Cola in the past), Amiri says the idea of el Grocer was sown in his and co-founder and Country Manager Mickael Costache’s head as early as the emergence of online food delivery phenomenon. “It was a small thought in the back of my mind that I didn’t do anything about, and then a bunch of friends, ex-colleagues, and I got together to really build the idea properly, plan, and prepare for it to come to reality,” he says. The entrepreneurial bug, however, had bit him much earlier, with Amiri having been involved in ventures such as an unnamed marketing agency in Iraq, and helping out in his family business before conceiving the idea of el Grocer. With a vision to create a “value-add marketplace platform to connect shoppers with retailers and brands to deliver convenience,” the startup wants to give users the power of choice, when in comes to their grocery buying habits. Be it the power to choose from a variety of stores, a wide-ranging product catalog, or the power to receive purchases in less than one hour (the app says orders will arrive within 60 minutes), el Grocer is operat-

ing as a welcome respite for busy and lazy shoppers in the UAE. “The other point [benefit] is our ‘same store pricing’ policy, which means no hidden mark-ups or fees,” adds Amiri, talking about the app’s policy to offer goods for the same prices as bought in-store. Without divulging performance metrics of the el Grocer app, Amiri says they “had a good solid base of stores, users, and other key metrics” when they started their round with Eureeca, and with good organic growth coming their way, they are set to turn it into “high week-on-week double digit growth” on the back of the latest fundraising.

The mode of this round of el Grocer’s fundraising shines the spotlight on the state of crowdfunding in the region, and where it stands can be best understood from a recent finding by Khalifa Fund. The finding shows that approximately 50-70% of SME applications for funding in the UAE are rejected by conventional banks. “Loans to SMEs account for just 4% of the outstanding bank credit in the UAE, below the MENA average of 9.3%,” it reads. Yet, given that SMEs contribute nearly 60% of the UAE’s GDP, it is a dire necessity for alternate sources that seems to have fueled the growth of crowdfunding in the region, especially in the UAE. Accordingly, Dubai Financial





Services Authority (DFSA) also launched recently a regulatory framework for loan and investment-based crowdfunding platforms, which is considered as one of the first such frameworks in the GCC. In such a climate, the kind of reception el Grocer has enjoyed on a MENA-based equity crowdfunding platform has the potential to inspire and motivate aspiring entrepreneurs seeking early-stage funding. However in terms of turnover time, Amiri cautions upstarts that the process can take roughly 3-4 months end to end, but has the benefit of being a much more transparent mode of funding, which also lets you test the waters on user response to your offering. Amiri is also candid in admitting that, at the start, they were skeptical of the potential of the route. This is where, he believes, the platform matters. "We got a lot of support from the Eureka team- from proposal development guidance, to basic project management, to reducing the paperwork burden, to even cheering as we crossed some key milestones... It's rare to find such serious, supportive, and fun partners, and we see them as partners, versus just a fund-raising platform," he says.

Amiri is hence all praise for the Eureka team, and attributes their transparency, professionalism, and local

and international track record as a motivator for el Grocer to jump into equity crowdfunding. el Grocer's crowd investors hail from countries such as UAE, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Canada, and Amiri says the nature of investors too are a varied mix. "We have got first-time investors, students, mid-level professionals from many different industries, and we have some senior strategic investors too," he says. It's interesting to note here that this is the only other external backing the company enjoys, besides a seed round closed in May 2015 from friends, family, and early-stage investor Nuummite Ventures, and a grant from Publicis Group in the P90 Global Competition. As for el Grocer's growth plans, Amiri says the company currently earns revenue from two key sources -commission from the stores on orders and on value-added business insights, and earnings from brand partnerships- and is also working on a third revenue stream, about which we will hear soon. With regard to its strategy, el Grocer has its eyes on various e-commerce trends that it plans to leverage, with special focus on simplicity. "I think people underestimate the power of simplicity; it's one of the trends that goes and comes, but always wins," says Amiri. "The other interesting

**"IT WAS A SMALL THOUGHT IN THE BACK OF MY MIND THAT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT, AND THEN A BUNCH OF FRIENDS, EX-COLLEAGUES, AND I GOT TOGETHER TO REALLY BUILD THE IDEA PROPERLY, PLAN, AND PREPARE FOR IT TO COME TO REALITY..."**

one [trend] that we have our eye on is AI. Thanks to our new funding, we plan to embark on this journey...It's not an easy thing, and making it industry specific is even more challenging, but we have some cool ideas that we are working on," he adds.

And will el Grocer reach back to the "crowd" to fuel its future funding needs? The entrepreneur admits that as e-grocery becomes more ubiquitous, and gains acceptances among users, the startup will need "a bigger war chest and wider strategic connections," so is more likely to opt for VC/private equity and/or a family/individual investors approach. With a founding team that takes inspiration from successes of its global counterparts such as America's Instacart and South Asia's Happy Fresh at its helm, el Grocer is focused on becoming a name synonymous with e-grocery in the MENA region- here's wishing them all the best for this goal! ■

## 'TREP TALK

Nader Amiri, CEO, el Grocer

**What are some of the aspects users can watch out for with respect to el Grocer's markets and product-related strategies?**

"Geographic expansion is a key priority as we need to become more accessible- UAE expansion (Abu Dhabi, Sharjah) as short-term, [expansion in] key GCC cities in the mid-term, and rest of MENA in the long-term [are our priorities]. Definitely, multilevel marketing optimization is key as well. Don't forget that we are changing/evolving one of the oldest consumer habits of 'grocery shopping' so ensuring the right marketing channels, messaging/creatives, with the right frequency is important to evolve this habit.

As for product features, online payment is definitely one of the important short-term priorities. It enhances the convenience of the entire experience. While in the long run, growing beyond just an 'app' is something we think a lot of. Apps will continue being important for years ahead, but surely providing the right ordering platform as consumer needs evolve will be key (think integration with smart fridges or leveraging VR)."

**What are your thoughts on the MENA entrepreneurship ecosystem, its evolution over the years, and where it's headed?**

"Although I'm the new guy on this block, I've kept an eye on things and kept in touch with people in the ecosystem. One of the things that encouraged me to jump in is the improving transparency, faster progress, higher global interest in this region, and growth of funding availability. With economic diversification becoming more of a priority for GCC and MENA, it's just a matter of time for the ecosystem to bloom. We as a team, and I as an entrepreneur, are taking big bets on this ecosystem that we see a very high potential in."



# BE HEARD

**MIND ROCKETS** WANTS TO GIVE A VOICE TO THE MENA REGION'S DEAF COMMUNITY

*By Pamella de Leon*

THE STARTUP HAS GAINED AN UPPER HAND AS A FIRST-MOVER IN THE ASSISTIVE TECH FIELD WITH THEIR REAL-TIME VIDEO AND WEBSITE INTERPRETING AVATARS, PLUS CUSTOMIZED SOLUTIONS FOR THE MEDICAL FIELD, SUCH AS PHARMACIES.

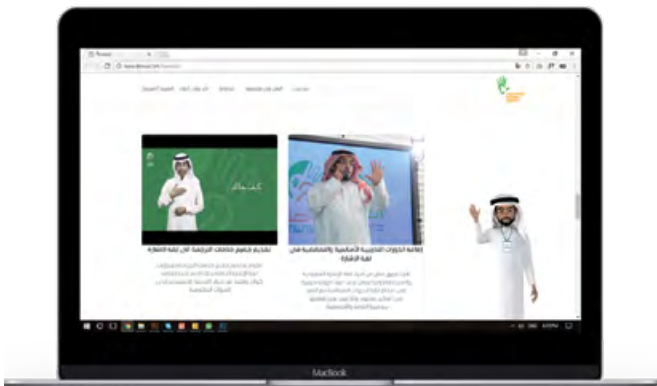
**F**or most of us, on the most part, conversations are as easy as they come. For 360 million people—over 5% of the world's population, according to the World Health Organization— that have disabling hearing loss, conversations can be a challenge. MENA startup Mind Rockets Inc wants to change that, and they've tasked themselves

with the mission of developing assistive tech solutions to make the world accessible to the deaf community. The founders of Mind Rockets, Mahmoud Al-Darawsheh and Mohammad Al-Kilani, pointed out that illiteracy was a huge challenge for the deaf, as reading and writing may not come as naturally since written and spoken words are a second language for them: "The mother language for a deaf person is his community's visual three-dimensional language." With a focus on the deaf and hard of hearing (DHOH), the Jordan-based startup develops smart animated avatars that translate text or speech to sign language. The avatars are used for two of the startup's apps: Mimix3D for American sign language, and Al Turjuman for Arabic sign language, both available on iOS and Android devices. Realizing the avatars' market

potential, Mind Rockets wanted to release it for a bigger market: the team thus went on to develop a customized solution for pharmacies, and it recently rolled out websites integrated with avatars to provide content in Arabic sign language.

According to the founders, this is their distinct advantage— with Mind Rockets, entities can reach a significant segment by making an avenue for businesses to cater to an overlooked demographic, and to provide equal access to content and services for the deaf community— a win-win situation for both. Al-Kilani stresses on the need for the startup: "We are providing a very basic human need, it's not something secondary, every deaf person has the right to access to information and services." The team found research on how only 1-2% get access to sign language classes, as well as the huge lack of human interpreters. However, Al-Kilani points out how they don't aspire to replace human interpreters, but rather, let the avatars fulfill a "serious and substantial" part of the gap. Though there's a Brazilian competitor specializing in Portuguese sign language, the startup has gained an upper hand as a first-mover in the assistive tech field with their real-time video and website interpreting avatars, plus customized solutions for the medical field, such as pharmacies. It's essential to commend here the work developed by Mind Rocket's CEO and founder Mahmoud Al-Darawsheh, who—besides founding two startups earlier— has been coding since his elementary school years, and then proceeded to enhance his coding experience under multiple disciplines. In fact, it was from participating in Intel International Science

Mind Rockets website interpreter





and Engineering Fair (ISEF), a global high school STEM-focused fair, that Al Darawsheh came up with the idea to create a smart solution for the deaf since there was a lack of assistive tech solutions, and thus, developed an avatar sign language interpreter. Learning more about the deaf community and noticing the lack of interpreters and education, Al Darawsheh says the urgent need for such initiatives became clear.

Al Darawsheh is joined by co-founder and Chairman Al-Kilani, who brings in his

experience in operations and business development from organizations in the IT and construction industry, and has had his time in the ecosystem through coaching and mentoring employees, as well as in growing early-stage startups, among others. The duo were bootstrapping since 2008, until they received an undisclosed amount from an angel investment, and with that, officially launched in May 2016. Currently, the startup is self-funded from generated revenue, and is seeking a Series A investment round. As its business model, Mind Rockets has two main revenue streams. First, a subscription model for its web interpreter product, where websites can subscribe to enable its webpages to become accessible to the deaf community using their scripts. Its second model is through strategic partnerships- prospective partners can gain exclusive rights for a product, as is, in Saudi Arabia's pharmacy sector, wherein the product is distributed to pharmacies, and the profit is shared between both partners. They're also working on a



Mahmoud Al-Darawsheh, founder and CEO, Mind Rockets Inc, and Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Facebook at Facebook Developer Conference F8 2017

**THE STARTUP EARNED AN INVITE TO JOIN A ROUNDTABLE MEETING WITH FACEBOOK CEO MARK ZUCKERBERG DURING THIS YEAR'S F8 DEVELOPER CONFERENCE, AND WON THE PUBLIC VOTE AWARD AT THE SEEDSTARS SUMMIT 2017, A GLOBAL STARTUP COMPETITION, FROM AN AUDIENCE OF ALMOST 1,000 PEOPLE.**

SaaS revenue-based model utilizing the API's developed by the startup, letting developers build assistive tech solutions based on their core technology. Coming a long way from a science fair idea, Mind Rockets has been operating within two markets: the American sign language app Mimix3D, in the US/Canada region, and the Arabic sign language app Al Turjuman catered to the MENA and GCC region,

both garnering more than 80,000 users as of writing, in addition to the first set of websites for their client, online media house Creative Investments, which is integrated with their website interpreter. Other partners who have signed on include Zain Jordan as well as the National Call Center for the Deaf (NCCD) in KSA, exclusively for the pharmacies solution.

Developing the apps certainly had its own hurdles- the founders explain that contrary to common assumptions, sign language isn't universal, with each word having a different sign in American sign language, compared to Arabic sign language, with British and Australian sign languages differing as well. Adding to different structures for different sign languages, Al-Kilani comments, "The deaf communities have different cultures of their own, so what might be acceptable in a certain deaf community, might be unacceptable in another. So, the appearance of characters is also important." For the Al Turjuman app, which took seven months of development, the duo says a main challenge was building the core engine to handle interpreting Arabic words to Arabic sign language. Not an easy feat, but the team's dedication here was evident- the team >>>



Malek Zuaiter, Business Development Executive, Mind Rockets Inc, as the startup won Public Vote Award at Seedstars Summit 2017

WITH A FOCUS TO THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING (DHOH), THE JORDAN-BASED STARTUP DEVELOPS SMART ANIMATED AVATARS THAT TRANSLATE TEXT OR SPEECH TO SIGN LANGUAGE.

studied the basic principles of Arabic sign language to understand its structure, and learnt to break down Arabic words into parts that can be correlated with Arabic sign language, and even hired a deaf team member, who's well-versed with Arabic sign language. And the feedback? Based on the apps' reviews, the apps assist family members and friends communicate with each other, as well as teachers utilizing it in classroom settings with hearing and non-hearing students. Another cool factor? The startup also earned an invite to join a roundtable meeting with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg during this year's F8 developer conference, and won the Public Vote Award at the Seedstars Summit 2017, a global startup competition, from an audience of almost 1,000 people. The team see the tech going beyond its current market. Listing down the benefits of their tech for government bodies, to news, business and sports

websites, the founders sees his company's offering as an opportunity to be more inclusive to the deaf community. He adds that decision makers are part of their target customer demographic, as they can "cause transformations and improvements for the benefit and de-marginalization of the marginalized." In the next few months, the team is focusing on increasing the adoption of its website interpreter locally and regionally, with an eye (and hope) on having it among government entities and medium-to-large organizations. "We believe that accessibility and inclusive environments are becoming the new standard for organizations. The demand for new solutions can only be attained with collective efforts of a strong developer community. This is why we are working on building a network of developers, giving them access to our APIs, so they can use them and come up with their own creative solutions to the challenges at hand." In essence, Al-Darawsheh is saying that Mind Rockets has a large audience to cater to- as he puts it: "Our market is every organization who wants to be deaf-friendly." ■



Mohammad Al-Kilani, co-founder and Chairman, and Mahmoud Al-Darawsheh, founder and CEO, Mind Rockets Inc

## 'TREP TALK

Mahmoud Al-Darawsheh, founder and CEO, and Mohammad Al-Kilani, co-founder and Chairman, Mind Rockets

**What would be your advice for startups that are considering working with larger enterprises as partners?**

"Our best tip, is to be brutally honest with your potential strategic partner and avoid over promising, because this usually leads to struggling with achievement, or worse, losing focus on your main task of making your startup sustainable. Make sure your aspirations and goals are aligned with your strategic partners, check what is being said based on previous experiences with other startups and past projects related to your startup's vision and potential market. It's also very important to have a balanced relationship with the strategic partners, seeing eye to eye on roles, projects and goals. We believe we were very lucky with our partnership with Zain Jordan, they started giving us unconditional [support] even before we agreed on [a] partnership with them, this laid a solid foundation of trust even before we signed the deal. And we have been gaining momentum ever since, Zain Jordan were quick to take action and move things forward, which is something that you rarely see in large organizations. The speed and attention at which they operate is critical, we didn't expect it, but they move as quickly as a startup in making decisions. Having this kind of strategic partnership will keep you going forward quickly instead of moving at a slower pace."

**What are some of your tips for starting a business in MENA's e-health industry?**

"'Give first', we have an old Arabic Bedouin saying in Jordan and the rough translation goes something like this, 'you can never truly repay the one who gave first'. In the Arab world, if someone offers help to you first, even if you give back to

them, still, you do not repay them completely- giving first itself is an advantage that is not easily caught up with. It applies to doing business as well. One must be well-acquainted with the culture here (and anywhere, obviously) to be able to do business. If you have a startup from outside the ME and wish to enter, I would advise getting some Middle Easterners to be on your side and not to go about it on your own. The same should be done wherever you want to expand in the world. Always ask and know your audience, that's probably your best advantage. Sometimes you ask them through a quick survey on your app, sometimes, you watch them use your application. Without knowing your audience and how they interact with your product, you cannot move forward.

What you shouldn't do in the Middle East, in general, is being extra careful when you are building a relationship with potential partners or customers. It is one thing being smart in negotiating better terms, and it's a completely another thing, if you are negotiating every item in an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding), or if you are always assuming the worst will happen every step of the way. You can't build trust in the Middle East if the other party feels that you are not entering in good faith, in dealing with people and organizations, do your background check and assume goodwill in all your actions, otherwise it may be taken personally and it will definitely kill your chances if it's taken as a personal insult of mistrust. At the end, it's your actions, negotiations, attitude, handshakes, honesty, smiles and breaking bread together, that is what will infuse trust, it's never the two words of good faith on that piece of paper called a contract."

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# BACK TO THE FUTURE

## TEN STARTUPS TO WATCH OUT FOR AT GITEX FUTURE STARS 2017 IN DUBAI

Taking place from October 8-12, 2017, this year's GITEX Future Stars will be a showcase of startups from around the world working in a variety of sectors- from virtual reality and education tech, to health tech, gaming, and others. We went through the list to find ten MENA-based startups that we at *Entrepreneur Middle East* think you should keep an eye out for, as you head to GITEX Future Stars 2017.

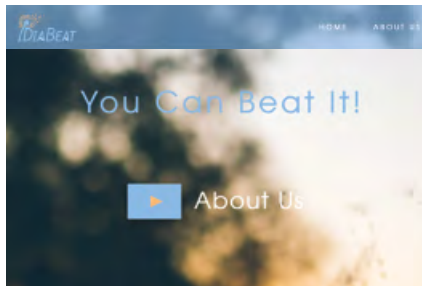
### 5Dvr (Fifth Dimension)

A Cairo-based digital studio, 5Dvr is involved in delivering immersive VR/AR experiences, and strive to create "emotional engagement" with both their platform and content. Creating experiences since 2011, 5Dvr has an enviable list of clientele including the likes of Hardees, Visa, Dodge, Philip Moris, Cheetos, and others, and is going global from their base in Egypt. [www.5d-vr.com](http://www.5d-vr.com)



### IDiaBeat

This health tech startup wants to help create awareness about diabetes in the UAE with a glucose monitor in the form of a phone case, which, along with an app helps track glucose levels in the body. IDiaBeat wants to improve the lifestyle of the region's (and global) diabetic patients by doing away with a need to carry large/complex devices for continuous monitoring. [www.idiabeat.com](http://www.idiabeat.com)



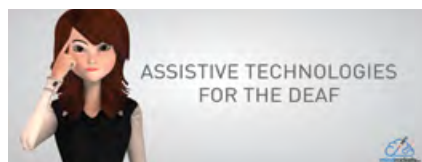
### Linovate

Linovate is a platform that connects students and researchers with the industries to facilitate communication and collaboration between the parties that can help innovators grow their idea into a feasible business. In line with the UAE's objective of building a knowledge-based economy, Linovate wants to be the bridge between those creating solutions and those who can help scale the same. [www.linovate.ae](http://www.linovate.ae)



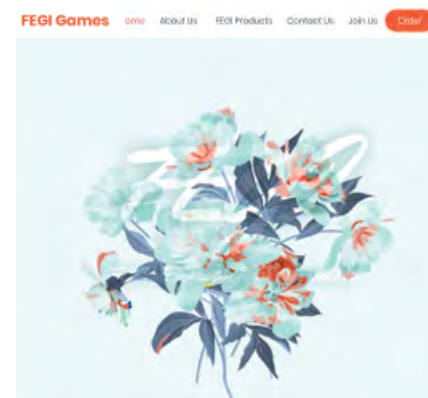
### Mind Rockets Inc

Mind Rockets Inc develops assistive technological solutions for those deaf or hard of hearing in the form of "Avatars" that translate text and speech to sign language (both English and Arabic). In its journey to promote inclusion of the deaf community, the Jordanian startup is supported by strategic partners such as Zain, and has been recognized by forums such as Seedstars Summit, Startup Weekend, and in fact, earned an invite to join a roundtable with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg during this year's F8 developer conference. [www.mindrocketsinc.com](http://www.mindrocketsinc.com)



### eFatoora

The eFatoora app is a sustainable smart shopping solution that wants to make Dubai's retail experience paperless. The app can send you digital receipts for any transaction without the need for registration and without risk of fraudulent transactions- the retailer requires no change in their billing systems, and the consumer can enjoy a safe and easy checkout. [www.efatoora.ae](http://www.efatoora.ae)



### FEGL (Future Emirati Game Innovators)

Spearheaded by two Emirati women game developers, FEGL has a vision of delivering "compelling educational games" that help organizations and educational institutions convey their message in an effective manner. Based in Al Ain, UAE, the Arabic gaming upstart's mission thus aligns with the UAE government's own vision to use tech to improve education. [www.fegigames.com](http://www.fegigames.com)

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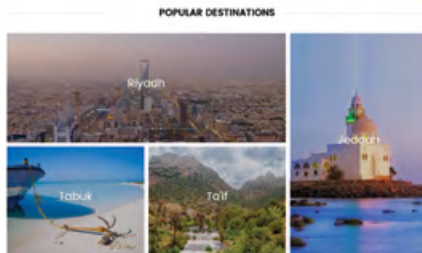
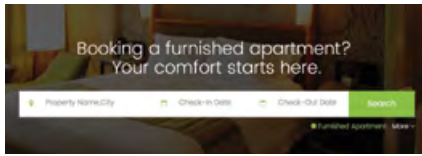
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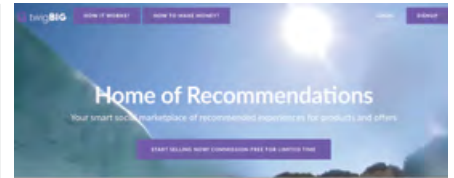
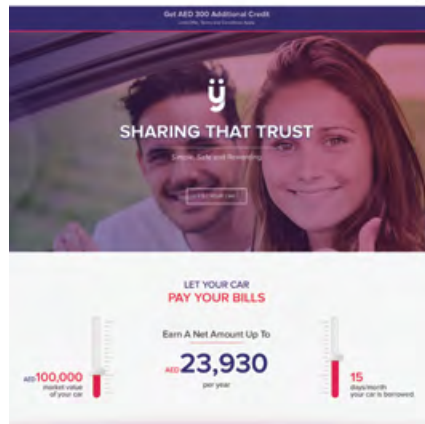


### Gurfati.com

This Saudi Arabia-based travel/hospitality startup wants to make your business travel hassle free with its web and mobile platform that helps you book furnished apartments in the Kingdom. With a vast portfolio of properties listed across destinations such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, and other cities, everything you need to book and manage a furnished apartment is just a few clicks away. [www.gurfati.com](http://www.gurfati.com)

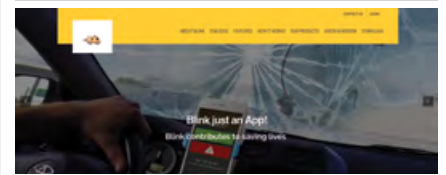
### FriendlyCar

With a slew of recognitions such as victories in the Dubai Smartpreneur challenge, and ArabNet Dubai, startup FriendlyCar is slowly but steadily growing its presence in the region as a marketplace for borrowing and lending cars. The platform is a fairly simple and rewarding experience for car owners thanks to a borrower's verification system and customer support center, and is also an affordable option for car borrowers. [www.friendlycar.com](http://www.friendlycar.com)



### twigBIG

The twigBIG app is a social marketplace that learns what you like, and then offers personalized recommendations for products and experiences involving food, travel, beauty, shopping, fitness, and other activities. A user just needs to tell the technology how they feel to enjoy economical and enjoyable recommendations. [www.twigbig.com](http://www.twigbig.com)



### Blink App

A boon for the Middle East roads, this Egypt-based accident detection and notification system enables emergency units to respond to vehicle crashes quickly. An end-to-end solution, the app analyzes motions, detects crashes "within 70 milliseconds," and notifies a pre-determined set of people. [www.blinkapp.net](http://www.blinkapp.net)



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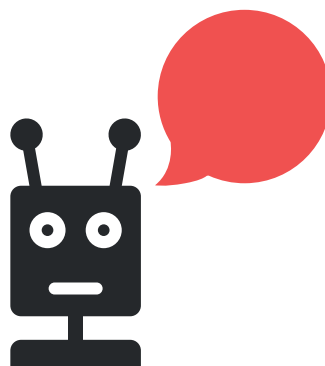
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# Bots that speak the MENA language

MENA STARTUP WIDEBOT WILL HELP BUILD YOUR CHATBOTS IN ARABIC

By Pamella de Leon



elaborates that WideBot's framework functions includes natural language understanding, machine learning, and conversation support, as well as integrations with WordPress, RSS feeds, Mongo DB, Twilio SMS, WooCommerce and more platforms. Currently, WideBot has more than 30,000 users using their bots, with clients from Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, including Santander Rio Bank and Americana Group in KSA. Its core business model is monthly subscription-based

**ONE OF THE HURDLES DURING WIDEBOT'S DEVELOPMENT PHASE WAS "FINDING THE SMOOTHEST FLOW FOR DATA BETWEEN THE USER, THE BACKEND AND THE BOT."**

and providing white labeled chatbots for enterprises. A nifty product under WideBot (where the framework's capability shines) is Menu Maker, its bot builder platform for restaurants to automate the food ordering process by helping customers order food directly from the messenger and thereby lower costs too. Besides providing notifications for ready orders on the web, Android, or desktop app, the bot's distinct advantage is its ability to interact in Arabic. At the time of writing, Menu Maker serves more than 10 restaurants, and brands are incentivized to try it out as they have a two-month free trial period to test functionality and features, with the team on hand to offer customer service. WideBot also has a product targeted for the e-commerce sector under development, which the team plans to launch by the end of November this year, with their Arabic integration once again as its forte, as well as seamless integration with third-party services like Zapier, WordPress, Google and Json.

Nabil notes that one of the hurdles during WideBot's development phase was "finding the smoothest flow for

**A** study from Juniper Research has forecasted that—particularly in the customer service industry—chatbots could save businesses up to US\$8 billion annually by 2022, up from \$20 million in 2017. Of course, as the benefits of bots grow (and improve), the market for them will also increase— but building chatbots requires specific skills, and one needs to invest time, effort and money to train the requisite AI engine and integrate it with the necessary services. But if this notion worries you, do not fear: Egyptian startup WideBot, a bot builder platform, aims to take the hassle out by letting users build chatbots— and no, you don't need to have any special coding or technical skills to do that. Founded by Mohammed Nabil and Ahmed Labib, the Cairo-based startup launched earlier this year after the duo came across bots on the Telegram app, and after market research, saw the potential of bot technology for businesses and consumers. The co-founders, who come from a software development background and also have previous startup experience, noticed the market value of bots when tech giants started to make inroads into this space. Facebook, for instance, allowed businesses to integrate and support chatbots on its Messenger platform last year, while Microsoft developed its own bot builder framework, and IBM launched Watson, a

natural language processing (NLP) tool, which can build chatbots that understands natural language to integrate to various messaging platforms.

What makes WideBot particularly noteworthy is its focus on supporting AI in Arabic. Though the platform's generated chatbots interact in both Arabic and English, Nabil says they wanted the enterprise to focus on Arabic to give them a competitive edge against rivals in this space. Considering the various Arabic dialects from Arab-speaking nations, it is indeed a challenge (and, to be fair, a feat for them) to tackle. Another USP that sets the company apart is that WideBot is an industry-specific bot builder— that is, instead of having a general platform for building bots for all industries, WideBot promises to ease the process by catering to specific sectors. Its website



The WideBot team at ArabNet Cairo's Startup Battle

**“WE TRACKED AND ANALYZED ALL [THE] USER TESTING WE MADE SO FAR, AND CREATED A PREDEFINED AUTOMATED SOLUTION THAT TEST OUR BOTS, AND GETS FASTER RESULTS WITH SPECIFIC PERSONA OF PEOPLE.”**

data between the user, the backend and the bot.” Given the nascent space of chatbots, the team makes it a point to thoroughly test all functionality with users, and so far, the feedback has been positive. “We tracked and analyzed all [the] user testing we made so far, and created a predefined automated solution that tests our bots, and gets faster results with specific persona of people.” A common issue with chatbots is bot discovery and onboarding users, given that everyday consumers are not accustomed to the tech yet. To get past this, the team encourages brands to make their Facebook cover photo relate to their bots with a call to action, while also including testimonials of customer’s experience. They also advise to insert referral links in ad campaigns, and even use QR codes, which has worked out well for restaurants. Over on the tech side, the team looks out for conversations that take

a longer-than-usual session time, and try to improve its UX design and reduce conversation steps to create smoother flow to the process and improve accuracy. A “help” text is also available. Nabil describes the process as being a “guided experience for users, in which they learn how to use the bot, by using it.” Plus, to motivate users, the team has gamified the process, and user data is retained to improve retention and provide personalized offers and messages for each individual user.

Regarding trends in the chatbot arena, Nabil says they’re looking to leverage their tech in the e-commerce and fintech industry, as they feel it’s these industries that maintain a relationship with customers based on trust, and the startup want to “take it to the next level” to help enterprises perform better and generate more user engagement and retention. They’re also considering providing white label-

ling to clients working in the telecom, banking and healthcare sectors. For the next six months though, the team is focused on hitting some hefty milestones: this includes sustaining their product in the food ordering and e-commerce industry, plus gain at least 500 clients in the region. Besides forming an ardent team, they also aim to train their AI engine to answer up to 90% of user inquiries, and further improve their knowledge database to serve those two core industries. It does look like WideBot can accomplish these goals though- after all, the startup, which was initially bootstrapped, has done quite a lot in its first year: it joined Egypt’s Technology Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (TIEC) wherein it received an undisclosed angel investment from its incubation program, and won ArabNet Cairo’s Startup Battle 2017 in first place. Given these achievements, and with a mission to have the “strongest and smartest” AI engine that can understand and interact in Arabic in the MENA region, this startup is definitely one that’s worth keeping an eye on. ■

## ‘TREP TALK

Mohamed Nabil, co-founder and CEO, WideBot shares the lessons he learnt launching a tech startup in the Middle East

### 1. KNOW YOUR MARKET

“The Middle East market is very big and has great opportunities. But before you start your business, you must study the market very well, and be sure that the market will accept your solution.”

### 2. GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON BOARD

“The amazing human resources are available and very qualified, but you need to make extra effort to find them.”

### 3. MAKE USE OF A MENTOR

“Every stage in your startup needs mentoring (idea, MVP, market fit or growth). Search hard for the right mentor, and accept the criticism.”

### 4. TREAT YOUR PEOPLE WELL

“I think that the most important lessons I learned so far are to accept our failure and mistakes and fix it very fast. Also, the startup = the team, not the founders. Our mission as founders is to make every person in our team feel that he owns Widebot, not just [as] an employee, [and] after that, he/she will give Widebot amazing results.”

**“EVERY STAGE IN YOUR STARTUP NEEDS MENTORING (IDEA, MVP, MARKET FIT OR GROWTH). SEARCH HARD FOR THE RIGHT MENTOR, AND ACCEPT THE CRITICISM.”**



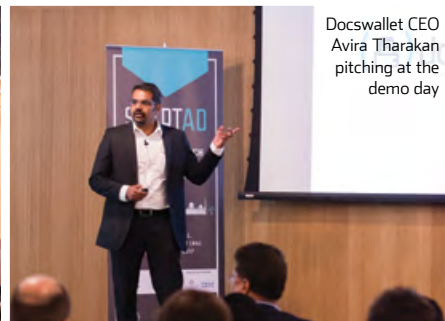
The jury panel for the startAD Fintech Venture Launchpad



First place winner WaveX



Ramesh Jagannathan, MD, startAD at the demo day



Docswallet CEO Avira Tharakan pitching at the demo day



Kiran Sispal, CEO, uHONCHO

## Taking off

Startups WaveX, Docswallet and uHONCHO emerge winners of startAD's Fintech Venture Launchpad

Marking the end of a 10-day program that helped participating entrepreneurs develop skills around business model design, MVP development, team culture, and fundraising, New York University Abu Dhabi's (NYUAD) entrepreneurship platform startAD held a demo day of their Fintech Venture Launchpad in September. Aimed at helping early-stage startups "develop scalable, repeatable and capital efficient ventures," this edition of the Venture Launchpad focused on the fintech sector and intended to connect startups in this space with large industry players.

At the end of a pitching session, where the program's top 10 teams

showcased their businesses to investors and other ecosystem stakeholders, fintech startups WaveX, Docswallet and uHONCHO were declared the first, second, and third place winners. While Sharjah-based WaveX is working on building "a democratized energy market" leveraging the Internet of Things and blockchain, India's Docswallet seeks to bring government transactions online using digital identity and electronic signature, and uHONCHO is an app that freelancers can use to track, measure and manage their day-to-day activities and finances. The winning teams are entitled to US\$120,000 in IBM Cloud credit for a year to implement their applications as part of the IBM

Global Entrepreneur program, in addition to mentorship, and go-to market support.

Supported by the UAE Ministry of Economy, UAE Exchange, IBM, and Abu Dhabi Global Market, this year's edition of the program attracted over 200 applications, and 20 teams were shortlisted to participate in the program, following which 10 were chosen as finalists. Noting in a statement that the pace of emergence of fintech startups in the UAE is "almost three times faster" than other hubs in the MENA, the program focused on helping entrepreneurs address key challenges such as visibility, customer awareness, and product trust. The demo day also featured a session of talks by industry professionals including Promoth Manghat, CEO, UAE Exchange, John Tate, CEO, Tamkeen, and Ramesh Jagannathan, MD, startAD, among others.

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