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Hitting (all) the right notes
A. R. Rahman

THE ACADEMY AWARD-WINNING MUSIC COMPOSER ON SUCCESS, HUMANITY, AND MORE

Shape your corporate culture

A GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AT YOUR VENTURE

Break through

The **communications trends** brands need to watch out for in 2018

PARADIGM SHIFT
BUILDRONE FOUNDER TALIB M. ALHINAI

Meet the 25-year-old **inventor and entrepreneur from the UAE** who is reimagining the use of drone tech

9 772311 541008 >

FEBRUARY 2018 | WWW.ENTREPRENEUR.COM/ME | UAE AED20

22
Talib M. Alhinai,
founder, Buildrone

20 H.E. Huda Al Hashimi, Assistant Director General for Strategy and Innovation at the UAE Prime Minister's, at the media launch of the UAE Innovation Month

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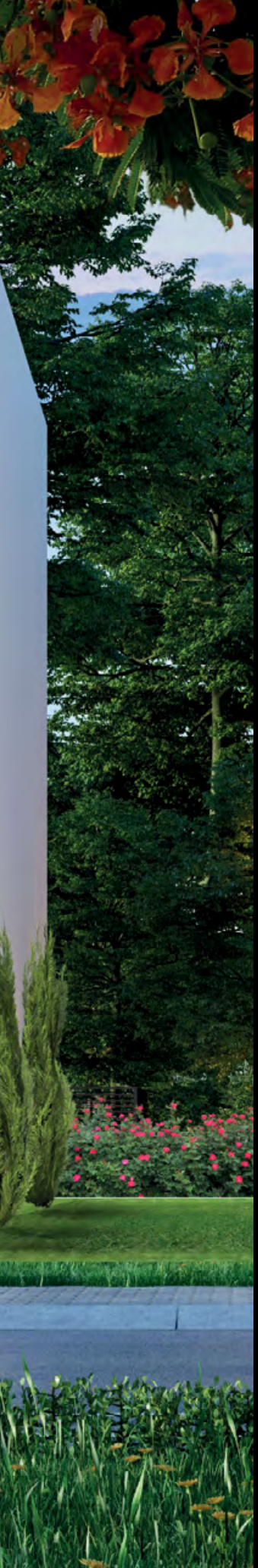

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CONTENTS FEBRUARY 2018

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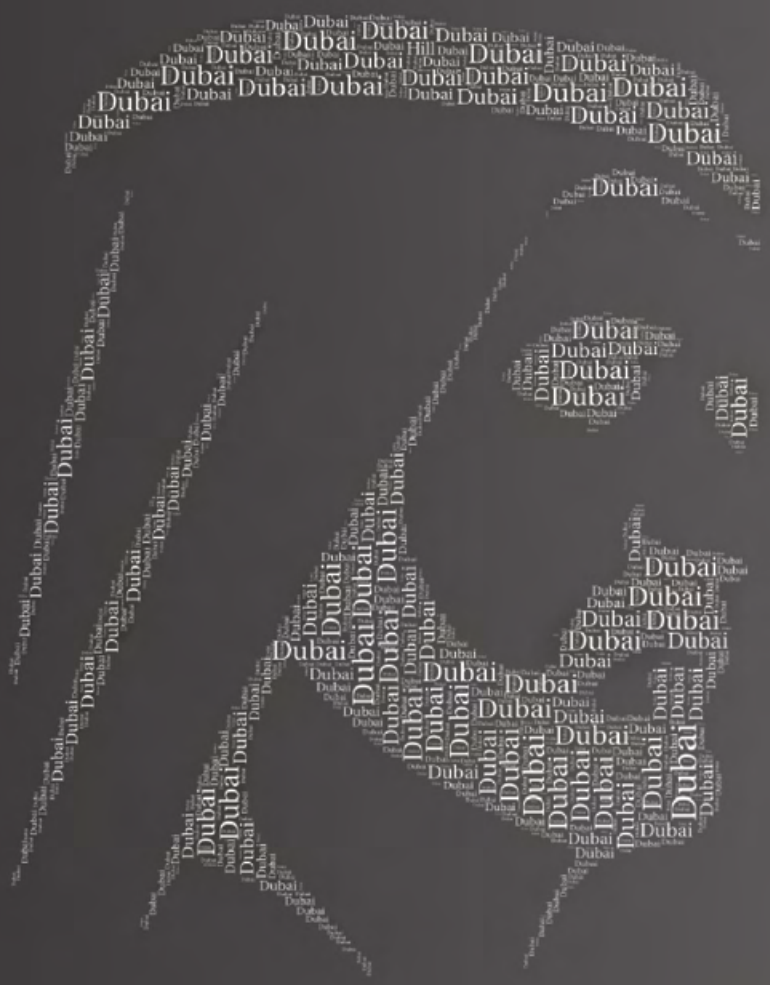

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CONTENTS FEBRUARY 2018

40
Claire Diaz-Ortiz at Turkey Innovation and Entrepreneurship Week 2017


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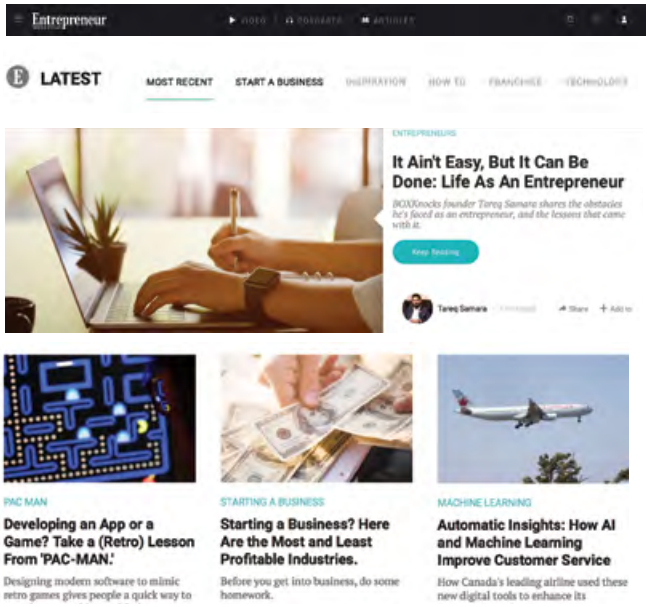

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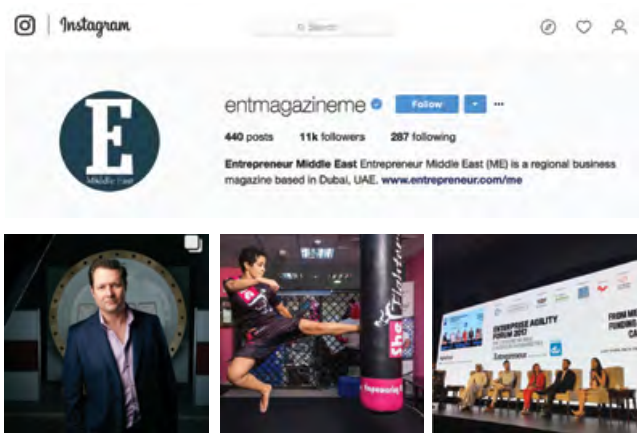

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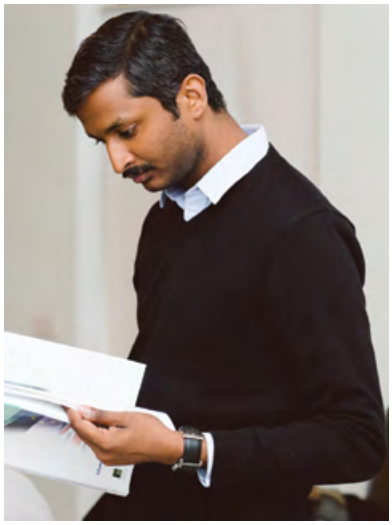
One for the team

Deals come and go, but every lost opportunity is a lesson learned

THE OTHER DAY, I was at a startup's office, and overhead the CEO of the young organization talking on the phone with someone in the leadership ranks of, well, a larger and older company, which was operating in the same sector that his was. (Before any of you tell me that it's bad manners to listen in other people's phone calls, let me state for the record that this particular entrepreneur has a loud, bombastic voice, and I can assure you that every one of his employees in the office that day could hear this conversation- or rather, at least one side of it.) As I heard it, the call consisted of essentially the entrepreneur trying to find out why his fledgling enterprise had been essentially blocked by the larger corporate from competing for a particular contract or deal from a third party. It appeared that the older player had pulled some strings so as to ensure that the startup would effectively not be allowed to even enter the field, much less make a play for it. Now, yes, I know it's a tough market out there, and one often has to make use of every trick in the book to gain the upper hand over their rivals in business, but in this particular case, I couldn't help but feel that the larger enterprise was not playing fair and was being unnecessarily petty.

But what caught my attention in this particular conversation was the way the entrepreneur conveyed his feelings on the situation to the individual on the other end of the call. Over the course of the conversation –which was being done in full view and earshot of his team- the entrepreneur told his counterparty that he was fighting for his chance at the deal not just as a personal exercise, but for the people that he had onboard his enterprise: the deals he secured for the company translate into salaries and livelihoods for his small group of employees. He then proudly declared that he took the blockade imposed on him as a sign of his enterprise's strength and standing in the marketplace- there had to be *something* he and his small team were doing right for such a well-established, deep-heeled company to resort to such a mechanism to keep their apparent place at the helm. Remember, the entire office was being privy to everything the entrepreneur said- I could swear I could see a few of the employees there straighten up their backs, as if to both take on their boss's apparent badge of honor, while also getting themselves to work harder and put more of themselves in to make their fledgling enterprise soar higher.

I'm pretty certain that the entrepreneur didn't realize the impact his words were unconsciously having on members of his team- which is perhaps what made it seem all the more sincere, and, well, nice. He may have lost the chance to secure a contract- but he did manage to further secure his team's loyalty and trust. And as we all know, deals may come and go, but your team is what makes



your enterprise- and this particular entrepreneur, by keeping his people on top of all that he does, and being respectful and conscious of the work that they do, seems to have got this concept right.

And the rest of you should follow suit.

Aby Sam Thomas
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H.E. Huda Al Hashimi, Assistant Director General for Strategy and Innovation at the UAE Prime Minister's, at the media launch of the UAE Innovation Month

Fueling progress

UAE Innovation Month aims to invigorate the country's trailblazers

Organized by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation (MBRCGI), the UAE Innovation Month seeks to foster innovation with more than 1,000 activities across the nation from February 1-28, 2018. From parks displaying creative inventions throughout various cities, to a Google Innovation Hub launch, and more, the month-long initiative will hold key events and competitions to showcase leading ideas and innovators across the UAE. As part of the Year of Zayed, the initiative was also inspired by the leadership of UAE's founder, H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

On the initiative's launch, H.E. Huda Al Hashimi, Assistant Director General for Strategy and Innovation at the UAE Prime Minister's Office asserted that owing to the momentum of the previous years' innovation-themed week, this year, it was extended to a whole month to give people more time to visit and interact with activities. As the event is also held to support the National Innovation Strategy, H.E. Al Hashimi noted, "The UAE Innovation Strategy clearly defines seven main sectors for innovation: space, transportation, water, renewable energy, technology, health and education- so all of these main sectors are to be key players in this." She added that there would be a particular focus on AI, with efforts to bring in the involvement of the youth, as well as how the private sector, be it multinationals or SMEs, would have their own platforms too.

Media launch of the UAE Innovation Month

"THE UAE INNOVATION STRATEGY CLEARLY DEFINES SEVEN MAIN SECTORS FOR INNOVATION: SPACE, TRANSPORTATION, WATER, RENEWABLE ENERGY, TECHNOLOGY, HEALTH AND EDUCATION- SO ALL OF THESE MAIN SECTORS ARE TO BE KEY PLAYERS IN THIS."

H.E. Al Hashimi explained that each Emirate in the UAE would have its own program, with an Innovation Truck following the route, which will be at all of the main gatherings in each Emirate. What should 'treps look out for? Students and tech professionals alike can join the UAE Hackathon, a nationwide competition, held in partnership with the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, which aims to use open data to improve UAE's economic growth. In Abu Dhabi, there would be an Innovation Lab competition, which will be announced by H.E. Noura Al Kaabi, Minister of Culture and Knowledge Development. In Ras Al Khaimah, the Seaside Startup Summit will be held, welcoming entrepreneurs from across the world, as well across the GCC.

At the same time, Fujairah will be holding the Innovation Race, a competition aimed at finding ideas to improve local government services, open to residents of the city, and with a winning prize of AED20,000 for first place, AED15,000 for second place, and AED10,000 for third place. Ajman would be holding a series of workshops on programming and robotics. In Dubai, the Aero Innovation Summit 2018 will invite professionals and entrepreneurs to focus on the aviation sector, while the Finnovate event will bring together Middle East's fintech community to highlight challenges and opportunities in the sector.

www.uaeinnovates.ae

UAE INNOVATION MONTH TIMELINE

Abu Dhabi February 1-7
Ras Al Khaimah February 8-14
Fujairah February 8-14
Sharjah February 15-21
Ajman February 15-21
Umm Al Quwain February 15-21
Dubai February 22-28

IMAGE CREDIT MOHAMMED BIN RASHID CENTRE FOR GOVERNMENT INNOVATION

PARADIGM SHIFT

BUILDRONE FOUNDER TALIB M. ALHINAI

MEET THE 25-YEAR-OLD INVENTOR AND ENTREPRENEUR FROM THE UAE WHO IS REIMAGINING THE USE OF DRONE TECH by SINDHU HARIHARAN

If you had to name two technological advancements that have radically opened up opportunities for businesses to embrace the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as well as have the potential to make a difference to the society at large, it'd be safe to say that drone technology and 3D printing would make the cut. Well, having assumed that, what would you then say about an invention that combines the core of both these technologies? While the cynic in you may cause to roll your eyes at the aforementioned description, you should know that such a product actually exists, and that it is also currently on the path toward commercialization as Buildrone, which refers to itself as "an aerial repair service." Buildrone is essentially a flying robot, armed with a 3D printer, which can spot leaks and fix pipelines from the air in hard to access or hazardous areas, with its application ranging across sectors like construction, oil and gas, utilities, to name a few. But that's just the beginning: Buildrone aims to push forward the development of aerial robots capable of construction-scale 3D printing of entire structures. That is, imagine a future where a swarm of drones build your homes and offices, block by block, from the skies. While Buildrone's function by itself makes the enterprise especially relevant for the Arab world, the region may be further invested in this venture by learning that this breakthrough innovation that's reimagining the use of drone tech is the brainchild of Emirati inventor and entrepreneur, Talib M. Alhinai. ›››

IMAGE CREDIT TALIB M. ALHINAI

Talib M. Alhinai and his advisor, Dr. Mirko Kovac, Director, Aerial Robotics Laboratory

As an undergraduate student of mechatronic engineering (a combination of mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, and computer science), Alhinai admits to have been enamored with the notion of building robots that can have a profound impact on improving people's lives, for a long while now. Raised in Abu Dhabi, and graduated as a student of the American International School in Abu Dhabi in 2010, Alhinai attributes his earliest interest in STEM and futuristic tech to Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, a work of fiction to which many scientists across the world, owe their initial inspiration. During his undergrad at the University of Manchester in the UK, he chose to pursue his final year research project in the subject of haptic teleoperation, a field that recreates the sense of touch through robotic manipulators, to aid a human operator to carry out a task remotely- as Alhinai puts it: "Think, a doctor in London performing surgery via a robot on a patient in New York, or an engineer in Houston remotely controlling a robotic arm of a rover on the moon." Subsequently, Alhinai set out to do his PhD in robotics at the Department of Aeronautics, at Imperial College London in 2013. "I particularly liked the vision that Dr. Mirko Kovac [his advisor] had for an Aerial Robotics Lab that he had just started at Imperial College London, where he was keen on the idea of building drones for humanitarian applications, particularly at a time when the word drone had a much more stronger connotation with war than it does today," Alhinai remembers.

Buildrone is essentially a flying robot, armed with a 3D printer, which can spot leaks and fix pipelines from the air in hard to access or hazardous areas, with its application ranging across sectors like construction, oil and gas, and utilities.

"THE LONG-TERM IMPACT BUILDRONE CAN HAVE IN THE STATUS QUO WOULD BE TO ENABLE DRONES TO BE FLYING MINI-FACTORIES, WHERE THEY WOULD FLY TO A CONSTRUCTION SITE, WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE BUILDINGS FROM SCRATCH."

And with its ambitions to be an aerial robot capable of construction-scale 3D printing, Buildrone can well be perceived as a humanitarian project that's also an advancement from the current application of drones. "In order for drones to be used for construction tasks, they would be required to actively interact with the physical environment and effectively carry out pick-and-place tasks when needed, dictating that the drones need to be robust to turbulences and external disturbances, repetitively and accurately lay down construction material, and to incorporate levels of autonomy and intelligence that would minimize the need for human supervision," explains a clear and precise Alhinai. He's also clearly excited about the near-term impact of the patent-pending Buildrone technology in the infrastructure industry- as that of a first-response repair service in scenarios like leaking gas pipelines, or to repaint large structures, or for corrosion treatment on offshore oil rigs, among others. "The long-term impact Buildrone can have in the status quo would be to enable drones to be flying mini-factories, where they would fly to a construction site, work together to create buildings from scratch," notes Alhinai, elaborating on how the product could be perfect for inaccessible sites and those dangerous for human workers to get to, and thus alter the state of the construction industry in this part of the world.

While the potential impact of Buildrone for the region is clearly there to see, as an entrepreneur yourself (or as a person closely tracking the space), you'd agree that the life cycle from imagining such a hardware product to seeing it achieve results, is well, quite *hard*. Further, working on highly technical products such as Buildrone (the "hard tech" sector, as it's often called) involves greater barriers. From the whiteboard to the first prototype to the proof of concept, the process of seeing your imagination come alive is certainly a tedious one for entrepreneurs, and Alhinai is no exception. "As a hardware startup with a goal of 3D printing buildings *with* drones, one of the principal challenges we had during verbal pitches of our business was that often times individuals that we approached thought that we were 3D printing *our own* drones rather than 3D printing buildings with drones, [and] that was, and is, to be frank, always an interesting encounter," he says. He also warns entrepreneurs to accept that many things can go wrong at any point in the initial prototypes, and how he "had to quickly learn to grow thick skin, and be patient to be able to persevere in this game."

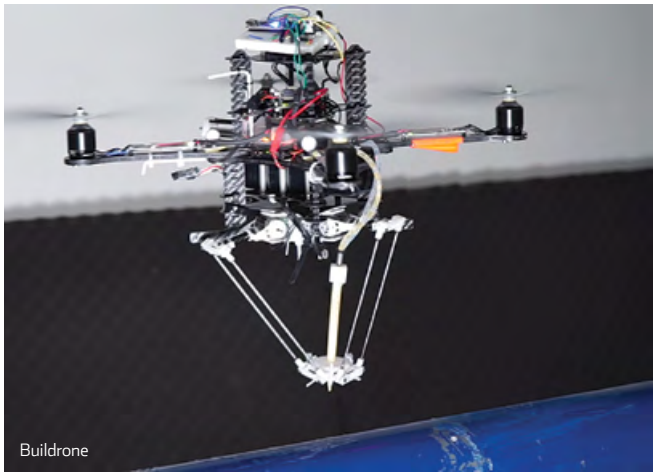
Buildrone's connection with

IMAGE CREDIT TALIB M. ALHINAI

"WE'RE CURRENTLY ON THE PATH OF COMMERCIALIZATION TO DELIVER THE PRODUCT TO POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS IN THE FORM OF AN AERIAL REPAIR SERVICE."

the UAE extends beyond its utilities or the nationality of its creator. In February 2016, Alhinai and his team bagged the national category award, winning the AED1 million prize at the UAE Drones for Good Award challenge in Dubai, a forum popular in drone circles as the "world cup for drones." Emerging as winners out of over 1,000 submissions, Alhinai's Imperial College team won the award for reimagining the inspection and repair tasks associated with construction and oil and gas sector, while simultaneously achieving time and cost savings with their drone. "It was a fantastic experience from the making of an entry video at the very beginning, all the way to being announced as winners and meeting His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, and being personally presented with the award," Alhinai says. "It was an honor to meet him, to have had the opportunity to personally showcase Buildrone, and share our vision with him." The award, he admits, opened a lot of doors for his company- from introduction to new partners to carrying out pilots with, to being recognized on the global tech stage as a formidable creation. And of course, though Buildrone continues to scale while still being a bootstrapped enterprise, Alhinai says the prize winnings from the 2016 UAE Drones for Good Award have significantly helped them to keep going without having to rely on external investors. Post the victory in the challenge, Alhinai's connection with the local ecosystem also deepened. He worked with the Dubai Future Foundation -a body set up to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Dubai- to help establish community innovation centers to encourage the adoption of robotics solutions and technologies. "The involvement then transitioned into joining a two-year project in August 2016 with The Executive Office of H.H.


Talib M. Alhinai presenting at the 2016 Drones for Good challenge


Buildrone

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to accelerate the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Dubai which I am still a part of," he adds. Alhinai is also playing a part in nurturing UAE's future change makers as an Ambassador for Shorik, an initiative launched by H.E. Dr. Ahmed Belhoul Al Falasi, UAE Minister of State for Higher Education, that intends to connect high school students interested in studying abroad with students currently studying at global universities.

And very soon, just like the Emirati entrepreneur himself, his startup Buildrone too will be an integral part of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. The company, which is currently based in the UK, is also being relocated to the UAE, says Alhinai. "We're currently on the path of commercialization to deliver the product to potential customers in the form of an aerial repair service. This service is proposed to be a drone that would be deployed to a remote site (e.g. an oil refinery or steel plant) to inspect and identify potential weaknesses in structure and preemptively carry out repairs on them before a fault even takes place," he adds. While two pilot projects with established industrial partners ("the first with a large steel manufacturer in Spain concerning pipeline leak repairs and a second with a renewable energy firm in the UAE concerning cleaning solar panels") are currently ›››

'TREP TALK
TALIB M. ALHINAI, FOUNDER, BUILDRONE

Q What is your advice for aspiring entrepreneurs in the MENA region?

A "My top three tips for MENA's entrepreneurs would be first to focus on cultivating their grit- starting a venture is hard, but as long there is passion and a perseverance at the core of their work ethic, then there is always a way forward.

Second is to get out of your comfort zone- if you want to build the business of your dreams you'll have to be willing to give up your full-time job and putting those hours instead into your business.

The third tip would be to seek out other entrepreneurs who are 'ahead' of you (e.g. those who have already completed their Series A) for advice, and as well as others who are in the same level as you, to keep each other motivated."

Talib M. Alhinai and team winning the UAE Drones for Good challenge

The entrepreneur's short-term priorities include publishing the recent results of his just-concluded research part of his PhD, and to focus on continuing to refine the Buildrone prototype to carry out aerial repairs.

"[WE AIM] TO DEVELOP SWARMS OF AERIAL ROBOTS THAT COULD BE DEPLOYED AT HARD-TO-REACH CONSTRUCTION SITES FOLLOWING NATURAL CATASTROPHES AND AUTONOMOUSLY 'PRINT' BUILDINGS TO SERVE AS TEMPORARY HOUSING SOLUTIONS AND DISASTER SHELTERS."

underway, the Buildrone team is also working on their main goal of 3D printing buildings with drones. "[We aim] to develop swarms of aerial robots that could be deployed at hard-to-reach construction sites following natural catastrophes such as tsunamis and earthquakes and autonomously 'print' buildings to serve as temporary housing solutions and disaster shelters," he says.

Alhinai is currently in the process of transitioning from London, and he is clear that he'll be based in Abu Dhabi "for the foreseeable future." This decision is also guided by his optimism about the UAE's efforts to position itself as a global hub for innovation, and desire to be a contributor to this ambition of his nation. "The results of the UAE's leadership's efforts to create a knowledge economy for the world after oil can already be seen with a spike in children and youth interest to take part in STEM from an early age, and with Dubai's burgeoning reputation as the world's test ground for attracting disruptive technology," he says. He believes that the way things are progressing and the entrepreneurial success stories that surround us are clearly testimonies to the role of government-sponsored initiatives, and "the trickle-down down effect [they have] on the rest of society."

At the same time, the timing of Buildrone's migration to the UAE could not be more fortuitous for the country, as well. It's no secret that the UAE's policymakers harbor ambitious goals for 3D printing technology, and are keen to supplement this goal with tangible results. While in 2016, the UAE made headlines for a 3D printed office unveiled near the Emirates Towers in Dubai, H.H. Sheikh Mohammed also declared at the time that by 2030, 25% of buildings in Dubai would be 3D printed. And to help the country achieve this monumental goal, Alhinai strongly believes in entrepreneurs maintaining links with the academic community, as "that's where most of the innovative ideas are nurtured." Thus, once he's back in the UAE, the entrepreneur's short-term priorities include publishing the recent results of his just-concluded research part of his PhD, and to focus on continuing to refine the Buildrone prototype to carry out aerial repairs.

As for what keeps him stay steadfastly motivated and devoted to his not-so-easy venture, Alhinai says looking back at the long way Buildrone has come keeps him going. "It's energizing to be recognized for an idea that was once just a pet project, and to have seen it blossom into a business today. It's motivation for us to work even harder, given that we're still a long way away from achieving our vision." But if the achievements Alhinai and Buildrone have realized so far are any indication, then it's safe to say that this Emirati entrepreneur has an impressive future ahead of him- and we at *Entrepreneur Middle East* are certainly looking forward to it. ■

On balancing research and product development with the business management, as an entrepreneur

"Juggling a PhD at the same time as starting and then managing business was an interesting learning experience due to the large gulf in between the two, but the research skills I gained during the PhD were largely transferable which made the shift into the product development aspect of Buildrone much easier. In terms of managing the business, those skills had to be acquired on the go as and when needed as we are a team of four and all of us are fully focused on research and product development, but when the time came to focus on the business, I was fortunate enough that the team rallied around me and supported me into making that transition while still keeping research development and experimentation as a primary focus."


Talib M. Alhinai, founder, Buildrone

HITTING (ALL) THE RIGHT NOTES

A. R. RAHMAN

THE ACADEMY AWARD-WINNING MUSIC COMPOSER ON SUCCESS, HUMANITY, AND MORE **by ABY SAM THOMAS**

I've been an unabashed fan of A. R. Rahman for a long while now, and when I say, "a long while," I mean that quite literally- I first came across this Indian artist's creations back in 1992, when he composed the soundtrack for a Tamil movie called *Roja*. That album –which, by the way, is now listed as one of *TIME*'s "10 best soundtracks" of all time- signaled the start of Rahman's journey in the music industry, which, after more than 25 years, now sees him as an international artist par excellence with a plethora of awards -the list includes two Academy Awards, two Grammy Awards, a Golden Globe, and a BAFTA Award- in addition to a fan following spread across the globe. No surprises then as to why I felt tongue-tied, and quite frankly, star-struck, when I got to meet with the man dubbed as the "Mozart of Madras" in January, prior to his headline appearance at *The Journey*, a concert that was organized by Brothers Incorporated and staged at Bollywood Parks, Dubai in the same month. I didn't get to spend a lot of time with Rahman, but the few minutes that I got to chat with him did offer, I believe, glances into the psyche that powers this genius. Success, to this artist extraordinaire, is something that doesn't come easily- but Rahman feels that the road to it starts with one having a steadfast belief in oneself. "You have to [hold] a mirror to yourself," Rahman says. "Look at yourself, and where you stand with all these people around- are you standing out? What will make you stick out is your personality- and hard work. Instant success never comes. You don't get success in one day, two days- it might take two years, three years, 20 years... But come out with a strong personality, and something to contribute to humanity- and you'll be recognized." ›››

IMAGES COURTESY A.R. RAHMAN

"WHEN YOU HAVE PUT IN SO MUCH OF YOUR ENERGY INTO SOMETHING, THEN THAT ENERGY HAS VALUE. YOU HAVE TO HAVE FAITH, AND YOU HAVE TO KEEP AT IT, CONSISTENTLY... YOU MAY LOSE HOPE [AT TIMES]- BUT YOU'LL FIND A WAY."

A. R. Rahman

IMAGES COURTESY A.R. RAHMAN


A. R. Rahman

Such a sentiment would explain what has fueled Rahman's meteoric rise as an artist, along with his passionate support for a number of social causes. He started out as a composer for movies made in the Southern part of India (hits include *Bombay*, *Minsara Kanavu*, and *Kandukondain Kandukondain*), which eventually led him to enter the country's larger Hindi film industry, Bollywood, as well, and a string of hits later (landmark albums include *Rangeela*, *Taal*, *Dil Se*, and *Lagaan*), he soon had a fan following in all corners of the country. His success (and impact) in India got his work to be noticed overseas as well- the legendary English composer Andrew Lloyd Webber (of *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* fame) commissioned him for a theatrical production, *Bombay Dreams*, in 2002, and soon, Rahman found himself working on a number of projects in the West as well. His music for the Danny Boyle-directed movie *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008 saw him win a slew of international awards, which firmly established him as a musical icon with a global presence. Rahman's music

"WHAT WILL MAKE YOU STICK OUT IS YOUR PERSONALITY- AND HARD WORK. INSTANT SUCCESS NEVER COMES. YOU DON'T GET SUCCESS IN ONE DAY [...] BUT COME OUT WITH A STRONG PERSONALITY, AND SOMETHING TO CONTRIBUTE TO HUMANITY- AND YOU'LL BE RECOGNIZED."

has transcended boundaries, and links people together in ways that are, quite simply, unfathomable- for a frame of reference, know that Rahman is the common denominator in the rendition of an 18th century Carnatic classic "*Alai Payuthey*" (*Alai Payuthey*) at, say, a pious wedding in Chennai, India, and that sound of Nicole Scherzinger blaring out "Jai Ho" (*Slumdog Millionaire*) at a weekend party in New York City. For what it's worth, his standing in the global landscape is something that Rahman is very aware of (and grateful for), and he does acknowledge the responsibility it brings. "It seems like there's reason behind all of this stuff," Rahman reflects. "When you see all this turmoil in the world, you feel like you can be a voice, like a neutral voice, through art."

And this statement serves as an indication of how Rahman approaches being a humanitarian as well: he has lent his name to and partnered with a number of social initiatives, one of which is The Sunshine Orchestra, a program that takes in talented children from underprivileged backgrounds in India, and then trains them in the art of music. This is just one example though, and regardless of whether it is a philanthropic activity or not, Rahman claims to be driven by a desire to effect change (of the good kind) in the world around him. "What you do is what you get," he declares. "Even if it's in your mind, if you intend to do something good, then there's a reward for that. And we should never underestimate that. Just smile at somebody- there will be a reward for it… So, nothing goes to waste. For one kind deed, there will be a reward for that. For one kind thought about the whole of humanity, there'll be a reward for that." This is an ethos that has obviously served Rahman well, and the rest of us would be wise to follow in his footsteps- regardless of what we set out to do with our lives. "There should be a purpose," he declares. "Money is not a purpose. Fame is not a purpose. But humanity is a purpose." While Rahman's ideas should be inspiring for all you creatives out there, I'd suggest the not-so-arty among you (wannabe entrepreneurs with dollars in your eyes, I'm looking at you) to also take his words to heart. As for those of you dreaming of replicating the success that Rahman has achieved, Rahman says that your road to it begins with you *knowing* yourself, and understanding what makes you, well, *unique*. Of course, this is easier said than done, and yes, you will need a while to come to this realization. "To get that special instinct that you've got something which nobody else has, it takes time," Rahman says. "It's a big shift. You need to first convince yourself- you need to deliver something, and show yourself [that you can do it]. When you get that internal coin drop, then it's easy. You then have to show what you have to likeminded people, and then slowly, everything will come together." This may sound simplistic, sure, but I, for one, find it hard not to be taken in by Rahman's childlike, but intense, belief in this premise. "When you have put in so much of your energy into something, then that energy has value," he says. "You have to have faith, and you have to keep at it, consistently… You may lose hope [at times]- but you'll find a way." ▪


A. R. Rahman

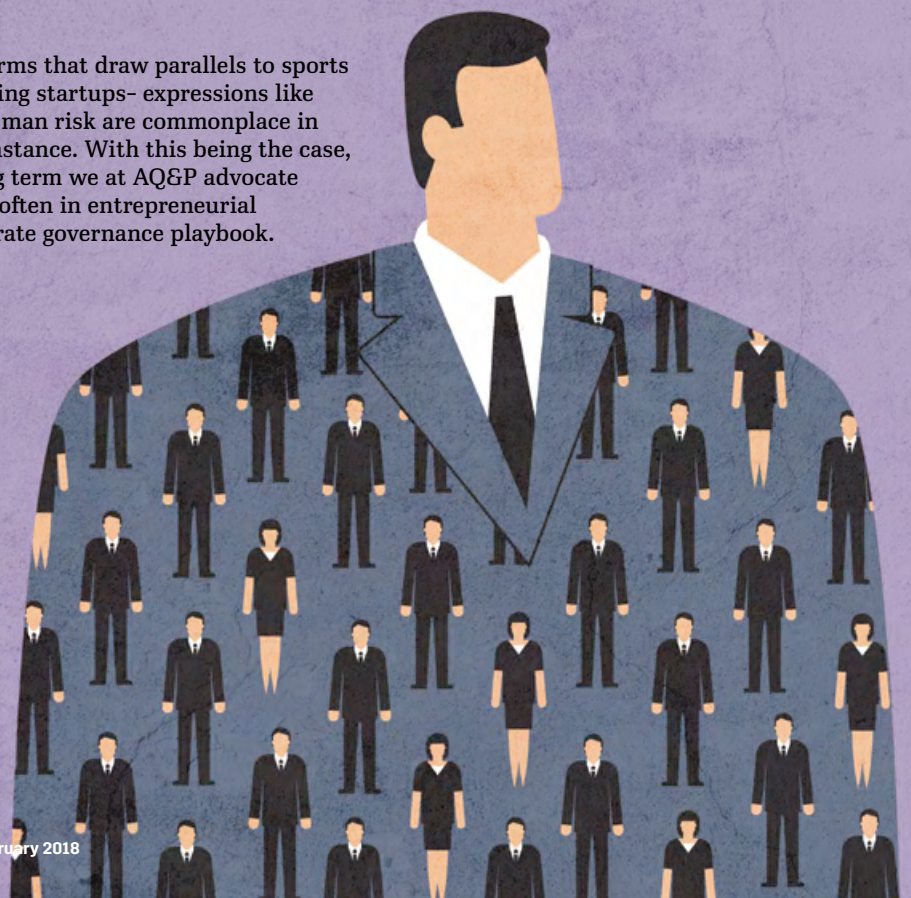
Shape your corporate culture

[The how-to]

A guide to establishing **corporate governance** at your venture

by FAHIM AL QASIMI

We often use terms that draw parallels to sports when discussing startups- expressions like MVP and key man risk are commonplace in startup spaces, for instance. With this being the case, here's a new sporting term we at AQ&P advocate should feature more often in entrepreneurial discourse: the corporate governance playbook.



THE WHY

THREE REASONS WHY YOUR STARTUP NEEDS A CORPORATE GOVERNANCE PLAYBOOK

Corporate governance is often misunderstood. It is not, as most entrepreneurs believe, a practice reserved for large multinationals and publicly listed firms. It is not a science, nor is it something that is complex to implement.

When working with entrepreneurs, we describe their corporate governance playbook as a document that identifies the roles, authority, and timing in key business decisions between shareholders, directors and the CEO. It is an important aspect of your enterprise, and here's why you should focus on corporate governance at the outset of any venture:

1/ It manages complex decision making Startups are just as complex as large multinational firms, albeit in a different fashion. Founders are often the CEOs of their venture, they also hold shares, and sit on the board of directors. Many angel investors will also require a board seat to oversee their investment. If you have raised funding from venture capital firms, then you will need to manage their interests in the shareholding structure, the composition of your board, and the role of the CEO. As your startup grows, the interplay between these three levels requires active management. The responsibilities, authority levels, and timing of decision-making need detailing. Your playbook should outline when meetings occur, what decisions require board approval, and the structure of your board of directors.

2/ It saves you time Anyone that has been involved in a startup knows that decisions need to be made quickly. Your ability to maneuver and take swift decisions can make or break your strategy. One of the hardest things to hear from a board member or shareholder is: "Why was I not told about it?" Or: "Let's discuss this at the next board meeting." Clearly laying out the authority matrix of your business, and the timing and subjects of your board meetings in advance can shape a corporate culture that not only empowers CEOs, but delineates accountability when the tough decisions need to be made. Sketching your playbook and agreeing on it in advance can save you time in the long run.

3/ It promotes investor confidence As an investor, a corporate governance playbook is one of the first things I ask to see at a startup requesting funding. Seeing a well laid out approach to accountability, responsibility, and timing of decisions between shareholders, boards of directors and the CEO gives an investor clarity and confidence on the structure of your venture. Understanding how the board is composed, the process of appointment, and how votes are dealt with answers a lot of unknowns before shareholder agreements are negotiated. A clear way to differentiate yourselves from other startups and impress investors is to be proactive and share your playbook with them.

Getting started with your playbook is not a difficult task. Think about the major decisions that your startup may face in the long run, and highlight the way in which the three levels will engage to overcome challenges. Corporate governance playbooks are not static documents, and they will continue to evolve as your startup grows. Liken yourself to a coach of a sports team, and the effort that he puts into making his playbook. I personally often use sailing to draw parallels to corporate governance: if your sailboat is your startup, then your corporate governance playbook clearly lays out the relationship between your stakeholders before race day. When you go out onto the racecourse for your fiscal year, you can concentrate on what CEOs need to focus on, which is, steering the ship.

> THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS SHOULD BE A CORE PART OF YOUR BUSINESS PLANNING PROCESS. FROM THE OUTSET, YOU SHOULD THINK ABOUT THE IDEAL SIZE, DIVERSITY, AND INDEPENDENCY OF YOUR BOARD.

THE WHAT

THE BASICS ON PICKING YOUR DREAM TEAM OF DIRECTORS FOR YOUR BOARD

You have a startup, you are about to raise funding, and now you have been told that you need a board of directors to ensure that you have sound corporate governance. As an advocate of good corporate governance and having structured boards for many entrepreneurs in Dubai, here is a step-by-step guide to building a board for your startup.

Do I need a board of directors? You need a board of directors. Your board is appointed to represent the interests of the shareholders and if you are raising funding, a prudent investor will demand a seat at the board level. If you structure your board with value in mind, you should have access to a diversified group of experts that guide through your journey of building the business.

When do I need a board? The structure of your board of directors should be a core part of your business planning process. From the outset, you should think about the ideal size, diversity, and independency of your board. The way in which you structure your board can echo some of the values and business aims of your venture. An odd number of directors is commonplace, and we recommend five as a minimum; so plan on filling the seats as you get closer to launching the business.

Who should sit on the board? This is the hardest part of the exercise. In AQ&P, we use a framework to assess the effectiveness of a board-with three of the five tenets focused on structure. They are proportionality, independency and diversity.

Proportionality encourages a high percentage of non-executive directors [those that do not have a day-to-day role operating the business] and the separation of roles between the board of directors and the CEO. This is the most basic form of checks and balances in building an effective board.

Independency is key to good corporate governance, ›››

so if you fill your five seats with investors and founders, you lack an objective viewpoint that independent directors bring to the table. We encourage startups to have 80% of the board as independent directors. In addition, your corporate governance playbook should have a disclosure process for conflicts of interest.

Diversity is something we advocate for with passion. Gender balance and a diverse group of skillsets can make or break the corporate governance effectiveness of a business. The world's biggest businesses ensure that diversity is a key value in their corporate governance playbook.

How do I remunerate the board? Remunerating the board is important, especially with independent directors. Not only does it incentivize them to deliver, but paying an independent director can be more cost-effective than hiring a team of consultants to support your strategic goals. How much you ask? Think of the size of your business, the time invested and benchmark your peers- it is that simple.

At AQ&P, we coach businesses on building an effective board and encourage a comprehensive feedback process to ensure that your directors are delivering what you need. If you have decided to improve your corporate governance practices and don't know where to start, seek advice or ask other founders if they would be interested in a board seat; you would be surprised at the value that can bring to your startup. Your all-star picks could be the entrepreneurs down the street.

THE HOW

THREE TIPS TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF YOUR COMPANY'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

There are two distinct emotions associated with board meetings- it's either excitement or dread. As an entrepreneur, your board of directors should be your biggest asset, and preparing for a board meeting should be an exciting time for your business. Using sound corporate governance practices can create value in your relationship with directors. Here are a few tips to manage this important relationship.

1/ Meet with your board regularly Your corporate governance playbook (or guidelines) should dictate the number of board meetings you have per year. I recommend quarterly meetings as a minimum, but it is common to meet up to six times a year for startups. Scheduled far in advance, this ensures that you assess performance regularly, and that your directors commit their time to supporting the business.

2/ Meet with directors separately If you have structured your board with value in mind, then you should have access to a diversified group of experts to call on. Each director should be appointed on the value that they bring to the business. CEOs should make a habit of reaching out to them separately when their expertise is required. Do not hesitate to have meetings with directors individually leading up to board meetings to get guidance and feedback. Some entrepreneurs have to manage the "eager director" that wants to meet more regularly (such as weekly calls, monthly catch-ups). While this can be challenging to manage, your corporate governance playbook should highlight the role, authority and timing of key decisions in the business. A well laid out playbook can help you respond to an eager director by saying, "Let's save our discussions for the board meeting."

PAYING AN INDEPENDENT DIRECTOR CAN BE MORE COST-EFFECTIVE THAN HIRING A TEAM OF CONSULTANTS TO SUPPORT YOUR STRATEGIC GOALS.

3/ Board meetings should be quick I cannot reiterate enough how important it is to keep board meetings short. By sharing the information and presentations in advance, directors can review it, and their feedback can be incorporated before you meet with the entire board. Your board meetings should focus on approvals and critical discussions. It is common to meet with directors individually before board meetings to run them through the key points. A well-structured agenda, briefing directors and focusing on the key issues will keep directors engaged. Another important aspect to incorporate into your corporate governance playbook is committees. If certain subjects are recurring themes in your board meetings [remuneration or audit for example], it may be useful to establish a committee that meets more often and reports to the board. This structure can help manage conflicts of interest [a managing director and remuneration for example], as well as give you the ability to bring in external support with specific committee requirements.

Corporate governance and board meetings should not be a chore, nor a box ticking exercise. If you have selected your directors with value in mind, then your role should focus on making the most of the time you spend with them. When time is an increasingly expensive commodity, you want to welcome time with your board with excitement, not dread. ■

Fahim Al Qasimi is a Partner at AQ&P, a Dubai-based corporate advisory and investment firm. AQ&P plays an active role in advising large corporates and SMEs on corporate governance, market entry, mergers and acquisitions in the UAE. As an advocate for strong corporate governance in SMEs, Fahim has spoken on the importance of addressing corporate governance at the outset of any venture. He believes that strategic advisory is not reserved for large conglomerates, and has worked with startups and SMEs as a strategy consultant. www.aqandp.com

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A NEW WAY TO WORK

In 2018, the work arrangements you provide to your employees are going to play a huge part in their loyalty towards you **by SUHAIL AL-MASRI**

It is a staple of this time of the year to talk about new trends, future resolutions, and big changes. However, preferred work arrangements require near constant observation and care. Unhappy and unmotivated employees are less likely to be loyal to their workplace and seek alternative employment. Seeing as loyalty and retention comes at a price, this is one of the most elementary reasons for continually assuring that you, as an employer, are doing your best to provide for your employees.

In the past decade, increased technological penetration and the advent of social media has hugely altered various aspects of our daily lives. This has caused the lifestyles and priorities of professionals to evolve both globally and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and, in turn, has morphed the professional landscape as well. In current times, instant connectivity, gratification and action is not only possible, but expected.

Seeing as companies are always on the lookout for the best new practices for attracting and retaining top talent, it is only natural that, when new regional preferences become apparent, reassessment and adaptation are taking place. However, it is difficult to pin down the collective thoughts of millions of professionals across a vast and culturally diverse region. Additionally, while communication is a highly valued aspect of every workplace, it might be difficult for employees to reach out and demand provisions that are still somewhat unconventional from their employers, such as remote work options.

For such reasons, many companies struggle to pinpoint the most effective workplace arrangements for their employees and could risk being left behind as the rest of the market gets swept up in a storm of trends. So, what should companies be wary of as they investigate their success at keeping existing employees satisfied and potential employees interested?

Remote work is definitely a prevalent trend and one of the key characteristics of the rapidly morphing 21st century work environment.

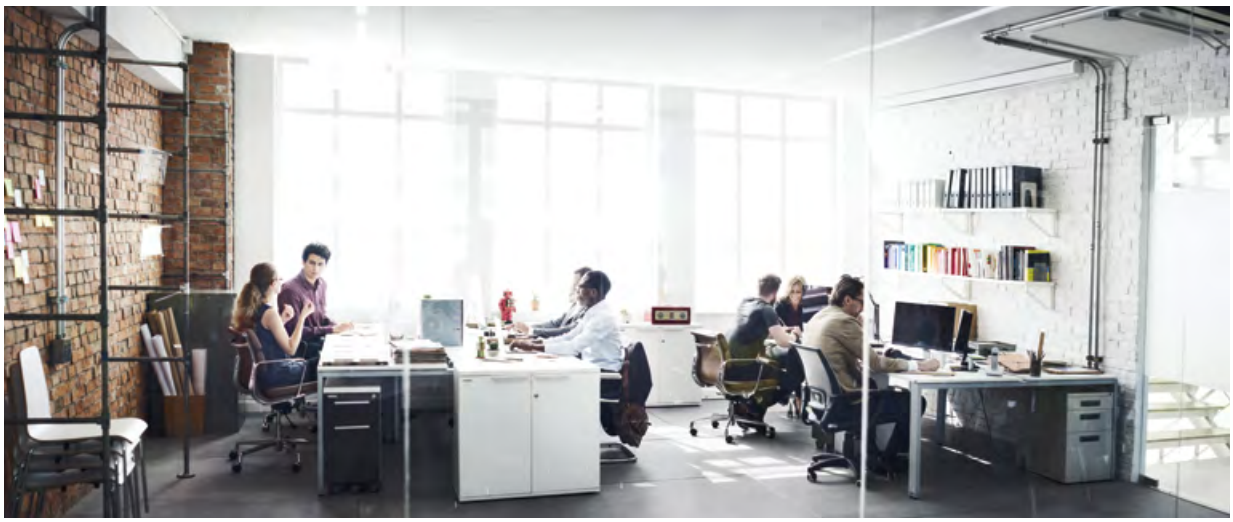
THE DAYS OF RIGID NINE-TO-FIVE OFFICE WORK ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY ANTIQUATED AND FLEXIBILITY OF HOURS AND WORK OPTIONS IS BECOMING MORE PREVALENT.

THE BIG PRIZE

When discussing the key drivers of attracting top talent, maintaining employee engagement and morale, and increasing employee loyalty, there are many factors that come into play. These factors are vital because they assist in developing the best practices and strategies to secure top talent, drive employee engagement and ensure that every employee is motivated enough to contribute positively to the company. This is especially crucial for startups that are yet to formulate their employer brand and fully define what their workplace and culture are all about.

In order to identify the priorities of professionals in the Middle East, a recent poll conducted by Bayt.com entitled *Preferred Work Arrangements in the MENA*, December 2017, revealed that the foremost priority in selecting job opportunities is salary and compensation, as cited by 41% of respondents. This is unsurprising as salary is a factor universally acknowledged to attract talent and drive motivation. In fact, the poll further revealed that nearly 9 in 10 respondents claimed that they would be willing to work beyond their prescribed work hours and responsibilities in return for appropriate compensation. Additionally, when asked if they were willing to travel for work, 82.8% of respondents stated they would do so as long as they were compensated for it.

As such, it is evident that compensation continues to be a remarkable motivator when it comes to employee motivation and engagement. It is also worth noting that 74.6% of professionals would consider relocating for employment, compared to less than a fifth (17.4%) who claim that their willingness to relocate is dependent on the country, while only 6.2% of professionals are entirely unwilling to relocate for work.



JOB SECURITY OVER COMPANY SIZE

Besides monetary incentives, there are other factors that were arguably taken for granted in the past and have recently emerged with greater significance in the workplace. At a cursory glance, details such as a preference for larger or smaller companies, full-time or part-time work and professional benefits or caveats may appear to boil down to individual preference and, as such, may sometimes exist outside the control of companies seeking to attract top talent.

Nonetheless, one of the key findings of the Bayt.com poll, *Preferred Work Arrangements in the MENA*, was that a staggering majority of 74.2% of job seekers would prefer working for a "large or multinational" company rather than a "small or medium-sized" company or a startup (11.2%). While this assertion may seem like bad news for smaller companies and startups, it must be remembered that preferences for work arrangements reflect the ever-evolving priorities of employable adults in any given region. Generally speaking, large or multinational companies are seen as being more established, stable and secure, and as being equipped with the right revenue to ensure the fulfilment of their employees' desires for work arrangements.

However, size is only a surface issue and employers of smaller or medium-sized companies as well as startup businesses can circumvent this road block by emphasizing their ability to provide the highly sought-after job security and by incentivizing hiring with non-monetary benefits and compensation.

PROFESSIONALS IN THE MENA REGION SEEM TO DESIRE THE STABILITY OF A FULL-TIME JOB WITH A FIXED-DURATION CONTRACT BALANCED WITH THE INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM OF FLEXIBLE HOURS, ROOM FOR GROWTH AND REMOTE WORK OPTIONS.

A major incentive when choosing job opportunities is the provision of stability and job security. When looking at preferences in the nature of work, the results revealed 9 in 10 respondents mostly want to have full-time work instead of part-time (1.9%) or freelance (1.9%) work. A trend of preferring low-risk arrangements with higher chances of job stability is apparent from the aforementioned data. This is further evidenced by the reasons given for preferring full-time work with nearly half (48.3%) of respondents citing "job security" as the primary advantage of full-time work. This was followed by "better career growth prospects" cited by 26.6% of respondents, "stable source of income" (15.7%) and, finally, "greater ease in communicating and completing work" (9.4%).

In addition, career growth has been proven to be of incredible necessity to MENA professionals in general. In the Bayt.com poll, *On-the-Job Training in the Middle East and North Africa*, October 2017, the findings revealed that a majority (85%) of professionals would leave their current jobs for better training and career development opportunities elsewhere. This sentiment is echoed once more in the Bayt.com *Preferred Work Arrangements in the MENA* Poll, wherein career growth and training emerged as the second-most valued attribute when looking at job opportunities at 23%, right after salary. With this statistic in mind, the provision of career growth opportunities by employers, irrespective of the company's size, is an imperative incentive of attracting and retaining top talent.

AUTONOMY DEMANDED

While it is clear that the majority of professionals in the MENA region prefer full-time work, they are still seeking a degree of flexibility when it comes to their preferred work arrangements. The results revealed that more than 8 in 10 MENA professionals would prefer to work for a company that provides "flexible hours." Further cementing the observed trend of desiring flexibility in work, 79% of respondents stated that they would prefer working for a company with 'remote work' options.

Remote work is definitely a prevalent trend and one of the key characteristics ›››

of the rapidly morphing 21st century work environment. It has been observed over the past few years that the days of rigid, nine-to-five, cubicle-constricted office work are becoming increasingly antiquated and that flexibility of hours and work options is becoming more prevalent. This is also indicative of another current trend, which is that in place of creating a work-life balance, a concept which hinges on a healthy separation of the professional and personal aspects of an individual's life, more and more individuals are seeking work-life integration. That is, a new concept describing the intertwinement of work and life, something that is projected to be the future of the working world.

This shift from working at home being seen as unusual to being something desirable tells of the modern day MENA professional's desire for flexibility, independence and autonomy. When asked of the advantages of freelance work, two-thirds of respondents cited "flexible hours" as the main benefit, followed by "more independence and control over work" (16.5%), the ability to "explore more career options," (14.2%) and "more control over income" (2.5%).

A NEW BALANCE: FIXED AND FLEXIBLE

The perceived perks of freelance work and the observed trend of desiring flexibility are contrasted by the vast majority (84.4%) of professionals preferring to have an employment contract with a specified duration when seeking new employment. Additionally, when asked what type of working environment they desire, nearly two-thirds (64.9%) of respondents reported that they prefer working indoors at a desk, while only 14.5% claimed to prefer working outdoors at different sites. The remaining fifth (20.6%) cited no preference on where they work.

What we can posit from this data is that while flexibility is becoming increasingly significant at a rapid rate, professionals in the MENA region seem to desire the stability of a full-time job with a fixed-duration contract balanced with the independence and freedom of flexible hours, room for growth and remote work options. It would appear, then, that a worthwhile practice for employers in the region to consider is introducing the balance between the flexible and fixed in their own companies in order to drive employee morale and increase happiness and productivity in the workplace.

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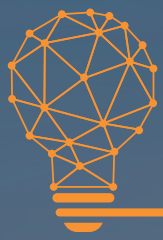
THIS SHIFT FROM WORKING AT HOME BEING SEEN AS UNUSUAL TO BEING SOMETHING DESIRABLE TELLS OF THE MODERN-DAY MENA PROFESSIONAL'S DESIRE FOR FLEXIBILITY, INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY.

Bear in mind that the conversation about how the workplace will need to evolve to make way for present and future needs is already happening all across the working world, and if it hasn't happened in your organization yet, then it probably will very soon. It is very likely that companies that do not get on the bandwagon of offering flexible hours and remote work options will get left behind and lose out on great candidates seeing as the majority of professionals hold flexibility in high regard.

On a final note, data on the preferences and priorities of employable adults can and should be armed by organizations seeking to increase their attractiveness to potential employees and drive employee loyalty. Many companies have already taken steps to break from the rigid constraints of the traditional workplace, opting for web conferences that do not require physical presence to participate, remote work options such as working from home some days of the week, or flexible hours instead of the draining nine-to-five routine. There is no reason to stop there, either. Technology and connectivity has made it so that there are dozens of new ways to perform old, routine tasks much more effectively. By getting creative with the facts and finding a middle ground that suits everyone, the workplace can become tenfold more productive and efficient. ■

Suhail Al-Masri is the VP of Employer Solutions at Bayt.com, the #1 job site in the Middle East with more than 40,000 employers and over 30,600,000 registered job seekers from across the Middle East, North Africa and the globe, representing all industries, nationalities and career levels. 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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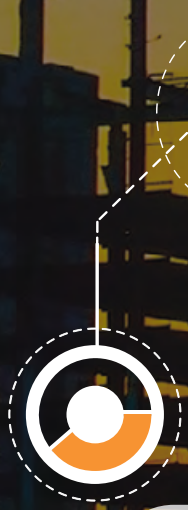

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Claire Diaz-Ortiz at Turkey Innovation and Entrepreneurship Week 2017

Social media for social good

Claire Diaz-Ortiz, formerly the Social Innovation Manager at Twitter, on how social enterprises can boost their digital presence

by PAMELLA DE LEON

Change the world with one tweet- that was the subject of Claire Diaz-Ortiz's speech at the Turkey Innovation and Entrepreneurship Week 2017, which was held in December 2017 at Istanbul. During her talk, Diaz-Ortiz, who was formerly the Social Innovation Manager at Twitter and currently advises social enterprises on their social innovation strategies, noted how her passion for creating social impact was what has been driving her career ahead- even her role at Twitter was a result of this. In 2005, Diaz-Ortiz was in Kenya, where she was looking to initiate an after-school program for an orphanage, which eventually resulted in the creation of a non-profit organization. At the time, in her bid to help raise funds for the orphanage, Diaz-Ortiz started a blog on Blogger.com, a blog-publishing service that was co-founded by Evan Williams, who was then also launching a new social media platform called Twitter. "They found [the] blog, started promoting it, and said, 'Hey, we're starting this new tool called Twitter, why don't you try it?'" Diaz-Ortiz remembers. "I tried it- it *worked*. I was connected with early journalists, with early donors, with people interested in orphanage children in East Africa. Twitter was my portal to the world." One thing led to another, and Diaz-Ortiz soon found herself working at Twitter, where she led initiatives like Twitter for Nonprofits, and Twitter Ads for Good. She has since authored eight books (including *Twitter for Good* and *One Minute Mentoring*), and following her departure from Twitter, Diaz-Ortiz has become an advisor for several social enterprises around the world.

According to Diaz-Ortiz, social innovation is today prevalent across the globe- when she wrote *Twitter for Good*, most of the case stories mentioned were US-based, as international stories were difficult to find at the time. That's wholly different to the current state of affairs, with Diaz-Ortiz noting that today, there are fewer opportunities for innovation in this space in "developed markets," with emerging markets now taking the lead in using platforms like Twitter in inventive ways. As an example, Diaz-Ortiz points toward a health program in Rwanda that helps provide basic health resources to people in rural areas by responding to issues, questions and medications requests through Twitter. "In Silicon Valley, you don't have the same type of need, so I think that's really the biggest change," Diaz-Ortiz says. But social entrepreneurs in emerging markets have challenges unique to them as well. "Let's say you were in Kagali, Rwanda, [so] you have to do really well in Kagali before you can do anything else," she explains. "And the challenge is that the cultural differences across borders are really extreme. I think emerging markets do have a big challenge, because it's about capturing your market, and then expanding."

With that being the case, the importance of social entrepreneurs having a digital presence cannot be understated, Diaz-Ortiz says. "The biggest [advice I can give] for a social entrepreneur trying to make an impact is to realize that you are your brand, you are the brand, and your brand is digital." For early-stage ventures, they may not have many marketing channels at their disposal, but what they do have, Diaz-Ortiz asserts, is the opportunity to create a blog, get on LinkedIn, create a Twitter post, and publish on Facebook: "They have these abilities to create [a] platform, and influence [their intended audience], and they should go do it, and go after it." It's a considerable advantage for social entrepreneurs, but Diaz-Ortiz notes that it is one they often miss leverag-

IMAGE CREDIT TURKEY INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP WEEK

"THE BIGGEST [ADVICE I CAN GIVE] FOR A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR TRYING TO MAKE AN IMPACT IS TO REALIZE THAT YOU ARE YOUR BRAND, YOU ARE THE BRAND, AND YOUR BRAND IS DIGITAL."

ing upon. "I talk to brands and social enterprises often who have very little online presence, and I just think it's such a waste of opportunity [to be] a market leader in a small niche [as] a social enterprise. Essentially, the first thing you should try to capture is the online market." While creating content and being on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook is vital, Diaz-Ortiz states that creating long forms of content -whether on Medium or LinkedIn or your own site- and also video ("Snapchat is a huge opportunity") should be leveraged to build one's influence. "Wherever you think you can create content, you should be making content."

With various enterprises trying to make a distinct mark online, Diaz-Ortiz observes that a common mistake social entrepreneurs make is aligning with influencers for their brand- which Diaz-Ortiz says is helpful over time when you're trying to build a relationship; however, it's more indispensable to build one's own community who "already care about what you do, or active customers who already are about what you do, and [as you] do both of those strategies at the same time, the more likely you will be [able] to build a presence and have an impact." On the subject of influencers, I asked her thoughts on how some individuals and brands portray influence by buying followers to display engagement. Her response: "That's just not the right strategy- the strategy really isn't about followers." Diaz-Ortiz encourages social 'treps to focus on engagement than follower numbers, keeping in mind how every platform has different algorithm settings. "What happens on social media is, we follow the people we believe in, typically," she says. "Everyone's living in separate bubbles, thinking that what they think is what everyone else thinks."

So, with such filter bubbles in the picture, alongside fake news, bots and pseudo influencers, how can social entrepreneurs go about measuring the impact social media has on their enterprises? Diaz-Ortiz maintains that now more than ever, a social media strategy's KPI has to be based on real life. "If you're looking at a social enterprise trying to sell sanitation resources in Nairobi, the KPI shouldn't be about their number of Facebook followers, or the engagement on a particular post," she explains. "It needs to be about the number of sanitation trucks that are dispatching each day." But, at the end of the day, Diaz-Ortiz remains optimistic (and adamant) about social media's altruistic capabilities. "I know the story of technology, and the story of technology is you build something, some people use it for good, some people use it for bad," Diaz-Ortiz says. "And some people [will] keep using it for good. So, I do think social media is a tool for good. I think we're going through [a] rough time, but we will come out the other end, and the truth, the good, will rise to the top." ■

Trust issues

WHEN IT COMES TO BRANDING, WHO DO WE TRUST? A MEPRA SURVEY THROWS SOME LIGHT ON THE TOPIC

DOES INFLUENCER MARKETING ACTUALLY WORK? If you find yourself asking this question often, this recent survey of 1,000 UAE residents commissioned by Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) and conducted by YouGov, may offer a perspective. Personalized word-of-mouth still remains one of the most valuable marketing tool even in today's digital age, with 84% of those polled saying they trusted "face-to-face recommendations of products and services from friends and family." Where does that leave social media influencers? Well, only 39% of respondents said they trust online recommendations from social media influencers or people with large followings. Further, looking at the aspect of trust in media, the survey found that trust in print publications (newspapers and magazines) ranked highest at 48%, followed by radio and television (44% rating). Blogs emerged as the least trusted source of information in the survey at 39%. As for trust in advertising, the most trusted formats were found to be television and billboards (both at 45%), followed by radio (41%), and online (social media) coming in lowest at 37%. As perhaps one of its key finding, the study finds that over half of respondents (57%) said they trust advertising less today than they did five years ago, leading the survey to deduce that purchase decisions continue to be guided by personal relationships and recommendations even in the digital media age.
www.mepra.org

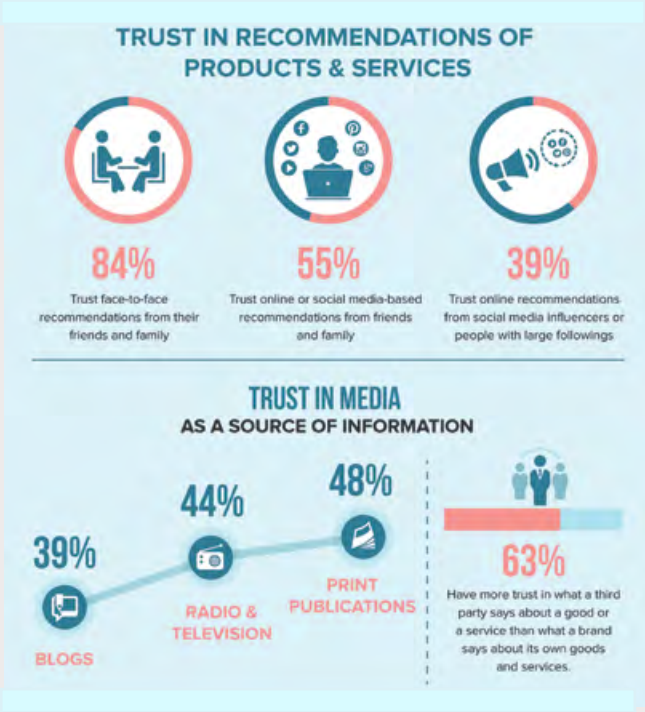


IMAGE CREDIT MEPRA, YOUGOV

#TAMTALKSTECH

GADGETS AND DOODADS THAT YOU MIGHT'VE MISSED OUT ON, SOURCED BY A TECH AFICIONADO. YES, IT'S OKAY TO WANT THEM ALL... AND NO, IT'S NOT OUR FAULT.

BUILT FOR BUSINESS

HP ELITE X2 1012 G2

HP's new premium commercial device, the Elite x2 1012 G2, combines power and portability into a sleek 2-in-1 design. It's powered by 7th generation Core-I processors and has up to 16 GB of RAM, which quadruples the storage of the first generation Elite x2. It offers advanced security features, up to 10 hours of battery life and fast charging, giving you up to 50% battery life in just 30 minutes. The device is both touch and tap enabled and works with an HP Active Pen, which allows you to write on the device naturally or launch an app. The Elite x2 1012 G2 is just as beautiful as it is functional. At about 8mm, the device is as slim as a #2 pencil. Its sturdy and elegant metal frame supports a 12.3-inch display with bonded Corning Gorilla Glass 4. Between the Collaboration Keyboard with built-in audio and high-resolution cameras, there's so much to love about the Elite x2 1012 G2.

HP Elite x2 1012 G2

HP Elite x2 1012 G2

IMAGES COURTESY: HP, LG, WHIRLPOOL


LG Styler

LOOK SMART
LG STYLER

The new LG Styler allows you to essentially dry clean your clothes from the comfort of your home. With expanded interior space, items that were once too bulky like down jackets and padded winter coats can be cleaned too. The Styler is powered by LG's innovative TrueSteam technology, which gently sanitizes garments and neutralizes unpleasant odors, removing over 99% of allergens and bacteria in clothing. The hot steam sprayed directly onto clothes sterilizes as well as straightens, while the Moving Hanger, which holds up to five items of clothing, shakes out remaining wrinkles. Professional pieces are usually what drive up the laundry bill, so the Styler has targeted technology to launder your work clothes. The Easy Pants Crease Care feature reduces behind-the-knee creases on pants, and can even leave a crisp line down the center of each leg for a sharp finish. This process works for pants with a waist size up to 48 inches and leaves a crease up to 60 centimeters long. The Styler is also an extension of LG's smart home appliances with Wi-Fi compatibility. You can set various styling courses and track energy consumption using your smartphone. The companion app can be set up to notify you when the cleaning cycle done and for clothes with NFC tags, the app can scan the tag and inform the Styler which course is most effective– a smart way to stay stylish!


LG Styler

COME CLEAN
WHIRLPOOL 6TH SENSE DISHWASHER

Smart home devices that are truly smart, save time, money and natural resources. Whirlpool masters this trifecta with its new 6th SENSE PowerClean Dishwasher. The appliance makes a daily chore efficient by cleaning more dishes at a time using less power and water. Its foldable racks accommodate any shaped dish and up to 13 place settings. You can also load pots and pans vertically facing the jet sprays to make space for 10 extra plates. 6th SENSE has 28 powerful jet sprays and PowerClean technology that uses intelligent sensors to detect the level of soil and adjust the water pressure to clean dishes with the lowest possible water consumption. Thanks to its revolutionary water recycling system, 6th SENSE uses only six liters of water per cycle when the ECO setting is used. And it doesn't stop there. Once the dishes are clean, the drying process begins. The PowerDry function achieves ultimate drying results, even on plastic items, thanks to its innovative 3D airflow drying system. It's a completely closed drying circuit that works by using the steam from inside the dishwasher to condense and drain away water left on dishes. Using the Normative ECO50 setting, you can save up to 20% of energy when drying. Whirlpool asserts that with the 6th SENSE dishwasher you can enjoy up to 50% savings on energy, water and time.


Whirlpool 6th SENSE Dishwasher

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

'TREP TRIMMINGS

THE EXECUTIVE SELECTION

From better goods to better wardrobe bests, every issue we choose a few items that make the approved executive selection list. In this issue, we present a sleek new timepiece, a fresh scent perfect for the season, a leather piece to add to your gear, and a UAE-based platform to look to for your next eyewear haul.

READY FOR TAKEOFF

BREITLING

Inspired by aviation enthusiasts, Breitling brings its Chronoliner B04 to the Middle East in a 250-piece limited edition series. The Swiss luxury watchmaker presents a timepiece dubbed as the flight captain's chronograph, with promises to "accurately measure flight times while juggling with times around the world." Powered by its Manufacture Breitling Caliber B04, it features an 18k gold case, blue dial and ceramic bezel, and a dual time zone system. Styled in blue and gold, from your long-haul flight to your next meeting, it's ready and waiting. www.breitling.com

Breitling Chronoliner B04

Montblanc Extreme briefcase

Montblanc Extreme backpacks

EDITOR'S PICK

MONTLANC EXTREME

Looking for a change in style? Keep your gear in order with Montblanc's Extreme leather collection. Combining contemporary techniques and its traditional leather manufacturing processes since 1926, the collection offers leather goods with color variants of grey, black, maroon, and deep blue. If compartments are your essentials, then the collection's backpack is for you, and with its woven-look leather construction lined with waterproof neoprene, it's easily paired for your smart casual ensemble. At the same time, pair your business suit with the collection's minimalist briefcase, which boasts of multiple inside pockets and adjustable and detachable shoulder strap- it's a wardrobe staple built to last and worth the treat. The functional and aesthetically pleasing collection also comes with essential leather goods to complement the bags, including wallets, pocket holders, and business card holders. And throughout the collection, the fine leather used is water, heat and scratch resistant, so you don't have to fret about damaging your valuables.
www.montblanc.com

IMAGE CREDIT BREITLING, MONTBLANC, MISSONI, EYEWA

Missoni Parfum Pour Homme

SCENT ON

MISSONI

Taking its influences from the Mediterranean landscape is this fresh fragrance from the house of Missoni. A woody scent full of contrasts, it composes of lemon, grapefruit and lavender as its top notes, encompassing Mediterranean marquis herbs, ginger fresh cut, pomarose and jasmine petals at its heart. The dry-down is a blend of sandalwood, with touches of oakwood, birch, patchouli and vibrant musks. Packing a whole lot in one spray, if you're seeking to make a statement, whether for special occasions or your day-to-day use, this scent is worth trying out. And to complement your new Eau de Toilette, the Missoni Parfum Pour Homme also comes with a bath and body line suitable for all skin types for your hydrating needs.

www.parisgallery.com

Missoni Parfum Pour Homme after shave balm

Missoni Parfum Pour Homme deodorant stick

Mehdi Oudghiri & Anass Boumediene, founders, eyewa

EYES ON ME

EYEWA

Ever noticed how buying new eyeglasses can be a dreary experience? Seeing how it's also nonexistent online, this inspired Mehdi Oudghiri and Anass Boumediene -both former co-managing directors of foodpanda- to launch MENA e-commerce platform eyewa in 2017. Focusing solely on curating eyewear, the platform promises to offer versatile choices and convenience at competitive prices (plus free shipping)- with shoppers able to try on pieces with its web try-on tech (similar to an Instagram or Snapchat filter), or home try-on feature by picking five frames and trying them on from the convenience of your home. As a niche e-commerce player, the team focuses on providing the best experience and value for customers. And the market seems to notice too: the platform has raised US$1.1 million from UAE and KSA investors in a seed round led by Equitrust, the investment arm of Choueiri Group, which the team plans to use for its expansion across the GCC. With 2,000 products and 50 renowned brands including Ray-Ban, Oakley, Emporio Armani, Police, Prada, Marc Jacobs, Lacoste, Michael Kors, Fendi and Chloe, you won't run out of choices for your eyewear needs.

www.eyewa.com

Giorgio Armani sunglasses

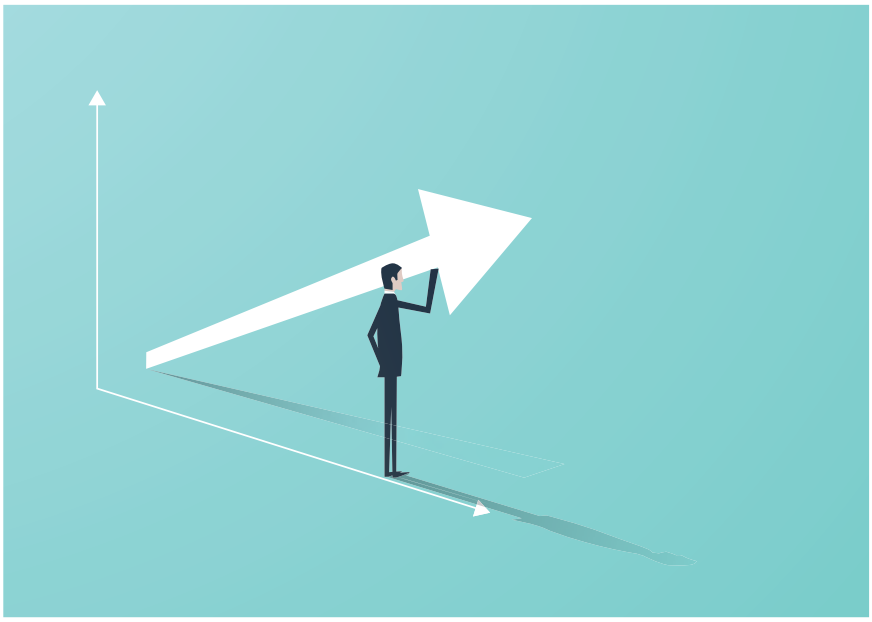
Fendi sunglasses

Emporio Armani sunglasses

A better investment than bitcoin

(And we've got three reasons to back that assertion up)

by MURTAZA MANJI



Even if you were living under a very large rock, you couldn't have avoided the recent hype around cryptocurrency, particularly around bitcoin. From enthusiastic "experts" to grim naysayers, it was perhaps the most hotly debated and discussed topic towards the end of last year- maybe just behind the US election! At its peak, over 100,000 people were joining bitcoin every day, and a lot of late-joiners regret not getting on to the bandwagon sooner.

It made sense. bitcoin made hundreds of people millionaires- and even made some billionaires! It took almost zero effort and no planning, yet the results were fascinating. Of course, when it's about US$5,000 turning into $1 million in a few months- that's enough to tempt someone to even borrow money to be able to invest in bitcoin.

For all the gains it has brought, though, bitcoin is a questionable area to put money into today. There is no clear path forward, no one can predict if it will continue to rise, and it's expensive to get into it now. As far as investments go, there isn't a new one yet that can top cryptocurrencies- or so it appears. There is another investment, one that has been around for a while, that -in the long run- can outperform bitcoin any day of the week. It's cheaper, takes effort and planning, but delivers consistently better results. It's even been validated by Warren Buffett, the man who has taken the investment world by storm, with his advice creating billions of dollars in returns.

I'll let Buffett say it himself: "The best investment you will ever make is in yourself."

Among others, here are three reasons why you are the best investment you can make.

FIRSTLY: a real investment is something that has intrinsic value, not just what value the market puts on it. Buying stock in a reliable company is a real investment, because that will continue to deliver results for their stakeholders. Cryptocurrencies have no intrinsic value- not yet at least. You already have intrinsic value, but the cream is in what you bring to the table. The sum total of your knowledge, your experiences, your mental and physical abilities, your social skills, your reputation and authority: that is what makes you so valuable. None of the above is determined by the market, it is all in your control.

SECONDLY: all "hot" opportunities eventually go cold and are replaced by other equally "hot" opportunities. You won't. Not as long as you continue to invest time and effort in bettering yourself. There are hundreds of stories of people who changed careers 180 degrees, and continued to deliver outstanding results in their new fields. Bitcoin will eventually fade away; ask any experienced investor what the "hot" things were over the last 40 -or even 20!- years. If you continue to work on yourself, you will become more valuable with age. 40 years of experience is something no amount of money can buy. Beware though: don't end up with 40 one-year experiences- that would be a disappointment!

LASTLY: while crypto doesn't have much practical use, you aren't limited. If it came to application, you'd beat any amount of crypto hands-down. You can apply yourself to any number of situations, and -with little effort- maximize results, regardless of circumstance. If

Murtaza Manji is an award-winning Business Coach and the founder of Kaizen Consulting, the first ActionCOACH firm in the Middle East. In the last six years, he has worked with over 400 successful CEOs, directors and business owners from over 15 different industries in Dubai and London to achieve higher profits, greater productivity from their teams, and sustainable growth by creating efficient systems and structures. Find him on Twitter @CoachMRM.

ALL "HOT" OPPORTUNITIES EVENTUALLY GO COLD AND ARE REPLACED BY OTHER EQUALLY "HOT" OPPORTUNITIES. YOU WON'T. NOT AS LONG AS YOU CONTINUE TO INVEST TIME AND EFFORT IN BETTERING YOURSELF.

the market suddenly decided that bitcoin had no value, it's end of the road for bitcoin. Conversely, if your industry were to suddenly be made redundant (through artificial intelligence, for example), you can reapply yourself in two dozen different industries. Not without effort, true; but by continuing to invest in yourself, you become so much more than just a job.

Terry Crews, the tough, funny, football-player-turned-actor is a talented artist, and made his way through college by painting portraits of football players. Snoop Dogg is a certified football coach, and Harrison Ford has rescued stranded hikers thanks to his ability to fly helicopters and planes. All of this is to say that you are not defined by your role, your title, or your industry. You are unique, special, and worth investing time and effort in. If you choose to not invest your time and effort in you, you will -by default- spend it on someone or something else.

Be intentional about your choices: they will define your future worth- and your net worth. ■

Terry Crews

TERRY CREWS IMAGE © SHUTTERSTOCK

MAKING IT BIG

Finding a profitable business idea

by LOTHAR HOHMANN

MORE AND MORE PEOPLE wish to create their own business, but struggle to find an idea. A business idea must be profitable and valuable. But what does it really take to turn an idea into a business?

My experience as an entrepreneur and through interaction with peers at Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) taught me that it's better to have a mediocre idea for which you make the effort to turn into a profitable idea, rather than an innovative idea that you do not exploit. Nowadays, innovation is a buzzword, and we tend to think that we always have to bring something new, whilst in fact there's no *real* necessity to find an innovative idea.

What is paramount is your ability to listen, analyze, and understand the problems of those around us. It allows you to identify the nature of a need and thus to anticipate a demand. For instance, some of the biggest and most successful companies such as Google or Facebook were not alone in their market. You must ask yourself if people are ready/keen to spend money on your product or service. Are they looking on the internet for solutions to their problems? Do they have other solutions? These are the basic questions one should ask.

In the UAE, we already have a national culture that encourages innovation and entrepreneurship, since our leaders have set this as part of the vision to strengthen the position of the country as a global hub for innovation. However, you should also keep an eye on what is being done abroad, and not hesitate to import a concept. To find the right idea, you must keep yourself informed of all the newest (or latest) business ideas from across the globe.

There are products or services that already exist in the market, but aren't easy to use or are just not yet successful- you can improve it by making it simple, quicker or more accessible. There are a lot of businesses that strive to improve a product or a service by just analyzing its evolution prospects.

Distinguishing yourself from competition is one thing. However, you must truly understand the viability of your idea. It's important to put it in front of your prospective users. Most budding entrepreneurs place a lot of value on the idea. They end up working on their ideas in isolation, and once they bring it to market, they quickly realize that the pain point is not what they understood it to be. The idea is a small part of the overall equation; the execution of the idea is the most critical piece of the business puzzle.

You have to also build a marketing strategy- but start by thoroughly defining your activity, its field, the exact nature of your product or service. Then, define your clients. Who's your target, and what is the type of offer you will be proposing? The idea is to propose a product or service that responds to a demand. It's not about creating the demand. To ensure you're responding to consumers' demand, you can also carry out a poll, a survey or a focus group. Nowadays, the market has the right entrepreneurial and innovation DNA to allow for entrepreneurs to take off. Some of us have been in the market for a long time, and it has been a long and challenging journey, but at the end of the day we learned a lot, especially when you are part of a family like EO, where peer to peer learning is one of the most significant benefits as a member. After all, there's a lot one needs to learn (and unlearn) when one becomes an entrepreneur- but the more you know, the better your prospects. Good luck!

Lothar Hohmann is a passionate entrepreneur, leader and strategist. As the President of PRECISE Group, he has created a million-dirham company with six business verticals that have a MENA-wide presence. His focus is to grow PRECISE into a brand that supplies the best of 3D printing products, 2D and 3D crystal engraving products, and develop product concepts for clients that are unique and outstanding for their business requirements. PRECISE Group's clients include Dubai Municipality, Etisalat, British Aerospace, Emirates, The Marriott, Atlantis The Palm, and many more.


d3 art installation

DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE

IT'S BY DEVELOPING A ROBUST ECOSYSTEM FOR SUSTAINED INNOVATION THAT THE UAE WILL REALIZE ITS VISION TO BE ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INNOVATIVE NATIONS BY 2021

by MOHAMMAD SAEED AL-SHEHHI

Over the first few decades of the 21st century, innovation has emerged as a fundamental element in the growth and development of countries. The UAE, a country which was largely rural just over half a century ago, has taken the lead in creating a culture of research and science to further strengthen its position on the global map. It's what its leaders firmly believe is needed to solve regional and global challenges, and provide its population with a bright future.

And they're probably right.

This February marks UAE Innovation Month, a time of the year when we take stock of all that's gone by in recent technology, and prepare for further scientific advances in our nation. We anticipate sizeable changes to our communities in the next 50 years with populations slated to double and urbanization reaching 70% by 2050, according to the World Bank. Gulf cities, in particular, are already heaving at over 80% urbanization, which directly affects their quality of life due to increased strain on infrastructure, utilities and even traffic.

FOR THE UAE TO CONTINUE ITS JOURNEY TO BECOME ONE OF THE TOP 10 GLOBAL ECONOMIES, ITS CONTINUED FOCUS ON INNOVATION AND TO NURTURE TALENT LOCALLY TO DEVELOP A ROBUST ECOSYSTEM OF SUSTAINED INNOVATION IS VITAL.

The move towards smarter urban alternatives has rapidly become not just a visionary directive for the future, but a necessity for many. In response to this, Dubai has boldly announced its desire to become the world's smartest city via a series of initiatives with tight deadlines. Dubai has planned a wide range of activities and programming geared towards bringing innovation to life across all sectors including 545 smart initiatives and services across eight government entities, and two smart districts with about 185 proposed projects in the transport sector.

In late 2014, the UAE government declared 2015 as the "Year of Innovation," and had launched a National Innovation Strategy with the aim of becoming one of the most innovative nations in the world by 2021. In the last few years alone, we have seen proof of just how serious this goal is, with the launch of almost sci-fi products, including flying taxis, deploying smart bus stations and embracing the hyperloop concept across the Emirate.

Mohammad Saeed Al-Shehhi is the Chief Operating Officer of d3. Mohammad previously held a number of prominent roles in the broadcast sector. In 2008, he was appointed Deputy CEO at Dubai Media Incorporated, where he developed corporate strategy and analyzed operational and performance efficiencies. He also launched the first DMI native HD channels, developed technical infrastructure and led DMI's digital offering. Before that, Mohammad was Senior Director of Broadcast Services at du, where he managed strategy and growth plans for the broadcast divisions, and expanded du's media and broadcast services regionally.

For the UAE to continue its journey to become one of the top 10 global economies, its continued focus on innovation and to nurture talent locally to develop a robust ecosystem of sustained innovation is vital. Dubai has gone a long way with building idea hubs and collaborative workspaces for entrepreneurs and freelancers with places like The Cribb, Dubai Design District's (d3) Co-Working Space and Micro Offices, and TECOM's in5 Innovation Centres that also provide practical opportunities for people with big ideas to network, train and develop with mentors across business sectors.

Innovation often connotes just science and technology, but design humanizes these ideas, making technology easier to adapt into our daily lives; cultivating this community of artistic and creative people, alongside more business-oriented ones, makes practical sense today. Companies like Apple are obsessively focusing on packaging cyber access while purposefully appealing to early adopters and the youth simultaneously. Why? Because they believe that research and design go hand in hand.

Last summer, the Palmwood project, a new collaboration between the UAE and US-based global design firm IDEO, ran a camp where kids aged 9-14 were asked to propose ideas on how they can improve society through innovation. Many of the responses centered around designing environmentally-friendly and affordable community housing, robots that alert when someone litters and recycling objects to create anything from fashion to homeware. Palmwood regularly operates as a design consultancy working with organizations across sectors to shape learning experiences, schools, and systems that encourage creativity and kindness at the same time.

Only through persistent innovation and design will we be able to retain our unique dominance over artificial intelligence (AI). This is especially important in our region, where the design sector is projected to increase by 20% over the next 2-3 years, requiring 30,000 new design graduates by 2019.


A scene from Downtown Design at d3

ONLY THROUGH PERSISTENT INNOVATION AND DESIGN WILL WE BE ABLE TO RETAIN OUR UNIQUE DOMINANCE OVER ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI). THIS IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT IN OUR REGION, WHERE THE DESIGN SECTOR IS PROJECTED TO INCREASE BY 20% OVER THE NEXT 2-3 YEARS.

Programs like the Industrial Revolution X (IR-X) recognize this and will open with a design thinking workshop in February this year, which is aligned with the UAE Artificial Intelligence Strategy and the UAE Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution to create "a highly productive innovative environment." This will require Emiratis specialized in AI to develop new sectors, and create opportunities for the national economy.

d3 also hosts a dedicated design university, the Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (DIDI), with a world-class curriculum developed alongside the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Parson's School of Design to offer a distinctive program dedicated to inventive thinking using design and tech as tools. According to the President of DIDI Mohammad Abdulla, "Our graduates will conceive and create sustainable design solutions for today's problems for the benefit of tomorrow's world." This combined approach of working towards ensuring Emiratis and residents alike are keeping pace with modern technologies and scientific advancements through creative application, positions Dubai well in achieving its smart ideal as the ultimate platform for the future. ▪


An installation at d3 Design Week

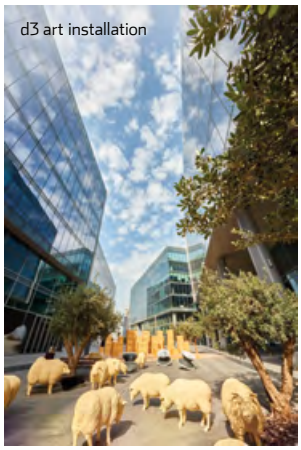

d3 art installation

IMAGE CREDIT D3

Reaching a deal

Four hurdles to successful **internal negotiations** (and how to get past them)

by HORACIO FALCÃO

Jessica thought it would be easy to borrow two members of David's team for a four-month project she'd been asked to undertake on behalf of the board. As senior managers of similar rank and responsibility, she thought he'd understand her resource constraints and the enormity of the project at hand. She'd also seen a lot more of David in his office recently and put that down to him being less busy than usual. She set up a coffee meeting and gave David a brief overview of the project before getting to the crux of the issue. But when she asked him if she could borrow his resources, she was surprised by his annoyed rejection. David explained that he was struggling to finish multiple projects, and refused to discuss it further. He'd been in his office more than usual, because he was tied down managing multiple teams and delegating assignments so he could focus on reporting to the board. It was a firm "no," and Jessica was back to the drawing board, the relationship slightly bruised from the interaction.

Internal negotiations – those between parties inside an organization– are often expected to be easier than external ones, but the reality is that they're often much more difficult. An internal negotiation has additional considerations and challenges that are underestimated. Colleagues are more likely to think their aims and objectives are similar, which will open doors for their internal negotiations. There are four main hurdles to successful internal negotiations, which can be overcome by framing them differently.

Jessica made the first mistake of internal negotiations: underpreparing. Most people fail to see their internal meetings as negotiations. She assumed that an informal meeting without much background research on David's activities or challenges would suffice. She also assumed he was less busy than usual, and failed to test this assumption. Jessica should have considered potentially conflicting objectives. Despite being colleagues or even working in the same department, different parties can often be bound by conflicting interests, or even divergent career aspirations. If she had been negotiating with an external party, she would have come prepared with an idea of her counterparty's objectives and constraints. She wouldn't have automatically assumed a partner's willingness to accept certain conditions without first discussing their concerns. Neither would she have approached the matter in such an offhand fashion.

This leads to the second main reason why internal negotiations often flounder, and that's a failure to consider a stakeholder's unique and potentially conflicting interests. Most people assume or unconsciously hope that their counterparty will naturally see how their request works for the greater good of the organization and quickly concede to their request. Internal negotiators often have conflicting views and perspectives on the organization, its direction and priorities. These views are colored by the parties' unique KPIs, which may be created to generate a healthy tension within organizations so that different departments balance one other out. However, such KPIs can also be created with a narrow view of the organization in mind; for example, finance personnel only care for finance-related goals, while marketing personnel only care for marketing-related goals. The extent of inter-organizational competition for resources and budget cannot be underestimated.

Thirdly, internal negotiators often suffer from long-term assumptions, perceptions and rumors about one another. When you have been in an organization for many years, it is natural to have some history with some of your colleagues or to have heard rumors or gossip about them. Such previous direct or indirect information could be: "David always helps me get things done." Or "Jessica is always asking others for extra resources, but rarely shares her own." Such perceptions, grounded or not in facts, can create a rigid image of our colleagues in our minds. For example, David may have had plenty of free time or an ulterior motive at a time when others asked him for help. Jessica may have once rejected someone's request only to be labelled as selfish. As a result, we have no incentive to properly invest in such relationships. We either give up on them or take them for granted. Our perceptions of others may have been fixed at a particular time and now they prevent us from creating new opportunities for our colleagues to show us that they have changed or that we were wrong about them from the start.

Fourth, there is often a zero-sum mindset in internal negotiations that stems from parties perceiving that they are fighting internally for limited and thus zero-sum internal resources, such as status, money, attention from management, etc. With this mindset, it's easy to wind up in an "us vs. them" mentality, perceiving each other as enemies or threats, believing value creation is not possible and adopting a win-lose attitude. As such, it is not uncommon that disputes are

Horacio Falcão is a Senior Affiliate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD. He is also the program director of Negotiation Dynamics, part of the school's suite of Executive Development Programmes. He is the author of *Value Negotiation: How to Finally Get the Win-Win Right*.

INTERNAL NEGOTIATORS OFTEN HAVE CONFLICTING VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE ORGANIZATION, ITS DIRECTION AND PRIORITIES.

settled based on power, authority arguments, coalitions or alliances or even escalation. This is quite unfortunate since resources are generally not as limited as initially perceived and can usually be expanded, with the right collaborative strategies and value creation techniques. But first, negotiators need to appreciate that the correct framing of a negotiation can put them in a positive-sum game and generate superior average returns.

While in external negotiations there are times that if you do not reach a deal, you can just move on to your alternative or best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA), but in internal negotiations, this is a much harder thing to do. Your organization is unlikely to have two departments responsible for the same resource, so that if you are denied that resource, there is nowhere left to turn. This lack of alternatives increases the internal negotiation tension, and causes mini-monopolies to emerge inside a firm. Not only do such monopolies have a higher temptation to use their power, because the counterparty cannot walk away, they also have rules and regulations that diminish the incentives to find creative solutions. It is important not to act like a monopoly, but to lead by example. Also consider what could motivate your colleagues to help you find creative solutions that encompass their own interests to discourage them from resorting to the monopoly mindset.

Take marketing and finance as an example. There is rarely a marketing executive who wants to constrain budgets, but finance executives are often ranked on how well they can optimize spending. It is hard to square the two parties in this situation. There are also egos to contend with. Jeff, an engineer, wanted to increase his development budget for building equipment his firm was manufacturing. But budgets were diverted to marketing to increase sales. "Marketing is rubbish," Jeff said. "If we spent more money on making quality products, they'd sell themselves." When negotiating externally, parties focus on creating value to satisfy both sides' unique interests, or even to develop a long-term partnership. They understand that they need to work hard to make these happen. Although they have different interests, time is spent analyzing both parties' interests and which ones align to further the negotiation. Internally, organizational egos can often clash. Negotiators often believe there can only be one alpha.

It is easy to be lulled into thinking that consensus building among internal stakeholders would be easier when working at the same company. It is important, therefore, to be aware of the internal negotiation pitfalls, and devote the necessary resources to these meetings. Under-preparation, failure to consider stakeholders' interests, failure to reinvent relationships with your colleagues, falling prey to a zero-sum or monopoly mindset are all surmountable hurdles. ■

Zooming ahead

UAE CAR RENTAL STARTUP EZHIRE RAISES SEED INVESTMENT FROM JABBAR INTERNET GROUP

Dubai startup eZhire, an app that wants to change the way you rent a car, has raised an undisclosed amount of seed funding in a round led by Jabbar Internet Group. According to a statement by the company, investors Ali Al-Salim, co-founder, Arkan Partners, and Sahm A. Yaghi, Partner, Al Jal Investors, were also part of the round. With plans to utilize the funds on marketing, expansion to other UAE cities, and to upgrade IT infrastructure, eZhire aims to scale operations as an on-demand car rental app connecting renters to car rental companies. eZhire believes this model (of partnering with car rental companies) allows the startup "to operate somewhere in between an old-school car rental company and a peer-to-peer [tech] service." "Jabbar Internet Group has a history and experience in investing in success stories," notes Hassan J. Saduzai, co-founder and CEO, eZhire. "Aligning with them has put us on the map; their experience and guidance will provide additional boost to eZhire," he adds. Saduzai says that Jabbar Group's reputation, and the "humble and very understanding attitude" they have towards portfolio entrepreneurs, excites him about the association. As for the investors, Samih Toukan, Chairman, Jabbar Internet Group, says in a statement: "We see huge potential in eZhire, they are truly redefining the way people rent a car. They are the first of its kind in the region, people really needed an easy way to get a car, and we believe eZhire is the answer to it."

Launched in 2015, eZhire lets you register yourself on a mobile app with required identity credentials, request a rental car of your choice, and get it delivered to you, without the conventional hassles of paperwork. Once done with your car, the user can also schedule car collection from the app, and get it picked up. "We had domain expertise in car rental, and we found it very confusing and complicated to rent a simple car. We believe that renting a car should be as simple as hiring a cab, and that's how the idea for eZhire was born," explains Saduzai.

As for the team's fundraising experience, Saduzai believes that the founding team's industry expertise, and the fact that eZhire has been revenue generating from an early stage, helped open doors for them. "Within a week's time [of sending pitches] we got positive responses. Also, we didn't dig too deep in the negotiation process." The entire process went on quite smoothly, with Saduzai noting that in "2-3 months, the funds were transferred eZhire's bank account." The entrepreneur is also thankful to the support they got (and continue to get) from regional ecosystem enablers including Dubai Startup Hub and in5 Dubai (where the startup is incubated).

WWW.EZHIRE.LIFE

Break through

The **communications trends** brands need to watch out for in 2018

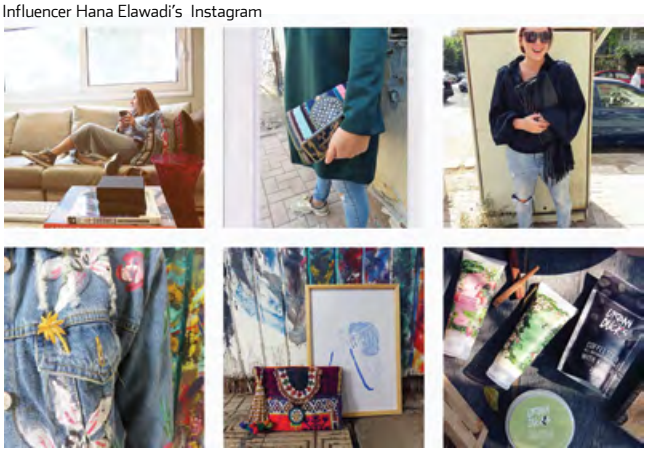
by MAHA ABOUELENEIN

Hello, 2018. Pleasure to meet you, and we can't wait to own you! A new year signifies a fresh page, a fresh calendar of days that are overflowing with hope, exciting unknowns, and a chance to reset the button to get focused on big goals. When it comes to communications, there are some key trends to watch that will impact how we do storytelling in 2018 in the region.

1/ Local is cool. Micro-trends and local understanding of the consumers and markets is going to be essential. Local brands, local businesses, and homegrown ideas are the heroes that consumers in the Middle East are paying attention to. Are you Team Careem, or Team Uber? Grab the popcorn as noon.com takes on Souq.com after they team up with Amazon. Upwork or Ureed? Consumers here support local hometown heroes, and brands need to tap into this- from football clubs to local food hangouts, localization wins. Did you hear about the Saudi actress Ahd Kamel taking Netflix by storm this year? There is also a huge rise in wearing local brands and designers to support the community, our culture, and ultra-local urban trends.

2/ Influencers will still be influential. As annoying as this may be for some of us, the influencer trend is here to stay in 2018. Some of the influencers have become really frustrating by hawking all kinds of brands and unboxing endless gifts they have been showered with- that's really not the point of being an influencer. Some really do add value and credibility to brands, and I have learned about some really cool products and services because the people I was following shared their experience. So, yes, it does work! I am living proof. I would have never bought a product for Vital Proteins if it wasn't for a local influencer trying it. In 2018, brands and companies are going to use their influencers differently- and by this, I mean that they will want them to experience the brand, and take their followers along on the journey. A really good influencer that I love to follow is Hana Elawadi (@hanagoeslocal on Instagram), and she is a champion for all things local. That's a 2-for-1 trend: #winning!

Influencer Hana Elawadi's Instagram



IMAGES © FIFA.COM | INSTAGRAM

The FIFA World Cup will be hosting four Arab nations this year

3/ 2018 is going to be eventFUL. This is the year of events -*major* events- and this presents exciting opportunities for brands to boost engagement and build customer experiences around events that are part of *their* lives. So, keep an eye on everything from the Royal Wedding to the Special Olympics in Abu Dhabi, and, as a bonus, note that the Holy Month of Ramadan overlaps with the World Cup hosting four Arab nations- your post-Iftar food coma just got pumped up.

4/ Authenticity is key. No fake news here; keep moving. Press releases are dead. Nobody wants to read how great you are. Be authentic, tell a story about real people and real experiences- tell a story of your impact, your purpose, and your added value. No gimmicks or publicity stunts, just the real stuff please.

5/ Leverage digital formats to tell fresh stories. One of the things you should take advantage of are the endless possibilities to tell fresh stories using video and new technologies like augmented reality. Even the digital formats and updates from Instagram alone can give you opportunities to tell fresh stories- you can save your stories to your page, and they are now testing sharing Stories straight to WhatsApp. Remember: Facebook owns both Instagram and WhatsApp, so look for the integration to come to life in 2018. The company also owns Oculus- so look at virtual reality as another way to tell fresh stories. Basically, start using the tools that are *already* available to you.

6/ Personal brands matter. People behind companies *are* interesting, and they *are* brands by themselves. You're going to hear about personal branding a lot in 2018. You can take advantage of this trend by focusing on a brand called *you*. Yes, you are a brand, you have influence, you have value, and you can make solid efforts to build your brand equity. What's even better? Your brand is unique- because there is only one you. And the kicker? You are a brand you can actually control. *Did you think about that?* So, start working on your personal brand, your digital footprint, your personal profile, and what you stand for. Make yourself heard. ›››

PRESS RELEASES ARE DEAD. NOBODY WANTS TO READ HOW GREAT YOU ARE.

7/ Say hello to the SEO + PR marriage. At long last, public relations (PR) and search marketing are finally coming together; the battle between the two is over. In fact, PR is on track to be one of the smartest ways to drive your SEO results, and it will be the gold star to get you visibility, drive traffic, and help with lead generation for marketing. Your site rankings will improve if you have more stories out there about you on big websites from news organizations and popular online platforms, with links to your website and social channels, and you will get more traffic from them as well. So, getting good PR is not just going to boost your reputation to get you coverage; it will also improve your search rankings, search listings, and your discoverability on the web. And what action do people take after they hear about something they're interested in? Yes, they Google it!

8/ What's your reputation currency worth? Powerful storytelling isn't just about the message, it's about the reputation currency- how to spend it, and how to earn it. Reputation is the only currency that matters. With real-time life happening, thanks to social media, reputation is the most valuable currency a business has. Money cannot save your reputation, but your actions and words can build it, protect it, and help you manage it. Your reputation is your most valuable currency- without it, your business cannot function, not with employees, not with stakeholders, nor your customers. Reputation is about trust, and no relationship or business succeeds without it. So, ask yourself: what's your reputation currency worth- and what lengths will you go to increase its value every single day. ■

New year, new you

YOUR DIGITAL (AND SAVVY) TO-DO LIST FOR 2018

The new year is a great time to start some new habits. No, I am not talking about working out and eating healthy (which you should do anyways)- I am talking about giving you a doable digital to-do list that will make you savvy and more efficient with respect to your digital presence! The aim of this to-do list is to give you tips that will make your life easier- so make an effort to follow them:

1. Install Grammarly
It's my favorite Chrome Extension. If you write, you need this. It fixes your grammar, your spelling, and it works on every platform tool you use- from Facebook to your email. I have told everyone I know about this gift from the internet gods. Go get it!
grammarly.com

2. Get a cloud-based password vault
Can't remember what password is for what? Are you using the same password everywhere (which is a digital no-no)? If so, get password savvy, and protect yourself. Use a cloud-based security vault to store your passwords- there are so many good ones out there like Dashlane, Keeper, or Sticky Password!
dashlane.com
keepersecurity.com
stickypassword.com

3. Follow a podcast
Get on the audio train- there are so many great podcasts out there! Use your time in the car, at the gym, at the airport, and other waiting periods to listen up and get smart! You can listen to everything from mindfulness, to side hustles, to cooking, to sports. I am in love with podcasts, and you can even make your own station which lists all your favorite podcasts- and share playlists with friends. One problem you will find is that not many podcasts are from this region- so what better motivation than to start your own!

4. Make monthly goals
This is a tip to make you more savvy. I hate annual resolutions- they are unrealistic, and who can plan a year in advance, let alone keep those plans or goals intact. Instead, I set monthly goals. Smaller increments, achievable goals. The first day of every month I write down some goals- personal, work, finance, social, health goals. I then work on them during the month, and at the end of it, I pat myself on the back for what I achieved, and set new goals or continue the big ones for the next month. By setting smaller goals, I win more, and by seeing my goals regularly, I actually achieve them. So try making monthly goals for yourself- and use digital apps to keep track of your monthly goals. Try out Evernote, Simplenote, Google Keep, Notebook, or even the Notes app on the iPhone.
evernote.com
simplenote.com
keep.google.com
zoho.com/notebook

5. Learn one new digital skill
Never stop learning. The internet presents thousands of opportunities and free access to learn anything you want to know right at your fingertips. Learn one new skill this year that ups your digital game- these could be anything from learning more about digital marketing and SEO, to photo editing, or how to record a podcast. Ever want to know what is Reddit? Or how to use a GoPro? Do it this year. Get digital, and get savvy. Check out all the free options on YouTube, Udemy, and Coursera.
youtube.com
udemy.com
coursera.org

Maha Abouelenein is one of the MENA region's top communications executives. From working with tech giants like Google and Netflix, to homegrown regional brands like Careem and Orascom, Maha has built her career advising Fortune 500 companies, high-growth tech startups, and top government bodies in the USA, UAE, and Egypt. She is the founder of Organizational Consultants, and you can read all about her breadth of experience in media, marketing, PR, events, digital communications and crisis management on her blog DigitalandSavvy.com. Raised and educated in the USA to Egyptian parents, she is home in both West and Arab worlds. She thrives on storytelling, building scalable campaigns, and thought leadership.

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FIVE TIPS ON EXECUTING BIG BUSINESS

Balancing leadership and management for a stronger organization

by AHMED ALKHOSHAIBI

Over the past few years, it has become fashionable to applaud "leadership" and criticize "management." We are regularly exposed to the current business discourse that lauds leaders and attacks managers– and it's coming from everywhere, including HR departments. What is actually needed, based on my years of experience both leading and managing, and appointing both leaders and managers, is an exceptionally rare mixture of the two methodologies.

Managing, contrary to today's thinking, is not all bad. In reality, I find that it's managers who often have the best eye for maximizing data, finding cost-saving alternatives, and enforcing due diligence and procedural adherence. Like it or not, these skills make a company run and ensure that your books balance at year end. Leaders, also contrary to today's trend, are not always the best executers. Executives are, by the very nature of the word, meant to be good at executing. Leaders are big-picture thinkers, and are often the ones that dream and delegate the actual execution to others. I believe in hands-on leadership, interspersed with a healthy dose of management expertise.

Here are five lessons that I apply to running our group portfolio that have served me well throughout my career:

1. ASK WHY

You may be surprised that I bring up Enron in an article with this title, but the truth is the company had the essential idea right– it just spiraled out of control. Always ask why. Why can't this be done? Why do we do it that way? Why haven't we tried this method? You would be surprised at the wealth of knowledge every single team member has to share. When I get an answer that begins with "I can't," there is always a why coming in response. I need to know why it can't be done– is there an innovative solution hiding in there somewhere? Is there an element or layer of complexity to this that I am unaware of? If so, let's hear it. The most effective solutions come from picking apart some of the most basic barriers. The best outcome here is that your leadership side asks why, and your managerial side comes up with the solution.

2. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

Know everyone's name, no matter how big your organization gets. Know what they're good at. Know what they're not good at. Know why they joined your organization, and know where they've come from. As the CEO, I'm only personally involved in the recruitment of senior management, but I am briefed by my team on every single person who joins us. One of our biggest companies, ARADA, has a

Ahmed Alkhoshaibi , Group Chief Executive Officer, KBW Investments

THE MOST EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS COME FROM PICKING APART SOME OF THE MOST BASIC BARRIERS. THE BEST OUTCOME HERE IS THAT YOUR LEADERSHIP SIDE ASKS WHY, AND YOUR MANAGERIAL SIDE COMES UP WITH THE SOLUTION.

large salesforce. I regularly spend time with the sales team at our B2B and B2C events. Both types of events provide valuable opportunities for me to get to know each member of the team and discuss their strengths and their successes. Also, during my weekly meetings with the sales team, they are encouraged to be vocal and put forward any information they believe is worth sharing. Leaders connect on a personal level, while your managerial side establishes who is being underutilized and potentially, undervalued. It gives me a lot of perspective in more ways than human capital, which leads to my next point.

3. TRADE IN KNOWLEDGE

To make informed decisions for your company, you must be well informed. The more you know and the more you can glean, the better positioned you are to execute. Of course, you need to tap into focus groups, and assess all of the available market documentation such as research reports compiled by industry analysts. But there's an even more valuable source of intelligence that you may not be maximizing: your first lines of contact. This is heavily connected to my second suggestion, simply because our sales team are the people on the ground. They are the daily receptacles of market sentiment, and they routinely hear client opinions and concerns. What are your customers asking? Think of your client-facing team as the operators of the biggest focus group out there. On an average day, our sales team might see anywhere from 100 to 300 potential clients. Think of all the insight you can gather on what your customers want, how they perceive your company and how they perceive the industry as whole. Based on this, you strategize your next moves.

4. PIVOT WITH PURPOSE

This doesn't mean lose sight of your vision and mission. You have company values, and you need to stick to them. It doesn't mean that you suddenly change trajectory with little or no thought to the long-term impact. In fact, the opposite is true. Study your hard data, study your soft data, take the numbers into consideration, then decide what needs to stay and what needs to go. If a certain product is unpopular, determine the factors contributing to its lackluster performance and make adjustments accordingly. The finest decision makers in the world will tell you that agile movement to correct or compensate for an inadequacy will save you working capital now, and opportunity cost in the future.

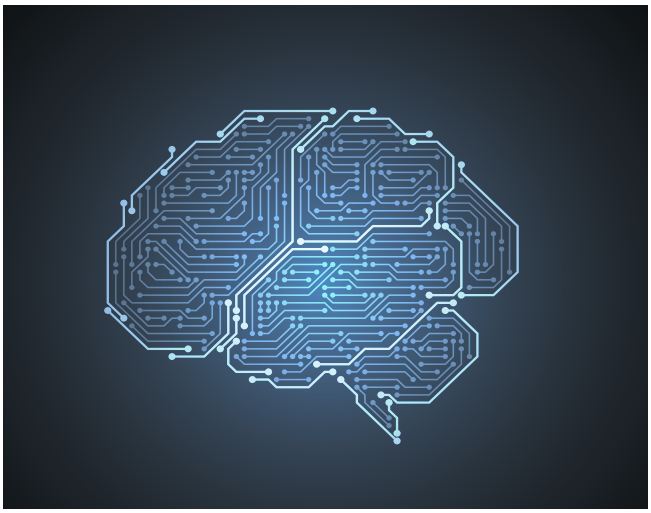
5. KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Not every company is destined to be Alibaba. You don't need to do *everything*. You need to execute your core competencies proficiently, and give your clients, partners and stakeholders a real reason to stand behind the company– that reason should be the fact that your company is a real powerhouse in the sector. I'm not talking about scale and revenue, I'm talking about superior delivery, quality, and truly inspired output. Distraction is a curse in the modern world of business, and if there is one salient takeaway it is that you really need to concentrate on what you excel at. If you cannot deliver outstanding results to your clients, then perhaps you need to rethink your business model. Many of the bestsellers on big business champion experimentation and "branching out." My leadership side believes that risk is needed, while my managerial side advocates "branching out" only when we are sure we can do it better and when we've *calculated* that risk.

Managers are second to none at ensuring that there's a healthy dose of reality injected into any big dream that comes from a leader, so you need to be both. Thinking big is a key characteristic of any global success story. That's what makes for a great narrative- what doesn't always make the headlines is the substantial amount of managerial know-how and grit that propelled the likes of Jack Ma to the top. ▪

DISTRACTION IS A CURSE IN THE MODERN WORLD OF BUSINESS, AND IF THERE IS ONE SALIENT TAKEAWAY IT IS THAT YOU REALLY NEED TO CONCENTRATE ON WHAT YOU EXCEL AT.

Ahmed Alkhoshaibi is the Group Chief Executive Officer of KBW Investments, and the Chief Executive Officer of ARADA, the UAE's newest developer. Prior to the formation of KBW Investments, as a serial entrepreneur, Alkhoshaibi founded, managed, and orchestrated several profitable exits in a number of industries with operations that varied in size and scale. With practical leadership and executive experience across a number of sectors, Alkhoshaibi's educational background includes a degree in business finance together with an executive MBA.



Ready for the future

Today's success means nothing if you're not already building for tomorrow (and the day after)

by GENE JIAO

It may feel like it when you're first starting out, but turning an idea into a business isn't just about building and selling. At the core, it's about building a value system that serves your customers, your partners, your team, and even your industry, in the best, most sincere way possible. Looking back at our journey, we believe Huawei's success and growth from strength to strength as a company isn't only about our products, but also because of our values. In the spirit of sharing with the ecosystem, here are a few tips for entrepreneurs on how we believe they can build for the future:

1/ Think about the human connection When developing your idea, first be human. Really think about who will use your product or service, and how it will benefit them and form meaningful connections. This thinking has been a core vision at Huawei for everything we do and is reflected in our motto of "building a better-connected world." It is a vision we share with all of humanity, because the only way to bring about real digital transformation is through openness and flexibility that fosters true collaboration between users of your technology, and creates extraordinary experiences.

2/ Don't just think smart, think intelligent The future of technology isn't just smart- it's intelligent. Like it or not, artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way both businesses and individuals function. To thrive in the era of artificial intelligence, enterprises across all industries need to look beyond smart and innovate to better process, as well as leverage and learn from big data to adapt to a user's behavior and needs. Whether in the form of intelligent chatbots, digital assistants, targeted ads or recommendations, businesses need to embrace the shift from the smart to the intelligence revolution. Huawei's Kirin 970 chipset and AI-powered phones such as our Mate 10 series are just the start for us.

3/ Customers first While it may seem like the most obvious thing to do, you'd be surprised at how many businesses work on ideas keeping in mind return on investment, rather than the customer. The former is, of course, the desirable outcome. But the latter is a necessary purpose, because an idea that does not focus on creating long-term value for customers by being responsive to their needs is unlikely to deliver sustainable business success. At Huawei, for example, we believe customer demands are the driving forces behind our development, and therefore, we measure our work against how much value we bring to customers.

4/ Integrity is our most valuable asset Whether you're a startup or a 100-year-old business, integrity is what drives us all to behave honestly and keep our promises, ultimately winning and keeping our trust and respect from both customers and employees. And for entrepreneurs and new entrants looking to establish their name in the market, integrity is their only advertisement when attracting new customers and repeat clients, as well as when seeking referrals. Building a reputation of integrity is also crucial when talking to investors, seeking funding or forming partnerships.

5/ Work with the ecosystem Businesses traditionally view competition as threats, but we think it's healthier to make the pie bigger for everyone involved. To be a forward-thinking business, focus on growing the industry and making the market bigger, rather than increasing the size of your own share. Contribute to ecosystem development by joining or forming industry organizations and alliances that focus on the greater good and success for all. There is strength in numbers- more players mean more innovation and prosperity for the ecosystem, ultimately benefitting users.

6/ You're only as good as your next innovation The exponentially increasing pace of technological advances puts even the newest innovations en route to becoming obsolete, which makes continuous improvement critical for any business to keep its heart beating. But innovation isn't just about research and developing new technology. It's honing the ability to actively listen to customers and making every facet of an organization customer-centric. It's the ability to take feedback seriously and be willing to constantly make changes or pivot off course in new directions. Today's success means nothing if you're not already building for tomorrow and the day after. At Huawei, we are doing just that. ▪

Gene Jiao is President, Huawei Consumer Business Group, Middle East & Africa.

Happiness matters

Four ways to keep your team engaged (and thus support your business' bottom line too)

by WALID FAKIH

Recent studies say there is evidence that happier employees are more productive in the workplace by anywhere up to 20%. Taking this into consideration, as a business owner it's your job to establish procedures that will keep your employees happy and motivated, not only benefiting the corporate culture, but also supporting your bottom line.

Here at McDonald's UAE, we were recently recognized as the UAE Best Employer by the prestigious AON Best Employers Award 2017 for the second year in a row. We grow at an average of 12 restaurants every year, and with an employee community growing on average by 450 people annually, we need to really focus on employee satisfaction in order to sustain this growth. McDonald's UAE provides the best possible working environments for its employees and invests heavily in their professional and personal growth, but each workplace is different and has its own dynamic, and it's impossible for any CEO to know and understand all of the interpersonal relationships and goings-on amongst employees.

While keeping an even hand and being aware of the general office (and in our case, restaurant) sentiment, these are a few of my tips that can help boost the mood of the entire workplace.

1. Celebrate success

It's easier to notice things done wrong rather than realize the things that have been going really well. Often, top management are only forced to get involved with the day-to-day activity when tasks are being mishandled, or a customer or client is upset. It is rare that a compliment from a customer will make it all the way to the top of the organization, and, because of this, a job well done flies under the radar. A simple fix of asking for monthly reports on exceptional service or implementing an acknowledgement program will allow for these superstar employees to be regularly brought to your attention, and therefore regularly celebrated. This will not only improve their workplace frame of mind, but will also incentivize others within the company. Saying thank you is both cost-effective and easy, and whether delivered verbally or through email, it will go a long way.

COMPANY LEADERS ACROSS THE GLOBE KNOW THAT KEEPING THEIR TEAM HAPPY MEANS THEY CAN MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER.

2. Listen

In addition to celebrating successes, keeping an ear out for the general sentiment in the office or workplace can help influence the office dynamics, and make sure your employees are happy. Being available for a conversation shows that you're willing to listen, and value your employees' thoughts and concerns. An open inbox, or better yet an open-door policy, provides opportunities for employees to be heard.

3. Encourage development

Most people, especially in the workplace, naturally want to better themselves and progress. Offering training programs and providing developmental support to

Walid Fakih is the General Manager at McDonald's UAE. Having been appointed in 2013, he is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the business, and driving future growth. With a significant number of years of both international and regional FMCG management experience, Walid is a key asset to the continuous growth, development and management of McDonald's UAE, and an important member of the management team.

employees of all levels will not only show you an individual's ambition, but also ensure they feel supported in their personal goals and journeys. Whether this is an online training course or a mentor program within the office or on the shop floor, better educating workers will only help the organization thrive. It is critical to have regular career planning discussions with your team to ensure you're supporting them wherever possible. When you empower your employees with knowledge and skills, turnover drops, productivity stays high, and your employees will meanwhile feel valued; you're investing in them, so you must want to keep them around.

4. Give them a positive environment and have fun

Happy employees make for a positive work environment, so ultimately if morale is high, the general corporate culture will compare. Things like publicly acknowledging accomplishments and providing lunch after a good quarter will maintain good spirits and motivate them to work hard.

It doesn't matter what type of business you're in. Your organization can't function or move forward without people. Company leaders across the globe know that keeping their team happy means they can move forward together. The most important qualities for a business is to have a culture where its employees feel valued and empowered. A culture where all levels of the team are courageous and generous with positive and constructive feedback, will not only demonstrate high morale, but mutual respect across the company. ▪

Start small

THE MANAGER'S GUIDE TO CORPORATE INNOVATION

by DIPIKA MALLYA

Research shows that 8 in 10 employees in the UAE report being bored at work, representing one of the lowest rates of job satisfaction worldwide. Corporate innovation and employee engagement are known to be linked to one another, so influencing one could have a significant positive impact on the other.

So, what can you, the mid-level manager, do about this?

While the onus of innovation and culture change is often pushed on higher management or a board of directors, the power of the individual cannot be underestimated. Here are six strategies that can help you boost innovation and creativity at work. Start small with these simple measures to create a change in your organization.

1. Develop a customer-centric mindset

As with most endeavors, corporate change often starts from within. Encourage employees across business functions to develop a mindset that focuses on customer needs, goals and pain points. With the current state of rapid social and technological change, employees should be focused on identifying new trends and drivers, and adapting products to address these needs. Use the free empathy mapping tool from Gamestorming (www.gamestorming.com/empathy-mapping) to start discussions when working on company projects to bring the customer perspective to the forefront.

2. Set aside time for brainstorming

Stuck in the day-to-day hustle, it can often be hard to set quality time aside to discuss new ideas, plans or developments. However, making a concerted effort to have a strategy or brainstorming session can be an effective way to start an innovation process. It's important to facilitate these sessions correctly to get useful outcomes; use structured ideation techniques to boost creativity and unique ideas. Furthermore, software applications such as Mural allow participants record ideas in real-time and collaborate with others to build on these ideas afterwards. Conduct a structured brainstorming session once a month; be sure to capture and build ideas on Mural.

3. Keep an eye out for process improvements

Innovation doesn't necessarily have to do with a product, service or business model. Changes to business processes can have a significant impact on productivity, quality and the financial bottom line. As a manager, keep a watch on the way business gets done, and map the processes with your team to discover problem areas and potential solutions. Solicit regular feedback from supervisors to see what changes are working. Create a flowchart of key business processes at your organization; keep it visible and handy.

4. Look for value-based partnerships

Partnering with a cause, mission or organization that complements your company's values could be a great way to foster change and innovation. Try incorporating values such as sustainability, education, technology and social impact into your company's product and service offerings to bring added benefits to your customers and stakeholders. Use the building partnerships map to build and sustain new relationships.

5. Encourage cross-functional teams

"Silo" is a frequently-maligned term used to describe the lack of communication and understanding between departments at larger corporations. Fight back against this phenomenon by fostering a sense of collaboration and solidarity. While this is easier said than done, a helpful strategy is to develop initiatives that require employees to understand the responsibilities and value-add characteristics of the other. Ask employees to partner with their colleagues to identify their top friction areas and co-create solutions.

6. Suggest an official innovation process

While it might not always be possible for corporations to invest in dedicated innovation labs, it can be beneficial to have a streamlined process to generate, select and prototype ideas. This can help with employee engagement and boost morale, in addition to harnessing the innovation potential within the organization. Adobe Kickbox is a great example of a structured process that yielded positive results.

Dipika Mallya is the founder of Ideation Labs, and she facilitates interactive sessions to help incubators, accelerators and startups solve marketing and design challenges. She has worked for leading brands in the region, including Cleartrip, YouGov and the Al-Futtaim Group. She holds a Master's degree in Advertising from The University of Texas at Austin, and a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. www.ideationlabs.io

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE MONEY

Modus Capital's **Kareem Elsirafy** is on the lookout for entrepreneurs building sound businesses that also have a positive social impact

by PAMELLA DE LEON

Kareem Elsirafy has had his fair share of struggles and successes in the entrepreneurial world, and now, in his new role as an investor, he's keen to support the ecosystem. Born in Egypt, he moved with his family at the age of four to the US, and later enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve. After being discharged from the military, he found himself struggling to transition to civilian life, wherein he even found himself moving to a homeless shelter, washing dishes at a restaurant, and working his way up as a waiter, and then to an assistant manager. Eventually, he began to study for the General Equivalency Development (GED) test, and found a sales job at a car dealership, saving enough to become a licensed insurance and financial services representative, and moving on to roles in finance services, and leading a sales, marketing and operations team. In 2007, he launched M1 Marketing Firm, which provided creative and business solutions for small to mid-sized companies, while also enrolling as a student at a community college to study economics and political science. Excelling in his classes, he enrolled to Columbia University and graduated in 2012 with a triple major in Political Science, Economics and Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies, and an MBA in Technology Management. After graduating, along with fellow partners, driven by their personal experiences, in 2013, Elsirafy co-founded Unite US, a SaaS platform supporting veterans transitioning from military to civilian life by digitally connecting health and employment services to individuals. It has since expanded to over 15 US states, and to date, according to Crunchbase, has raised US$10.3 million in funding. Elsirafy then moved on to other ventures, and in 2015, joined by his other partners, launched Modus Capital, a venture capital and operating firm based in New York, with offices in Los Angeles and Cairo. Investing in early to mid-stage companies, the firm asserts on its site that its aim is to not just fund their portfolio companies, but also partner with them to shape their products through its Modus Operations arm.

> "THERE MUST BE A BALANCE BETWEEN STAYING WITHIN CERTAIN PARAMETERS AND NOT BEING TOO OPPORTUNISTIC OUTSIDE OF YOUR CORE FOCUS, WHILE BEING PLIABLE ENOUGH TO PIVOT AND GET ON THE BEST PATH TO SUCCESS."

Starting up Modus Capital was, Elsirafy says, due to his and his partners' experiences of building companies and seeing how the venture capital ecosystem -specifically the relationship between VCs, their entrepreneurs and LPs- had its issues, prompting them to start a novel approach. In doing so, they looked at the two main players in the VC relationship. From the startup's perspective, they found that entrepreneurs need more than just capital from VCs. He notes that traditionally, VCs invest and provide capital and access to light mentorship and network introductions. This leaves 'treps struggling to find the *right* type and amount of advisory for strategic value-add, as well as talent. While both are available in the ecosystem, both do come with obstacles: "The right type of advisory is either expensive, and/or is difficult to acquire at the frequency a startup needs (which is, a lot). This is simply a consequence of a high opportunity cost for people with that expertise. On the executing talent side (employees), companies compete with ever increasing salaries supported by the high valuation startup environment which, when combined with the general challenges of finding the right type of credible

IMAGE CREDIT: KAREEM ELSIRAFY

Kareem Elsirafy, founder and Managing Partner, Modus Capital

talent that is a cultural fit for the company, presents a very challenging obstacle." Either way, he notes that startups struggle to find the right talent at an affordable rate, or hire an agency to plug the gap. From the VC's perspective, Elsirafy and his partners felt that in addition to providing the right type of value add support for portfolio companies, they needed to offer a better investment product to their LPs. "VCs historically engage in a framed discourse: positioning their competitive advantage as a sector specialist, or access to specific dealflow. In the end, and to overly simplify, the game is making educated bets hoping for one or two home runs that will carry the fund to profitability. While this risk is inherent to venture capital, we felt there is a way to provide a better de-risked investment opportunity to LPs." Considering both these perspectives, they took on the challenge to formulate a "new model of venture capital engagement, where you can provide not just more but the right type of value added to entrepreneurs, while giving LPs a safer de-risked investment product."

"COMPANIES COMPETE WITH EVER INCREASING SALARIES SUPPORTED BY THE HIGH VALUATION STARTUP ENVIRONMENT WHICH, WHEN COMBINED WITH THE GENERAL CHALLENGES OF FINDING THE RIGHT TYPE OF CREDIBLE TALENT THAT IS A CULTURAL FIT FOR THE COMPANY, PRESENTS A VERY CHALLENGING OBSTACLE."

For startups wondering if their enterprise should consider working with Modus Capital, Elsirafy assures that with his company's operational framework, which can provide value for early-stage startups and SMEs alike, it is quite industry agnostic, although the team do have a preference for concepts in fintech, regulatory tech, blockchain applications, SaaS, direct-to-consumer services, and medtech. The founder and Managing Partner admits Modus also tends to focus on businesses that have the potential for significant social impact: "We're looking for companies that can have a positive social impact en masse, more so than as a simple by-product of a new successful venture." And with an office in Egypt, Modus has also launched an initiative to expand its model across the region. Elsirafy remarks on how the ecosystem is still quite nascent, and has a few major gaps that the Modus model can help fix. When asked if his entrepreneurial background has affected the way he sources deals, Elsirafy explains that Modus' methodology is centered on doing due diligence, and having its operational teams work with the entrepreneurs, prior to being considered for investment. From his personal experience, Elsirafy has learnt that even if you've met the founding team countless times and have conducted due diligence, you're still only getting a partial perspective to the business. "We all know that execution is key, and that when challenges arise, and stakes are high, this provides an opportunity for teams to either break through successfully or let it get the best of them." The Modus process thus allows Elsirafy and his team to really see how the startup handles hurdles, and get a true insight to their operational flow and in-depth process.

As someone who assesses startups seeking funding, Elsirafy evaluates a startup's pitch based on a few particular aspects. One, is what the startup is trying to solve and the solution they're offering, plus if the demand is apparent and warrants the value proposition of their product or service. He looks at their approach to the solution: from the concept of their product-market fit, to their product's traction as early validation, and its USP of what makes their product or service better than what the market offers, and whether they address the problem distinctive. Two, he focuses on its opportunity and current and probable future market value. "Some companies may be addressing today's market, but knowing where that market is heading, and the underlying drivers contributing to its future development is crucial to understanding the long-term opportunity of the sector." Third, he factors in the startup's ability to explain their problem, solution and timeline with as few slides as possible, as it indicates that the startup has honed on their focus. "There must be a balance between staying within certain parameters and not being too opportunistic outside of your core focus, while being pliable enough to pivot and get on the best path to success." Fourth, he considers whether the founding team compliments each other's skillset, and Elsirafy notes how each founder contributes to an overall pitch, ›››

Kareem Elsirafy, founder and Managing Partner, Modus Capital

as it not only indicates how each person brings value, but also the synergy of the founders as a team. And finally, he examines their fit as an entrepreneur and investor. As they'll be working closely, though they would bring value as investors, it's essential startups would be flexible enough to take advice, and steadfast in maintaining their vision for their company, so a balance for each other's role is critical.

On that note, Elsirafy also points out crucial mistakes that entrepreneurs make when approaching investors. An overlooked component is forgetting their story- Elsirafy emphasizes part of every startup's story is information that investors are looking for: problem, solution, experience and expertise in that market, the ability to speak, market and sell it to other investors and customers, and their perseverance and work ethic to make this venture successful. He refers to his beginnings with Unite US, wherein his own pain points were the ideal use case for the company. Using his firsthand knowledge, it drove product development, gaining buy-in from investors and collaborating organizations. Being mindful of an investor's busy schedule can also be easily missed- it's vital for entrepreneurs to be ready, organized and make it easy for investors to have access to everything from their current status, to their future plans and all due diligence items in a packet ready for distribution. Another mistake startups often fall to? "A lot of entrepreneurs feel like investors have all the power, because they hold key to their success," which Elsirafy informs, is far from the truth. He advises entrepreneurs to keep in mind that investors are "only providing *one* part of what's needed to make their mark on the world-capital. Yes, it's a critical part, but it's only *one* part," he stresses. "This is why you see a lot of investors say that they invest in people, because they do. Being yourself and confident relays to investors that you understand the value you're bringing to the table and that you will be a key contributor to the success of the venture."

Upon receiving funding, Elsirafy reminds startups that, yes, new-found capital *can* make your startup better, but it can also easily make it worse. He points out various factors that need to be properly considered- first, having the right team: "Getting capital makes it easy to hire people to alleviate the existing teams' workload or fill a long-needed position at a company, don't rush it." At the same time, when it comes to hiring, Elsirafy suggests keeping in mind that everyone has their own professional and personal goals outside your company. He says it's essential to discuss each's goals and make a plan in place to get them there: "Not only are you being a good employer and harboring a great company culture, but you're also sure to get better output from every member of your team since your interests are aligned with mutually beneficial goals." Secondly, a factor that often gets disregarded is identifying diminishing returns- as in, for example, over hiring to the point wherein bringing additional staff would worsen issues: "Make sure you properly assess your needs and continuously perform cost-benefit analysis, so you're aware of when you begin to encounter diminishing returns." With new capital and growth, Elsirafy comments it becomes harder for an entrepreneur to keep a balance of their macro strategy and micro execution for it. He advises to establish a clear internal communication framework to ensure that even when the entrepreneur can't be involved in day-to-day micro on-goings, at least they have relevant information from their team that the micro is aligned with the macro strategy. Another common mistake that Elsirafy brings up is when founders either communicate too much or too little with their investors. "Investors don't need to hear it all," says Elsirafy, adding that though it's easy to be over eager in sharing positive information in a long update email to your investors (that is not only time-consuming for entrepreneurs to write, but for investors to read too), this sets a precedented for future long updates, and when there isn't as much to update them on, it might be seen as a sign of trouble. "Don't set the bar unnecessarily high, but also make sure communications are there and consistent. Lastly, whatever you do, don't ghost!" He concludes that he wants entrepreneurs to find a balance between "making the money last as far as you can, but without

"BEING YOURSELF AND CONFIDENT RELAYS TO INVESTORS THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE VALUE YOU'RE BRINGING TO THE TABLE AND THAT YOU WILL BE A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO THE SUCCESS OF THE VENTURE."

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"DON'T SET THE BAR UNNECESSARILY HIGH, BUT ALSO MAKE SURE COMMUNICATIONS ARE THERE AND CONSISTENT."

hindering the business from growing or doing what needs to be done." This trait is most often found in startups which had bootstrapped for quite a while, raise capital, and continue to operate lean and allocate resources as efficiently as possible. "If your goal is to make a bigger fire, pouring gas on it does the job, but doing so without the right controls, you can burn everything down."

Looking at the year ahead, when asked about the opportunities and needs of the MENA region's entrepreneurial landscape, Elsirafy is positive that the investment area would continue to bustle with capital and activity- he asserts that, this, is likely as investors would invest more as local governments continue to support and fund economic diversification initiatives and create "diversified local markets" for countries that traditionally depended on oil or other natural resources. "With large labor forces in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, governments are hard-pressed to help cultivate an industry with increasing job opportunities, and inclusive for women and youth," says Elsirafy on how such initiatives will increase throughout the year (and beyond), which would increase investment opportunities and investors' confidence for the region. Another opportunity unnoticed are SMEs- Elsirafy comments on how long-established family businesses are having its reigns passed to younger and increasingly entrepreneurial generation, and that with the right capital and advisory, could grow to large enterprises. And to leverage on this opportunity, this is when investors need to step up, to guide entrepreneurs on best practices, for which investors themselves need to be experienced in local markets, as well as sound business practices and management procedures to provide the entrepreneurs the right type of support. However, Elsirafy has a feeling that mentorship might struggle, at least, for now: "There is a significant shortage of advisors and mentors that have gone through a full entrepreneurship cycle (idea to exit). I think this will continue to remain a challenge for the next couple of years until local entrepreneurs have gone through enough cycles to actually qualify as mentors or the transfer of information and skills proliferates from developed venture ecosystems to MENA." But more so, Elsirafy is adamant on the future, he asserts that the region would start seeing a "reverse brain drain" with talent and knowledge transfer coming back to MENA, particularly from local natives and second generation of those who immigrated. "I'm also confident that it won't be a purely economic driver behind this, but the opportunity for entrepreneurs, highly-skilled talent, and investors to take on the challenge of innovating in a relatively untapped market, while contributing to a positive social impact." ■

'TREP TALK

Kareem Elsirafy, founder and Managing Partner of Modus Capital

Looking at your experience as an entrepreneur and as an investor, what do you think makes a "good VC firm"?

"A good VC firm is one that can properly manage their relationship with their LPs (limited partners) and the entrepreneurs they invest in. I feel a significant shortcoming of VCs is that their focus is biased towards portfolio performance strictly from the lens of their LPs. We all understand the fiduciary duty of a venture firm's GPs (General Partners) is a positive return for their investors (that's their job after all), but I think if more VCs provided a better type of support to their companies, positive returns will be an inherent by-product of those efforts. In the end, I don't think there is anything called a 'bad VC,' I just think there are approaches and models that are more beneficial than others, in regards to what startups are looking for or need."

With your business growth trajectory, how have you experienced failure? How did you deal with it?

"No matter how much data you have or how well you plan things, you're not always right. We've made mistakes by working with the wrong companies or founders in an effort to materialize an engagement that had a clear economic benefit, although our initial thoughts/feelings were telling us it may not be the best opportunity from a leadership or thought process perspective. In the end, our instincts were right, and the relationships were unsustainable, but we made sure to disengage in the gentlest way possible and always leave an opportunity to re-engage in the future. Taking the time to digest all the information and overcome your knee-jerk reaction to a failure helps us assess what we did wrong or could have done better, while also reacting in the most mutually beneficial way to you and anyone else involved be they an internal teammate at your organization or someone external."

In building up Modus Capital, what were the biggest obstacles you've faced and how have you overcome it?

"Aside from fundraising which is challenging enough itself notwithstanding doing so with a new model, I would say [it] is educating. I don't mean in a traditional sense of 'what to do' or 'how to do it,' but more around 'why.' Everyone has their own understanding of things and this is not what only drives their actions, but also helps forms their view of the world around them. In such a construct, if you don't articulate the why behind the what and how you do, it makes it significantly harder for you to get buy-in.

Attempting a new way to deploy venture capital in a supportive ecosystem while also providing an alternative investment product to LPs, is a significant challenge not only in educating investors and the entrepreneurs we invest in, but also the existing players in the market you're entering and the greater ecosystem. We've faced a lot of pushback when we initially solicited our model, but as soon as we did a better job of explaining why it is this way and the path that got us to Modus, we began finding a lot of support from both investors/companies and others in the market. In short, we've learned that educating through communicating the right information will help others see things from our perspective which is all we can ask of others."

Identifying potential

One of the founders of Dubai Angel Investors, Roland Berger Managing Partner **Kushal Shah**, explains how the investment club works (and how 'treps can better their chances at an investment from it)

by TAMARA PUPIC

As a building block of any promising startup ecosystem, angel investing has been a much talked about topic across the GCC region for years. The early-stage startup funding support is vital to the region's successful transitioning from oil-dependent revenues to a more diversified market, and the growing number of GCC-based angel investment groups serves as a testament that it is no longer possible to hold back the tide of change. In the UAE, one of the more recently established angel groups -Dubai Angel Investors (DAI)- is a member-led investment company made up of around 70 members, ranging from experienced angel investors and partners in venture capital funds to executives of successful companies. "The DAI model is unique and innovative for the region," says Kushal Shah, one of the founders of DAI, who is also the Managing Partner at Roland Berger in Dubai. "Firstly, most of the DAI members are seasoned investors and senior management executives of well-known companies. When these like-minded investors came together to invest, there was a natural desire to create an exclusive members' club for investments. Secondly, members do not make individual investment decisions. Unlike other clubs, we have a captive fund managed by a very diversified and talented investment committee, with rotating members, that drive the decision making via open sessions. Today, DAI is one of the very few angel investing clubs that allow its members to be fully engaged, and get heavily involved in the club activities."

Since its inception nearly two years ago, DAI has received around 500 deal proposals per year, and ended up closing approximately 10 of those per year, Shah says. The process starts with an interested entrepreneur contacting a member of the DAI's Investment Committee to review and advise on its application. If given the green light, the startup's application is submitted to the DAI's Investment Committee for initial screening and selection, followed by voting on whether the interested startup should be invited to one of DAI's pitch nights, those are usually held on the second Tuesday of every month. When asked what entrepreneurs should keep in mind when applying to DAI, Shah says, "There should be a market need and customer willingness to pay for their service. That market need needs to be tested through a market-fit process that is iterative and customer-led. Also, the business proposition must be profitable and scalable at relatively modest volumes. The reality is that the MENA is made up of 22 different countries with varying dynamics. A business must show that it can be profit-

Kushal Shah, Managing Partner at Roland Berger, one of the founders of Dubai Angel Investors

"OUR BIGGEST SUCCESSES ARE WHERE WE ARE VERY COMFORTABLE WITH THE FOUNDER, AND OUR FAILURES ARE WHERE WE DID NOT ASSESS THE FULL FLEXIBILITY OF THE FOUNDERS."

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able in each of the countries, otherwise the scalability is questionable. Lastly, the team must pass the stress test, and be able to sustain themselves in a VUCA (vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world. This is why investors are more likely to back teams and co-founders, rather than a single entrepreneur, since it is rare that a single person has all the necessary skills."

Come one of the DAI Tuesdays, and up to four startup teams are given 20 minutes to present their businesses, followed by 10 minutes of Q&A with members of the DAI Investment Committee. "One of the key differentiators of DAI is that we look at investments from across the world," Shah notes. "To date, we've made investments in companies not only in Dubai, but also in Egypt, Lebanon, UK and USA. Our entrepreneurs come from all around the world since we believe that entrepreneurship easily crosses borders, nationalities, and personal backgrounds." There are also additional differences from other region-based angel investing groups, one of which is that DAI members commit capital upfront, and, in most cases, do further invest their own money alongside the DAI commitment, Shah says. "DAI has already invested several million dollars, and in some cases, we lead the round as well, without VC support," he says. "In those cases, we complete our own due diligence with the help of the DAI members." To date, the majority of DAI's deals have included an investment of US$50,000 each, which is a minimum amount that the group invests directly, with the maximum being $250,000. Furthermore, DAI team has completely led three funding rounds, with one investment being of over $1 million, and the other two of around $500,000.

A decision to invest in a company requires two-thirds of the DAI Investment Committee members who attended the relevant pitch night to vote in favor of the investment. In any case, the startup is to be informed of the decision within 24 hours of pitching. Following an investment in the startup, DAI assigns one of its members to track the startup's progress and offer an assistance when and where necessary. In addition, DAI's portfolio companies are seldom invited to its meetings and provide an update on their activities. From Shah's perspective, the DAI team hasn't had any major funding "misses" on their record, but he does point out that NOW Money, Malaeb, and Eat are some of the startups that DAI did not invest in, but which did manage to successfully raise capital from other investors later on. "Speed is the name of the game for both startups and investors," Shah says. "We typically move fast, but sometimes we get dragged into processes driven by know your customer (KYC) and other matters, which are not directly relevant to the startups. Our biggest successes are where we are very comfortable with the founder, and our failures are where we did not assess the full flexibility of the founders."

"TO DATE, WE'VE MADE INVESTMENTS IN COMPANIES NOT ONLY IN DUBAI, BUT ALSO IN EGYPT, LEBANON, UK AND USA. OUR ENTREPRENEURS COME FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD SINCE WE BELIEVE THAT ENTREPRENEURSHIP EASILY CROSSES BORDERS, NATIONALITIES, AND PERSONAL BACKGROUNDS."


Kushal Shah at a Dubai Angel Investors event

As for the kind of ventures that DAI members hope to invest in the future, Shah points out that the group is sector agnostic, and that as long as the startup engages with its customers via proprietary technology and has a capital-efficient vision to scale the business, it is good enough to be considered for their investment. However, there are certain preferences for 2018, so entrepreneurs in the respective sectors should take notice. "Technology service providers that are addressing large new trends, such as providing services to corporates to support their blockchain or AI activities," he says. "Also, we see a lot of opportunity in logistics, be it transportation solutions, last-mile delivery, online markets, or long-haul carriers. Lastly, we have been intrigued by clean energy solution providers in solar applications." But what makes for a good pitch by ›››

MAKE IT WORK

Three tips from Kushal Shah for MENA-based enterprises to succeed in business

1. Improve organizational agility "The pace of change is fast in today's world. You need to keep up with changing environment, be it technology, political situation, business strategies or macro-economic changes. Scenario planning is vital for businesses that want to be prepared, rather than surprised."

2. Focus on talent "Acquiring, retaining, and developing talent is more important than managing the digital automation alone. People ultimately make or break a company's ability to compete."

3. Work in collaboration "Building long-term relationships with all key market players is important. Partnerships are extremely important to grow in the region. Solo business operations will not work anymore. These include partnerships with suppliers, customers and in some cases even competitors in areas like regulations and risk management."

an entrepreneur to impress DAI? Shah offers three pointers. One, demonstrate "use cases" with live examples, such as real customers and scenarios. "Show real examples on how they are disrupting to provide better solutions to a real problem," he says. Two, be realistic about where your enterprise is headed. "Be careful with forecasting, and present the right balance of forecasting and assumptions, not too over ambitious, yet not too conservative," Shah explains. "We tend to focus on unit economics and understanding how much money is a company making with every new transaction or incremental growth." Three, give the investors the full picture. "Present a thorough story, meaning a complete roadmap, plans, and clear understanding of the different aspects of the market-competition, barriers to entry, and so on." And there you have it, 'treps- three tips to better your chances at an investment from Shah and his team at DAI. Good luck with your pitches! ■

"BE CAREFUL WITH FORECASTING, AND PRESENT THE RIGHT BALANCE OF FORECASTING AND ASSUMPTIONS, NOT TOO OVER AMBITIOUS, YET NOT TOO CONSERVATIVE."

BE THE FIRST MOVER

HOW INVESTORS SHOULD CAPITALIZE ON A RAPIDLY CHANGING MIDDLE EAST **by SEAN MCKEON**

For investors scanning the globe in search of the next viable opportunity, the Middle East may seem like an unnatural place to look. Stories on geopolitical upheaval and demographic unrest dominate headlines. At the same time, a flight to safety in Western markets remains a popular trend, despite predictions of a market correction. As residents of the Middle East know well, current headlines overshadow an economic transformation occurring in the region, one that touches a wide range of industries including technology, finance, and retail. With this change, comes a growing number of opportunities for global investors willing to invest in such emerging markets. To better understand the available opportunities, we need to look closer at what is driving the newest Middle East business revolution and lay out a framework for making new investments.

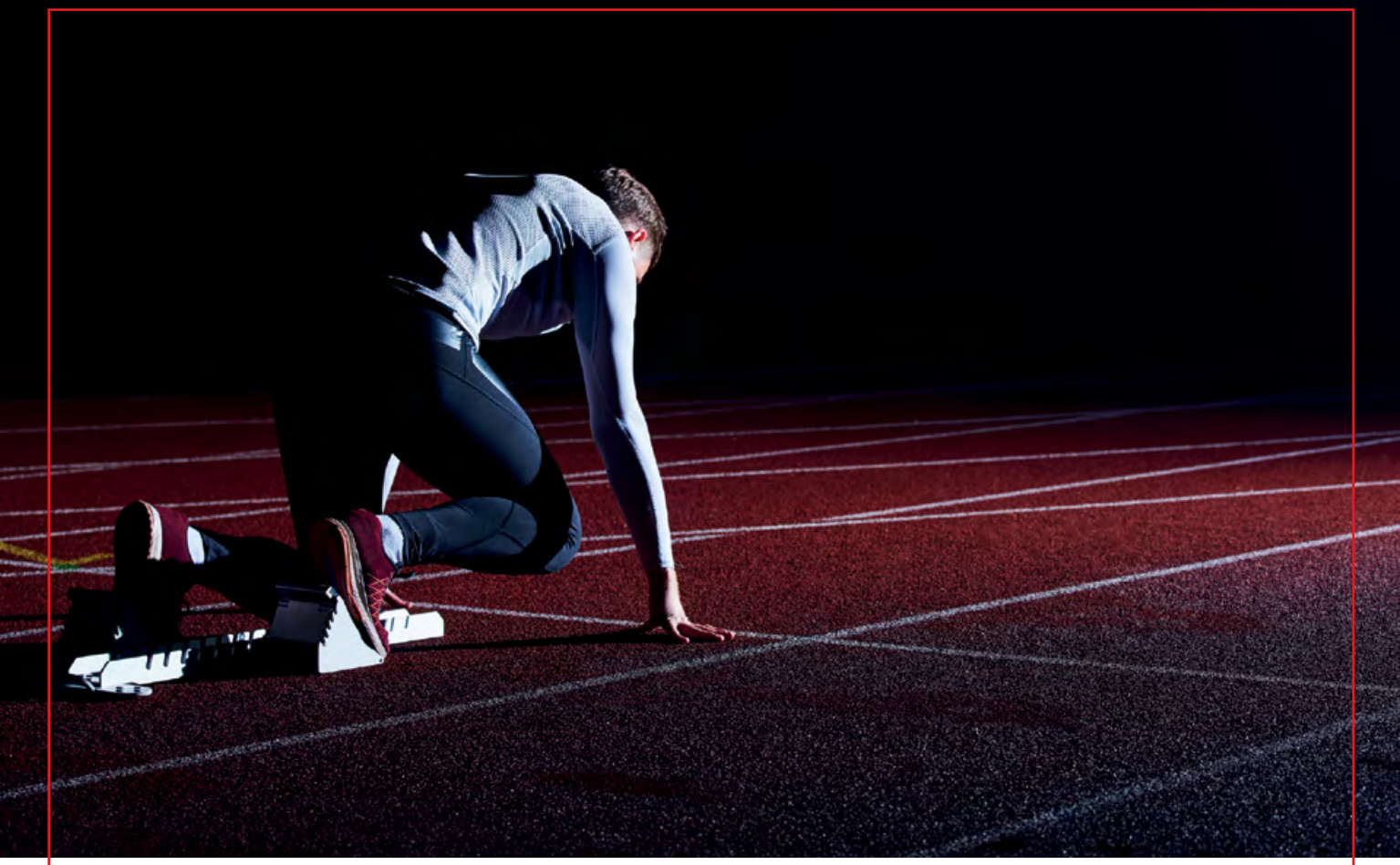
1. IDENTIFY SECTORS DISRUPTED BY GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SHIFTS. A changing geopolitical landscape and demographics offer new opportunities for investors in the Middle East. In one example, Saudi Arabia's push for diversification is creating new domestic and regional opportunities as the Saudi government looks for new global partners- the diversity of such partnerships is highlighted in recent announcements with Blackstone and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic. At a sector level, retail and consumer continues to attract private investment as oil and gas investments decline, according to a 2016 Deloitte report. Population growth in countries with large youth populations will further highlight the importance of other sectors like transportation and healthcare.

2. UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY UNDERLYING THE DISRUPTION. Backed by government initiatives, technology is increasingly becoming an investable sector in many Middle East economies. The growing popularity of technology-enabled businesses and growth of venture capital ecosystems in the UAE and Egypt was highlighted in Christopher Schroeder's 2013 book titled *Startup Rising*. In just a few years since publication, the region has witnessed an increase in tech-enabled businesses and the region's first two unicorns, which includes Amazon's acquisition of local e-commerce company Souq.com. For investors sitting in the US and Europe, technology and tech-enabled businesses offer a new level of diversified access to a region long dominated by petrochemicals.

3. SEEK OUT LOCALLY-DEVELOPED IDEAS BACKED BY GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES. Homegrown private sector businesses are increasingly seen as a viable place to invest in the region. Investors should look for market dislocations where state enterprises previously dominated. Such openness coupled with state support and subsidies is driving innovation in the region. The UAE, long a center of technological progress in the Middle East, continues to sponsor new initiatives aimed at modernizing the state's economy. Careem, a Dubai-based ride sharing company, grew to be the region's second unicorn following investment by regional and international investors. In countries with larger population centers, investments in local businesses offer international investors the added benefit of aiding the region's economic development.

As the region continues to open up politically, investors should monitor the many ways Middle East investments can complement an existing global portfolio. Among the many reasons are diversification, access to a region with large youth populations, and the dual benefit social impact coupled with financial return. As is the case in many emerging markets, hurdles to investment will arise; but, so long as change in the Middle East continues, so will the growing number of opportunities.

Sean McKeon is an investment advisor based in London and a passionate supporter of entrepreneurship in emerging markets. Talk to him on Twitter @fseanmckeon.



Akef Aqrabawi, President and CEO, INJAZ Al-Arab

Unlocking potential

INJAZ Al-Arab President and CEO **Akef Aqrabawi** is on a mission to enable Arab youth to drive the region's economy forward

by ABY SAM THOMAS

HEARING INJAZ AL-ARAB President and CEO Akef Aqrabawi talk about the organization's goal to have its education and training programs reach one million students annually in the Arab world by 2022, I'm struck by two things: first, the ambitious nature of this particular objective, and second, Aqrabawi's resolute belief that this target can indeed be achieved- if provided with the requisite support. As a non-profit entity, INJAZ -which is the regional operating center of the global Junior Achievement (JA) Worldwide network- is reliant on its partners both in the private and public sectors to not just provide it with financial support, plus also provide them with their resources to act as volunteers to conduct its programs for students across the region. INJAZ's programs, which fall under the domains of financial literacy, workforce readiness, and entrepreneurship, aim at equipping youth with the skills they need to succeed in today's world of work- these are things that traditional academia in the region are (unfortunately) not teaching them, but are absolutely needed (and demanded) by businesses in the current market landscape. One could say that there is thus an urgent need for education reform in the region- but according to Aqrabawi, waiting for that to happen –even as the Arab world already struggles with rising unemployment figures as well a rising youth population- is simply not in the Middle East's best interests. "Every single year we miss, there will be massive, massive wave of youth coming into the private sector marketplace, seeking an opportunity that does not exist," he notes. "And that is our role as INJAZ Al-Arab- to provide them with the skills they need to enter the marketplace properly in the future." Indeed, that's why an enterprise like INJAZ, doing what it does, is so critical for the Arab world, Aqrabawi points out. "The number of youth in this region: we are talking about 200 million students- 65% of them are under the age of 25," he says. "There is a big need for this program… Our purpose is to equip our young people to drive the economy forward."

IMAGE CREDIT INJAZ AL-ARAB

"THERE IS A BIG NEED FOR THIS PROGRAM... OUR PURPOSE IS TO EQUIP OUR YOUNG PEOPLE TO DRIVE THE ECONOMY FORWARD."

But while INJAZ may have a lot more to do for the future it seeks to realize, this organization has, in the years it has been in the region, managed to accomplish a lot already. Since its launch in 1999, INJAZ has seen over two million students from 14 countries participate (and benefit from) its programs, which has been backed by government authorities from across the region, as well as corporate partners from a variety of industries- the list includes companies like Boeing, J. P. Morgan, Deloitte, McKinsey & Company, and several others. In terms of impact, Aqrabawi has plenty of stories to share about students that he personally saw go through an INJAZ program, and come out as transformed individuals with renewed vigor and purpose. One such INJAZ alum he proudly points out is the founder and CEO of the RiseUp Summit, Abdelhameed Sharara, who, as Aqrabawi fondly remembers, went through INJAZ Egypt's Company Program in 2009, which was a precursor to the entrepreneurial endeavors he put his name to afterward. While Aqrabawi is understandably exultant about how Sharara and other INJAZ alums like him have progressed with their lives, he believes that the more important thing to consider is the number of youth in the region that are missing out on a better future, simply because they haven't been guided to realize it for themselves. "I do believe that our youth, in general, have something deep down inside them that needs to be discovered," Aqrabawi says. "They are talented, but they need an opportunity. They need a vehicle to get them to the right destination."

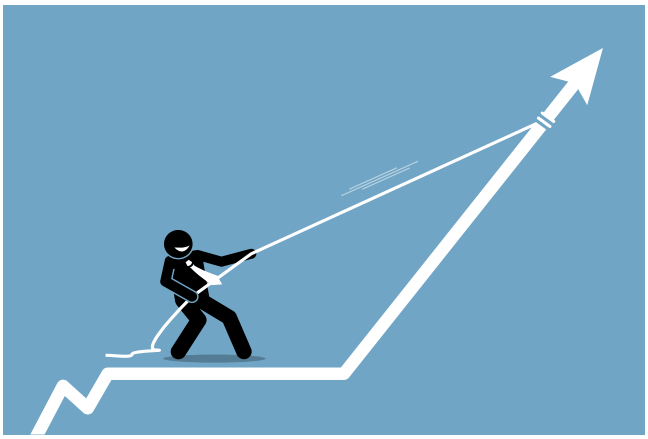
And INJAZ is certainly trying to be just that. Aqrabawi explains that INJAZ's programs for students, which are administered by volunteers from its corporate partners, enable young people in the region to enhance their employability, while also allowing them to experiment with their entrepreneurial capabilities as well. Note here that the volunteers are being more than just instructors- given that they are professionals with jobs and careers of their own, they serve as much needed models or inspiration that students can aspire to become. "The beauty of our model is in that we bring in those in the private sector to tell the youth about their journeys- they will learn a lot from those experiences," Aqrabawi says. INJAZ is, thus, essentially expanding the horizons that the youth can look out to- as he put it, if one doesn't see the possibilities, one simply won't know how to tap into those opportunities. "Our youth, in general, are not exposed to what is available in the marketplace," Aqrabawi explains. "They don't understand what are the growing and trendy industries that they need to look at, from now until, say, ten years." Such a mindset also explains why INJAZ has kept entrepreneurship as one of its core pillars for the programs in its portfolio. "I do believe that if you instill entrepreneurial thinking [in children] from an early age, this will definitely benefit them, and also keep the pipeline [of new entrepreneurs in the marketplace] going, when they actually grow up in the future," he says. "If you look at INJAZ's Company Program, for example, the journey that students in it go through, starting from coming up with the idea, conducting a feasibility study, marketing research, even raising capital- it will change their mindset."


An INJAZ Al-Arab event


Akef Aqrabawi, President and CEO, INJAZ Al-Arab

"THAT IS OUR ROLE AS INJAZ AL-ARAB- TO PROVIDE [YOUNG PEOPLE] WITH THE SKILLS THEY NEED TO ENTER THE MARKETPLACE PROPERLY IN THE FUTURE."

Aqrabawi speaks from experience, of course- he's been working with INJAZ for more than 17 years now, and in this time, he has seen first-hand the effect it can have on students, and the positive change that further occurs as a result of that. "The key point is our youth," he says. "When you see them talking about their products, the companies that they made, the impact you have had on them, yes, that's definitely something that makes us proud." This is, in essence, what drives Aqrabawi and his team at INJAZ to do what they do- and it's also a pointer for the rest of us to support them in what they do. After all, the future of this region is, as Aqrabawi tells me, something that's absolutely worth working for. ■



(Re)energize your business

The ten commandments of business innovation

by FREEK VERMEULEN

If you're looking for ideas to reinvigorate your business –or even start a new venture- I would like to set you a challenge. Begin by picking one or two long-established practices -either within your own business, or a sector you know about- and review their purpose. This can be a very effective way to identify entrepreneurial opportunities.

And if you're considering a sector where businesses are relatively undifferentiated, this approach can work particularly well. It's all too easy to become blind to the negative effects of long-established practices, thinking, "that's just the way it's done," when the original reason for a particular practice has long gone.

So, don't take things for granted. Look at the activities of some close competitors. To get you started, the ten-point plan below provides a practical framework. Pick one or two points, such as reverse benchmarking, and make a start.

If you're checking established practices, be sure to understand exactly why firms are doing what they do. If no one quite understands the reason for a particular activity, this could provide an opportunity for differentiation and innovation.

Let's take the example of broadsheet newspapers which circulated in the UK for so many years. Why were they printed on large sheets of flimsy paper when it was cumbersome for the reader, and more expensive than printing on smaller sheets?

Dr. Freek Vermeulen is Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at London Business School. He is the author of the recently published book, *Breaking Bad Habits: Defy Industry Norms And Reinvigorate Your Business*, published by Harvard Business Review Press.

After some research, I discovered that the practice originated from 1712 when the English government started taxing newspaper companies based on the number of pages they printed. In consequence, newspaper publishing began printing on larger sheets of paper to manage their tax bill.

This clearly shows why comparing yourself or your organization in terms of practices or performance, with a group of peers, and then potentially mimicking them, can be a recipe for poor performance.

So, I challenge you to seek out a source of innovation. Here are ten ways to help re-energize activities in your team, your business, or even to help identify a whole new venture.

1/ Cut out the benchmarking as this can prevent innovation Comparing yourself with others and following their approach without fully understanding their chosen path can perpetuate bad practices. (Remember the example of broadsheet newspapers in the UK.)

2/ Try reverse benchmarking If there's no clear reason why competitors or those in a particular sector are doing things the way they do, then try doing it differently.

3/ Experiment if you can, but make sure to do it well Change one element at a time, and nothing else. That way, you should be able to distinguish the impact of what you are doing.

4/ Monitor entrants and companies in distress New entrants who may be emboldened by little to lose or unshackled by old habits, along with organizations fighting for survival may be prepared to experiment with new ideas or dispense with old practices.

5/ Ask insiders for concerns Your own staff understand the business and sector, so ask them for their views.

6/ Ask outsiders and new staff for suspicions Individuals who may be unfamiliar with your organization's practices may be more likely to question long-established practices. Talk to them, find out what practices they query and keep an open mind.

7/ Create bundles of practices and a new business model Look for activities that fit together and you may be able to create a new niche business idea.

8/ Take aim at a chunk of the market Identify a corner of the market where an industry's long-standing conventions no longer meet the needs of that particular market. By targeting an under-served sector of the market may give you a new opportunity.

9/ Just stop a business practice and focus on what's really important If most companies in an industry are offering something which customers don't really want, you've probably discovered a bad practice which can be eliminated.

10/ Watch out for "that's the way we do things round here" If you hear people saying that, it means they can't identify a particular reason for the behavior. In my view, it's an instant clue that you may have found a bad habit that needs to stop. ▪

"WE GOT FUNDED!"

Egyptian startups Elves and Moneyfellows on how they convinced investors to support them in closing their early-stage funding rounds

by SINDHU HARIHARAN


Karim Elsahy, co-founder, Elves app

ELVES

www.elvesapp.com

Real innovation, they say, lies in taking the uncharted path. At a time when enterprises globally are betting big on the power of chatbot technology as a game-changing customer service tool, along comes a company that pairs users with real personal concierges to get their needs met. Egypt-based startup Elves connects you with a human assistant –who they call an Elf- who chats with you, understands what you're looking for, searches for options based on your preferences, and makes tailored recommendations for your needs. Be it to find the perfect gift for an occasion, book a cab, purchase a particular product, or deliver something to an address anywhere in the world, the Elves platform can make it happen through its iOS app or on Facebook Messenger. Co-founded by Egyptian couple Karim Elsahy and Abeer Elsisi in 2016, Elves does not make use of any pre-defined algorithm to do what it does; however, the assistants do make use of artificial intelligence (AI) to learn about their customers, and thus offer better recommendations over time- which makes it, essentially, "a human-assisted AI assistant."

The startup, with a team of over 40 employees, has admittedly had valuable global recognition come its way since its launch. The startup received an invitation by Facebook to its F8 developer conference, an invitation to the World Economic Forum where Elves was listed as one of the 100 most influential startups, and also won a shout-out from Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg on a Facebook post. Amid this, Elves has now successfully raised US$2 million in its seed round- one that the startup terms as having been "heavily oversubscribed." The investment came from high profile investors including Emaar Group, the Kauffman Fellows Syndicate, Dubai Angel Investors ("their largest investment thus far") and other regional and US-based angels.

Ask founder and CEO Elsahy how the startup managed to raise a seed round of a value that's likely to be considered quite substantial for the region, and he attributes it to one word: relevance. "Everyone we [would] talk [to] could find a use for Elves," he says. "Because the proposition is so compelling yet versatile and broad, everyone could find a use for Elves. It's hard to argue against it, when you see yourself use it constantly and effectively." With considerable experience in managing large call center projects as part of their careers, Elsahy says he and Elsisi spent a lot of time in America's Bay Area observing the growth of machine learning. "We felt that pairing our background with machine learning could lead to something interesting," he remembers.

Elves' proprietary technology allows the company to address a number of concurrent live user requests, which are handled by human assistants. As the company's website declares, "Bots understand you [user] as data; an Elf really gets to know you," and Elsahy describes this as "real intelligence- combining the empathy and understanding of a human with the efficiency and scalability of a machine; always ready, relevant, and constantly learning and growing." To help them scale such a model, the company plans to utilize the seed investment primarily in "marketing our expansion to new markets, and continue to build our tech to enhance

IMAGE CREDIT ELVES

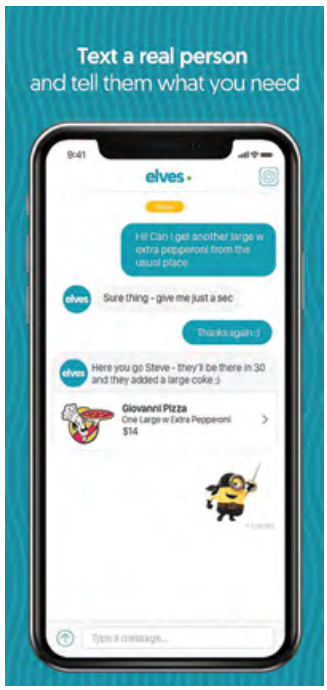
the user experience." Elsahy adds, "Our main goal is to drive as much traffic as we can to our machine learner and recruit the best engineers to drive Elves forward. We are now ready to take Elves to the next million users." Without getting into specifics, he says that Elves has managed to execute over a million conversations, and "with no marketing spend," it has captured over 24,000 users till date- double of where they were in August last year.

> "OUR MAIN GOAL IS TO DRIVE AS MUCH TRAFFIC AS WE CAN TO OUR MACHINE LEARNER AND RECRUIT THE BEST ENGINEERS TO DRIVE ELVES FORWARD. WE ARE NOW READY TO TAKE ELVES TO THE NEXT MILLION USERS."

As for the process itself, Elsahy calls the fundraising a "surprisingly fun" experience for the team. "We enjoyed going on the road to tell people our story. When you have a strong and compelling proposition that is able to capture the imagination of smart investors, you feel validated and encouraged," he says. As a serial entrepreneur with experience in starting and leading several successful companies including enterprise software startup Konnecti.com, and VC firm Genius Ventures (which was itself acquired by Sawari Ventures), Elsahy stresses that the fundraising phase should be embraced by entrepreneurs. "We met some fantastic people along the way [during fundraising], and learned a lot about ourselves and different opportunities we could potentially explore," he says, noting the positive vibes they've encountered in raising finance for Elves.

Interestingly, the evolution of the startup is reflective of the business model of the platform that it leverages the most- Facebook Messenger. In fact, noticing Elves' performance on their platform, the Facebook team also reached out to start a conversation with the Elves team, and Elsahy too says he's met members of the Facebook team at several industry events throughout the year. "Immediately, we felt that there was a lot of potential synergy between us; also because a large percentage of our users use Facebook Messenger to communicate with us." He adds that they have kept the dialogue open with the tech giant, and "seek their support regularly to enhance our user experience."

With external support, finance, and technology all going in their favor, I ask Elsahy if Elves' "human-assisted virtual assistant" model could pose a challenge to scaling the enterprise. But Elsahy shuts down the premise, saying "As our user base increases with conversations, our machine learns more and makes our Elves handle more concurrent users." He backs it up with an instance, as well. "To give you perspective, today we have the same number of Elves handling more than double the user base we had in July [2017]," he says. "One Elf handling many concurrent users is important to our business model, comparing



to a traditional customer service center where the model is one to one." As for the road ahead, Elsahy envisions their strategy evolving into a "many-to-many model, where anyone can be certified to become an Elf, and share their knowledge and experience with people local to them and in their language."

MONEYFELLOWS

moneyfellows.com

Egypt-based Moneyfellows, a tech startup that digitizes informal lending between friends and family networks, has raised US$600,000 in an investment round led by Dubai Angel Investors and 500 Startups. The web and mobile-based platform enables individuals to access interest-free credit under a method of financing wherein a community contributes money to a common fund, and then takes turns in withdrawing the amount.

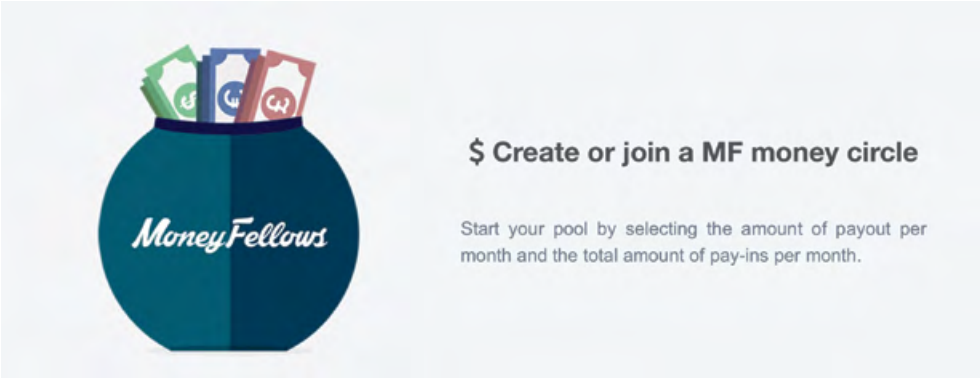

Ahmed Wadi, founder and CEO, Moneyfellows

The fintech startup had earlier raised capital in a pre-seed round from Startup Bootcamp Fintech London, Flat6labs, and others.

Founded in 2015, the idea for Moneyfellows hit the startup's founder and CEO Ahmed Wadi in Germany, where as a fresh graduate with a modest pay, he was looking to fund his own wedding and honeymoon. "Doing an offline money circle with friends and family back home was my only resort," Wadi recalls. "It was extremely painful to find a suitable one, manage it, and keep track of it. If there existed a digitized version of this, I would've been a frequent user myself. There wasn't; so, I decided to do something about it, and do it myself."

Speaking about the business model driving the enterprise, the Egyptian entrepreneur says that while Moneyfellows currently charges users a variable fee depending on a user's selected slot in a money circle, the team is also working to launch "product-based circles, where users would get products they're looking for, rather than cash." At the same time, the company is also in the process of "validating a third business model that, if it ›››

IMAGE CREDIT MONEYFELLOWS



works, [they] wouldn't need to charge our users a cent, while still being able to make a margin for ourselves." Without going into the specifics of the new offerings, Wadi says that are aiming to utilize the funds raised to finance their expansion plans. "We plan to acquire more than 45,000 paying users, build and expand our star team (we are currently hiring), as well as some initial country expansion plans like obtaining regulatory approvals, beta launches and testing those markets," he says. The startup claims to be gaining traction steadily since the time it participated in the Barclays Egypt and Flat6labs-powered 1864 fintech startup accelerator, and it had also won first place in the startups track at the 10th MIT Enterprise Forum Arab Startup Competition held in Bahrain.

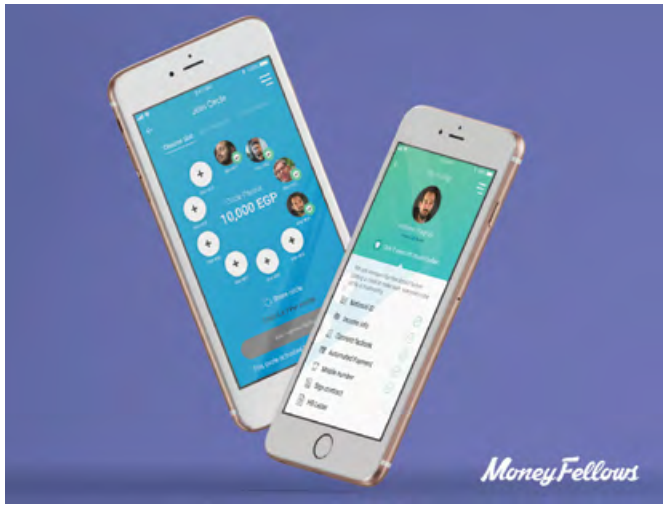

Hasan Haider, Partner, 500 Startups

Moneyfellows' fundraising story is certain to strike a chord with other regional entrepreneurs working towards financing the growth of their startup. "We've probably reached out to every single investor out there in the region," notes Wadi. "Some never answered back, others never gave us a 'no' (which kept us hanging out there around them for a while), some of which we've signed term sheets with but were never really able to eventually close, and finally some that offered us funding that we were stupid enough to reject," Wadi remembers. Not surprisingly, Wadi admits that keeping the core team focused on customer acquisition and product building during this period was a tough challenge as well. However, luckily for Moneyfellows, this challenging phase ended by raising what Wadi refers to as "smart capital from some of the bravest and smartest angel investors out there, while being able to maintain close relations with some other potential Series A, B and C investors."

And, as for the team's expectations from aligning with their current investor group, Wadi is excited about the amount of confidence and trust the investors had in them, the additional support they can expect to get out of their networks, as well as the ability for them to continue funding the startup in successive rounds. Hasan Haider, Partner, 500 Startups, notes that Moneyfellows' innovative model, which helps provide finance for the unbanked, attracted them to the startup. "[By] leveraging traditional forms of lending and savings, that of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), and bringing them online, Moneyfellows is going after a very large potential market worldwide," he says. "We love investing in locally developed innovations and teams with an execution-focused mindset like this. We expect to see them take traditional offline ROSCAs into the online world, and disrupt banking services (or the lack thereof) for people worldwide."

Moneyfellows' core business itself is not alien to the region. For a large population that has no credit history, and hence can't access conventional financing from banks and other institutions, the ROSCA model of finance (popularly known as gameya in Egypt) is a crucial leveler. By digitizing this process, Moneyfellows is enabling Egypt (and subsequently the entire MENA region) achieve financial inclusion quicker and at a larger scale. And with the region's policymakers and regulators keen to support fintech in every way they can, startups like Moneyfellows may soon be able to bring those excluded from the region's financial networks into it. ▪

"WE PLAN TO ACQUIRE MORE THAN 45,000 PAYING USERS, BUILD AND EXPAND OUR STAR TEAM (WE ARE CURRENTLY HIRING), AS WELL AS SOME INITIAL COUNTRY EXPANSION PLANS LIKE OBTAINING REGULATORY APPROVALS, BETA LAUNCHES AND TESTING THOSE MARKETS."



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Nour Al Hassan, founder and CEO, Ureed

TAPPING INTO OPPORTUNITY

Ureed founder and CEO Nour Al Hassan aims for her platform to be "the largest marketplace for Arabic content writers and translators in the world."

by ABY SAM THOMAS

As the founder and CEO of the UAE-based translation agency Tarjama, Nour Al Hassan is someone who has been working in the linguistic and editorial services arena of the Arab world for over 10 years now. And it is essentially because of her prolific experience in this domain that one is compelled to sit up and take notice of her newly launched enterprise, Ureed, a digital editorial marketplace that aims at connecting businesses and freelance linguists to collaborate on a variety of content-related tasks, which include copywriting, editing, documentation, translation, and more. After all, for businesses seeking to reach online audiences in the Arab world, the need for Arabic content in the digital realm cannot be understated, and Ureed, with its network of freelancers, seeks to capitalize on this opportunity. "Ureed.com is the region's first marketplace focused on editorial and linguistic services," Al Hassan declares. "You can simply go online and hire talented freelancers to work with you, safely and easily. Whether you're seeking creative copywriters to write your website content, or simply need someone to proofread your work, Ureed is the way to go." Much like Tarjama, which employs more than 400 full-time and part-time workers across the Arab world, Ureed is also focused on using talent from the Middle East to help businesses communicate better to their audiences in this region. In terms of a value proposition, Al Hassan notes that Ureed's offering will be particularly of interest to smaller-sized enterprises like startups or e-commerce platforms, which, while having large volumes of editorial work to be done, may not be able to afford the high margins that the typical agency model would charge for such tasks- they now have a much more cost-effective alternative at their disposal. As for why she chose to launch Ureed at this point of time, Al Hassan points toward her assessment of the landscape around her. "I saw an opportunity for making the service more accessible for a wider audience more efficiently," Al Hassan explains. "I felt that Ureed was the natural evolution of our industry, similarly to the evolution we're witnessing today with taxi services or hotels being disrupted, or at least complemented and improved, by their online and app-based peers."

Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and Ureed's appeal (and potential) as a business can be best exemplified by its current state of affairs. "As of today, Ureed has 320 registered clients, and 500 completed projects," Al Hassan says. "The feedback we have received so far is very positive; clients have been able to get jobs done at high speed and quality, without the hassle of signing contracts, or the requirements of going the traditional route of working with a company, and in many cases, for a much more competitive price." From the perspective of the freelancers on the platform, Ureed offers them the opportunity to gain income by working on their own terms- you may have a full-time job elsewhere, or you may be making a living by doing only freelance work, but as Ureed's website proudly declares, your paradigm can essentially be: "your desk, your rules." Al Hassan also notes that such a set-up allows for Ureed to cater to a variety of clients- be it your average internet user wanting to get an article translated for their personal blog, or a company seeking tens or hundreds of articles written or created on daily basis. "We have different models that cater to both types," Al Hassan explains. "The Standard Service is where a user, whom we refer to as an 'Employer' can manage the process of finding people and getting the job done by themselves on the platform, and we have an Enterprise Service, where companies simply communicate their requirements to an Ureed Project Manager,

IMAGE CREDIT UREED

"UREED.COM IS THE REGION'S FIRST MARKETPLACE FOCUSED ON EDITORIAL AND LINGUISTIC SERVICES. YOU CAN SIMPLY GO ONLINE AND HIRE TALENTED FREELANCERS TO WORK WITH YOU, SAFELY AND EASILY."

who in turn takes full care of the project(s) from start to end."

With Ureed being a new entrepreneurial endeavor for Al Hassan, I ask her how she's finding the startup journey this time around, having gone through this process last in 2008, which was when she launched Tarjama. "It's never easy starting something new," Al Hassan candidly admits. "The process and growth are as tough as in the old days of growing Tarjama. But what helps Ureed is my great team, and the experience we have in the content and translation space."

But have there been any changes in the ecosystem at large- is it at all easier to set up (and run) a business today in the region? "It's tough being a startup," Al Hassan replies. "Gaining clients' trust, [while] being a small company, is never easy. Clients tend to always want to give business for the big well-known names. It's changing now slowly to help startups more. As for other hurdles, it's very expensive to start a business- from license fees and registrations, and now, tax, it isn't a very inviting environment for business to start and grow. Getting financial support and loans from banks for SMEs is almost impossible. Access to capital is getting better through venture capital funds and angel investors, but [it's] still not enough." So, what can be done to make the landscape more welcoming for entrepreneurs? Al Hassan has one suggestion that can be (easily) put to practice given her personal experience with Tarjama: "Maybe [create] zones for companies that are starting, [which are] tax free, registration fees free or minimal, discounted rent rates?" she says. "I'll give an example here: twofour54 in Abu Dhabi helped Tarjama with discounted rent for over five years! This was something we couldn't find elsewhere, and this helped the company with its bootstrapping, and allowed us to grow without the need to fundraise. [This was] on top of [them] giving us a monthly retainer of their translation business for three years."

Such steps have helped Tarjama to come into its own as a regional enterprise today, and indeed, its success does bode well for Al Hassan's leadership of Ureed today. In terms of capital, Al Hassan says that Ureed has had only an initial seed round, which was entirely self-funded. "We didn't actively seek any funding at this stage, but we still managed to attract a lot of interest from various investors," she says. "What we're sure of is that we're very open to building strategic partnerships that could expedite the growth of Ureed." After all, Al Hassan sure has some big dreams for Ureed- she aims for it to be "the largest marketplace for Arabic content writers and translators in the world." Of course, that's easier said than done- but Al Hassan doesn't seem to be too perturbed with the idea that Ureed may have to tackle some tough times in the days to come. "I don't think of stopping," she says.

"It's normal to have tough days- they actually occur more often than the easy ones; it's the nature of the business! But the idea of quitting doesn't apply in our environment as a company. We need to keep going until we reach our next milestone- and so on..." If her response is any indication, then Al Hassan seems to be quite comfortable tackling the journey of entrepreneurship one day at a time- and it's a modus operandi that her peers in the ecosystem should perhaps take to heart as well. ▪

Nour Al Hassan, founder, Ureed (second from left), at the RiseUp Summit 2017 in Cairo, Egypt

Dany El Eid, founder and CEO, Pixelbug

ON A (HIGH) GROWTH TRAJECTORY

DANY EL EID FOUNDER AND CEO, PIXELBUG

WITH AN EXPO 2020 DUBAI CONTRACT IN THE BAG, THE ENTREPRENEUR IS NOW GETTING SET TO TAKE HIS COMPANY TO ITS NEXT STAGE OF GROWTH

by TAMARA PUPIC

BEING A PIONEER means leaving tradition, taking risks, and being patient along the way- *especially* when it is in the augmented and virtual reality space. However, for Dany El Eid, founder and CEO of Pixelbug, a AR/VR tech startup founded in Dubai in 2012, staying calm and quiet, while making a trail in this new industry has been a challenge more often than not. "I didn't choose to be an entrepreneur," he admits. "Entrepreneurship chose me, but I wish I had known how difficult it would be. Not that I ever imagined that it would be easy, but I also didn't think it would require so much patience. The learning curve and adrenaline rush one gets from being an entrepreneur is incomparable. However, this truly is a marathon, not a race, so it is important not to compare yourself to others." Committed to his own journey and trajectory despite the hardships, El Eid first became known after releasing Colorbug, a family-oriented AR edutainment app that brings characters in coloring books to life, in May 2015. However, even before that, he had already had a few wins under his belt, such as introducing viable commercial AR applications for multinationals, including P&G, Nestle, Lego, and Atlantis, or working with Dubai Properties, a Dubai-based real estate master developer to create a virtual reality tour of the company's Bellevue Towers, to name but a few.

Yet, recent years have brought other notable achievements. In a bid to capture a larger market share with more cost-efficient options for companies with smaller budgets, Pixelbug, at the beginning of last year, devised an innovative business model, a hybrid of subscription and premium services. It helped them also attract international investors and land high profile long-term contracts. At the same time, the Pixelbug team was selected to join Boost VC, the world's leading AR/VR accelerator that is managed by Tim and Adam Draper, tech investors who have desirable stakes in companies like Tesla, SpaceX, Skype and Baidu. While taking part in Boost VC's four-month acceleration program in Silicon Valley, El Eid also got invited to participate in the Venture Out program in New York. "This gave us access to the advertising and media giants on the East coast," he says. "This was a major achievement for us since it exposed us to the fast-paced mindsets of the Valley and the Big Apple. As a result, we have built a network of top tier VCs from both the East and West Coasts."

Furthermore, the big success came shortly after, in the summer of 2017, when Pixelbug won the contract to become the mixed reality provider for Expo 2020. "I'm really proud of landing the Expo 2020 contract. Having a key role in the success of this historical project is one of those accomplishments that will be remembered as our legacy," El Eid says. With 2017 having been an explosive year for AR and VR, El Eid expects 2018 to be even more exciting. "We've always been more focused on augmented reality, because I knew early on that it would be more scalable, since AR experiences can be consumed via smartphones that everyone already owns. In contrast, VR requires additional hardware that can be costly for mainstream adoption. Virtual reality is effective in certain use cases, like trade shows and education, but mainstream adoption will come from AR. We're already seeing convergence between AR and VR into what's called mixed reality (MR) or extended reality (XR). We're seeing the space fuse with other AI technologies, such as natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning, to make the human-machine interactions more compelling to users."

IMAGE CREDIT PIXELBUG

"THIS TRULY IS A MARATHON, NOT A RACE, SO IT IS IMPORTANT NOT TO COMPARE YOURSELF TO OTHERS."

While he plans to continue his business development efforts in the region, making Pixelbug's presence in North America more permanent is on top of his agenda for 2018, all in order to access larger investments and stronger talent. This statement might give a window into his past struggles with raising funds in the region, yet El Eid doesn't seem to have had any. Starting Pixelbug with his own funds, he managed to capture lucrative contracts early on due to being a first mover in the AR/VR space. The capital was reinvested in the business, allowing the Pixelbug team to forego seeking external investors for several years. Before long, the technology started maturing and with it came aspiring new entrants, leading El Eid to double down on building their own B2B and B2C digital products to scale faster, and position the company as a cost leader as well. This strategy allowed him to close a seed round last year from leading regional and international investors. At this point, however, El Eid opens up on his current challenges, which finally explains the company's plans to seek its base in other parts of the world. "Unfortunately, most international investors are still highly cynical of the Middle East, and very few actually pay attention to the region at all," he says. "It is very stigmatized. Most will demand that you have a permanent presence in North America to pursue discussions. On the other hand, entrepreneurs from this region are plagued with investors who often have a clique mentality due to how small the ecosystem is. Most VCs remain highly risk averse which makes them behave more like PE firms. A stark contrast to the early stage VCs in the US. For example, the recent acquisitions of Souq and JadoPado should have signaled the move towards untapped exponential technologies like AI, AR/VR, robotics, or blockchain. Yet, due to the region's herd mentality, we still witness way too much money flowing towards online e-commerce portals or Uber-ized 'me too' products. Recently, I saw a Saudi firm invest in a portal selling perfume, an ancient dot com era type of investment. This might be due to the fact that VCs are fund managers who need to answer to their LPs and GPs, just like startups have to answer to their board members. The fact of the matter is that the regional ecosystem is still very nascent, trying to find its footing in an increasingly fast paced world, and home to a market with inhospitable business conditions still running on archaic trade laws. Dubai is the only beacon of hope in the region, but despite its best efforts to alter the region's perception, it remains too small a market to be taken seriously by international investors."


ColorBug app

Dubai setting the example for others to follow is the reason why most Arab entrepreneurs flock to the Emirate to get a chance at a secure future, he explains, citing a MAGNiTT report which noted over 40% of MENA startups are actually based in the city. Nevertheless, setting up in Dubai has its own challenges, El Eid adds: "Cost of doing business here remains highly prohibitive, and time to setup is still long. Policies are outdated, and have yet to catch up with the rise of tech startups. It no longer makes sense to keep an office lease tied to the number of visas and license renewal, when most startups operate under a remote structure. Companies working under the knowledge and shared economy should be able to choose whether they opt for office space, and that decision should not affect the renewal of its commercial license, or how many visas are allocated, especially with the introduction of VAT."

But regardless of the red tape or other problems, El Eid points out that overcoming such hurdles is up to one's entrepreneurial skills- a good entrepreneur will recognize mistakes, but a great entrepreneur will quickly act on feedback to course correct. "One thing to quickly learn as an entrepreneur is that mistakes will happen, whether you like it or not," he says, advising those who are just starting out. "I've had many misses, some more critical than others. From choosing inadequate co-founders, paying attention to distractions, focusing too much on fundraising, and saying yes when I should have said no more often than not. However, the important thing is to focus on successes, no matter how small, to stay motivated. Frankly, one of my biggest successes is having the privilege of working with some very smart people whom I learn a lot from. Another is attracting great partners and founder-friendly investors, who keep me motivated and accountable." ■

'TREP TALK

THREE TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS FROM DANY EL EID

1. Raising funds is good, but generating revenue is better "Focus on getting business and generating revenue, so you can hold off from needing VC money. This not only validates your product and market strategy, but also gets you close to your customers, who are most important."

2. Start local, think global "Use the region as a testing ground, and set up abroad, either North America or Asia, as quickly as you can. Unless, of course, you're a localized 'me too' service or product. However, if that is the case, keep in mind that your market will remain small, relatively speaking. Not that one is better than the other, simply depends on one's vision and objectives."

3. Remember what they say about opinions? "Avoid opinion overload, and stick to your guns. Have confidence in your vision, your purpose, and your capabilities."

Reimagining fundraising

500 Startups' alumni partner to launch **22X Fund,** offering tokenized opportunity to invest in startups

As 2018 emerges as the year cryptocurrency captures the imagination of technologists worldwide, initial coin offerings (ICOs) too are fast gaining traction as an attractive mode for entrepreneurs to raise capital. Startups globally face a critical question today-should they stick to pursuing traditional venture capital (with all its limitations), or look at ICOs or token offerings of the cryptocurrency world, where money is quick though dotted with uncertainties?

Well, as it so happens, entrepreneurs are definitely taking a chance on this front. 30 tech startups from over 14 countries that are part of 500 Startups' summer 2017 program in San Francisco have announced a ICO called the 22X Fund, a token offering that enables investors to invest in and own up to 10% equity in the group of startups. With token pre-sales having commenced on January 26, 2018 at 07:00 EST, 22X is aiming to raise US$35 million, which, according to a statement, will be deployed immediately, and invested on a pro-rata basis in the equity of participating companies. Thus, investors purchasing the tokens issued by 22X will have an opportunity to support the growth of 30 participating early-stage ventures, which are said to have already raised over $22 million capital in total among themselves, from VCs and other traditional modes.

Sami AlSayyed, founder and CEO, ShortPoint

Interestingly, one of the 30 startups from this group of ambitious entrepreneurs is the Dubai-born ShortPoint, a subscription software that helps build "engaging intranets" with no coding, which is now based out of Silicon Valley. ShortPoint founder and CEO Sami AlSayyed, who is part of the 22nd batch of the 500 Startups program, believes that 22X Fund is an innovative fundraising technique that has a lot of potential. "We saw the massive excitement that cryptocurrency was creating and realized that if we did an ICO, we could take more control over our fundraising process," he notes. "We all wanted to raise funds, and we had an idea to do it all together as a group. We think there is the potential that we may not have to approach the traditional route again."

"ICOS ARE ALL THE RAGE RIGHT NOW, BUT FEW HAVE A CONCRETE OFFERING UNDERPINNING THE VALUE OF THEIR TOKEN. SINCE ICOS REPRESENT A NEW FORM OF EARLY-STAGE FUNDING, 22X IS LEADING THE WAY BY OFFERING A TOKEN THAT GIVES INVESTORS REAL VALUE RIGHT FROM THE START."

Commenting on the potential of such security-backed ICOs emerging as a mainstream funding channel for upstarts, AlSayyed says, "We believe that VCs often do add some value (after all, if it weren't for VC, we wouldn't all be together), but we think that decentralizing this process through the blockhain [tech] will ultimately add more value to our companies and to investors. We all see the future in security ICOs, which is different than typical ICOs," he notes. Chris Rawlings, founder, Judolaunch, another participating 22X company, said in a statement, "ICOs are all the rage right now, but few have a concrete offering underpinning the value of their token. Since ICOs represent a new form of early-stage funding, 22X is leading the way by offering a token that gives investors real value right from the start." Some of the 30 startups part of 22X Fund are ShortPoint, Judolaunch, OHALO, Fincheck, and Stealth Co. among others.

AlSayyed believes that the 22X Fund also democratizes investments in startups, giving the opportunity to almost anyone from all over the world "to invest in 30 of highly vetted startups" easily, and with benefits. "No carry fees or follow-on fees on your investment. You do not have to wait until a startup gets acquired because we will issue 22X tokens for you that you can trade after one year [for liquidity]," he explains. Interested investors (satisfying required accreditation criteria) can subscribe to the 22X Fund in any currency (conventional and crypto) in return for regulation-compliant 22X Token. As the startups grow, investors earn proceeds from either exit or IPO or even by trading the 22X Fund token. To carry out this token sale, 22X Fund has engaged Securitize.io, a startup platform by itself that facilitates the purchase and transfer of tokens, as investment manager. Platforms like Securitize help tokenize ownership, thereby allowing enterprises to "move from the analog world of certificates to the digital world of the blockchain."

IMAGE CREDIT SHORTPOINT | 500 STARTUPS