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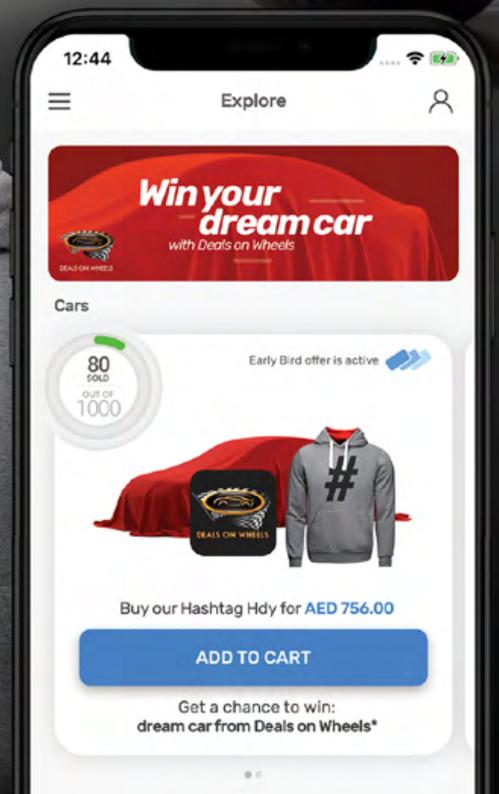
NITIN ANAND

The Executive Director
and Chair of the
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Skyline University College
on spearheading the
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next leg of growth





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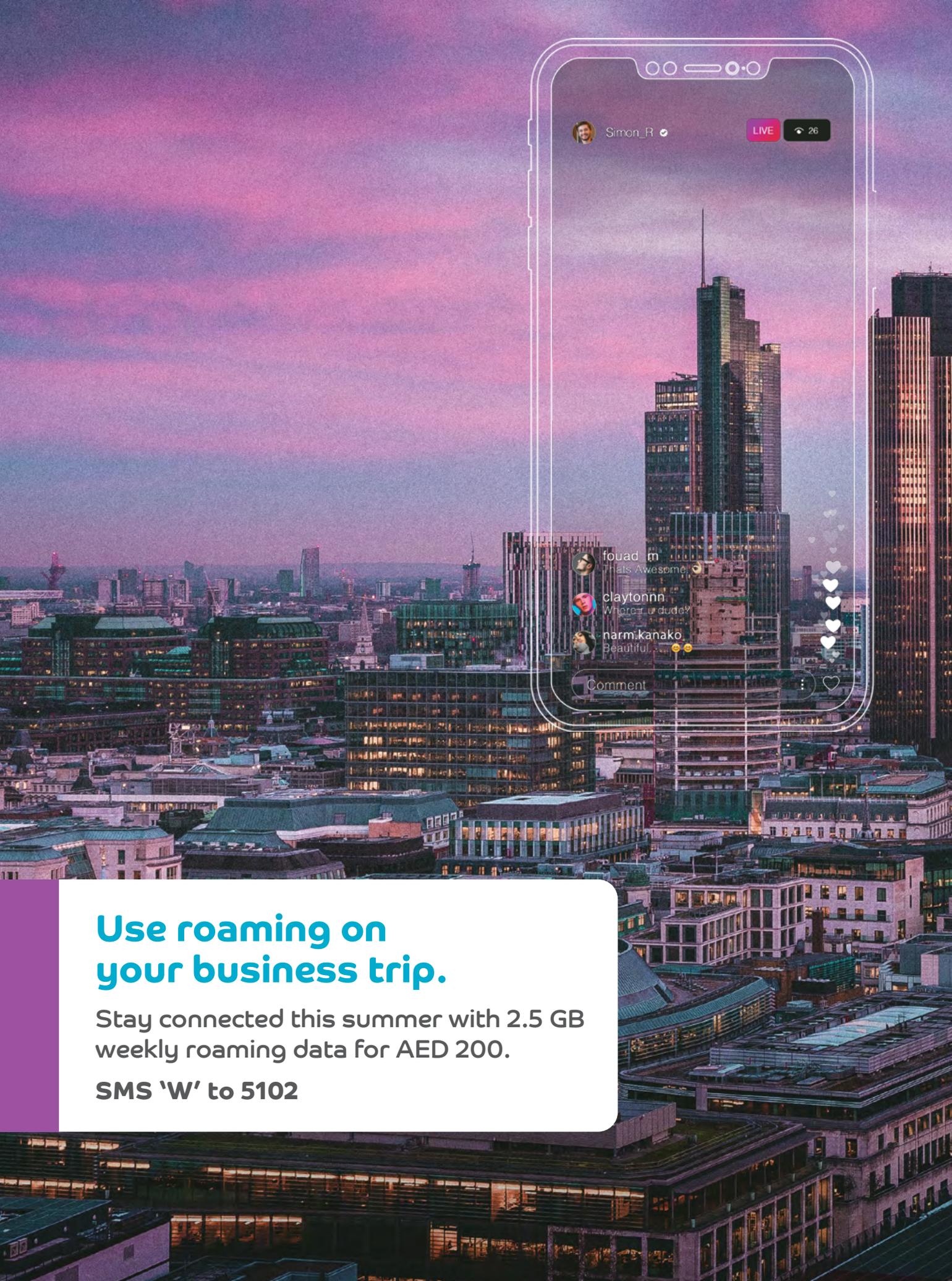
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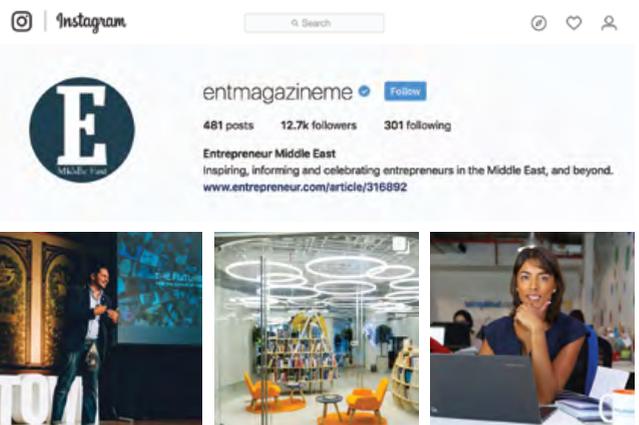
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A perspective on what to do when things seem to be going out of control

One of the recurring themes in the conversations I have had lately with people in the MENA entrepreneurial ecosystem is about how we often shy away from admitting to or publicly talking about the days when everything seems to be going, well, belly up in our respective startup enterprises. It's something we at *Entrepreneur* have noticed quite a few times as well- in interviews, when we ask entrepreneurs to tell us about the challenging times they have faced while building up their businesses, there have been cases where there was either a flat-out refusal to talk about such episodes, or just a vague allusion to the hurdles faced, without going into the depths of how these happened, or how they got past it. But this kind of behavior from those of us who work in startups is completely understandable, of course- nobody really ever wants to talk about the times they were "losing it" at a fledgling enterprise; breakdowns and meltdowns are things that *all* of us are only too glad to sweep under the carpet anyway. But shouldn't such discussions be a part of the larger discourse on entrepreneurship today?

It is thus in the spirit of sharing that I figured I will, well, walk the talk, and use this note to go into a particularly tortuous week at work recently, when I seemed to be, in the words of a one observer, "falling apart." What happened was this: a project that I was managing had

been hit by a series of unexpected impediments, which resulted in it descending into what I perceived as a complete mess that I was both unprepared for and overwhelmed by. Panic reigned supreme in my head, and that anxiety was further crippling my attempts to pull myself out of this situation. Despite this, I kept a stiff upper lip and tried my best to go about business as usual- which, in hindsight, was definitely a mistake, as by pretending that there wasn't a problem, I was essentially exacerbating the issue for myself at work.

Redemption came, perhaps ironically, when I finally broke, and let people around me know that I was in this apparently dire state of affairs. Friends rallied around me, and my team too- I was especially gratified to see people who were out on holiday still take the time out to offer both support and solutions to the conundrum I was in. With the various sets of advice now at my disposal, I forced myself to take a break from all of the tasks on my plate, and a rethink of the situation then followed- delegation became the order of the day, as opposed to trying to fix everything by myself. Once I realized that there were people out there who I could depend on and actually had my back, things began to look a lot better- sure, it was still not the best of times, but it was no longer the worst of times either.

The ultimate boost came during a meeting later with my project's stakeholders, when I realized that despite all of the hurdles along the



way, things were actually still under control, and not as bad as I had perceived it to be. All said and done, I came out of this episode with this lesson: when you think you're "losing it," make sure you let someone around you know about it as soon as you can. Don't be afraid to ask for help- it will only ever do you good.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Aby' with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end.

Aby Sam Thomas
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Driving fintech forward

FinTech Abu Dhabi 2018 is all set to be held on September 17, 2018

FinTech Abu Dhabi 2018, a MENA-wide event bringing together the region's fintech talent in Abu Dhabi, UAE, is back for its second edition after its inaugural conference in October 2017. Held under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Hazza bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Vice Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council, FinTech Abu Dhabi 2018 will be held on September 17, 2018 in Abu Dhabi at the Fairmont Bab al Bahr Hotel, and is organized by Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM), an international financial center and business hub based in Abu Dhabi.



H.E. Ahmed Al Sayegh, Chairman of ADGM addresses attendees at FinTech Abu Dhabi 2017

FinTech Abu Dhabi's 2017 edition reported receiving almost 3,000 requests for attendance from across the regional and global financial services and technology world, and this year's edition of the event aims to provide a comprehensive look at the latest developments in MENA's fintech industry through deep dives into select sectors and technologies. The program will deliver on this objective through keynotes, fireside chats, and discussions with local and global leaders from the fintech, government, and private sectors.

Some of the new elements introduced this year include a Bootcamp Day exclusively for fintech startups on

September 16, which shall offer fintech startups sessions on topics such as legal advice, fintech investing, among others. Entrepreneurs will also have the opportunity to meet and network with investors and potential customers, who will have been invited by ADGM to be a part of the bootcamp. Further, the Bootcamp Day also features demos from ADGM RegLab member firms, and access to global fintech accelerator Plug and Play and their network.

For fledgling fintech ventures, FinTech Abu Dhabi 2018 will also host the Innovation Challenge, an initiative of Abu Dhabi Global Market in collaboration with KPMG to support the develop-

ment of fintech, by enabling collaborations between the region's financial services institutions and fintech startups. In this year's challenge, selected startups will work to develop a prototype solution addressing business issues identified by UAE-based institutions ("Corporate Champions"). Each startup and Corporate Cham-

pion will then present the outcome of their collaboration before an audience of financial institutions, regulators, corporates and media at the Demo Day scheduled on September 17.

A few speakers who are set to share their insights at the event include Jan Reinmueller, partner and head of Digital Village in Singapore, Mei Gao, Partner, IDG Capital, Wai Lum Kwok, Executive Director, ADGM Financial Services Regulatory Authority, Najla Al-Midfa, CEO, Sheraa - Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center, and Brian Meenagh, Partner, Latham & Watkins LLP, among others.

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TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

WeWork goes meat-free as part of its environmental policy

Here's to a company that is walking the talk when it comes to doing its part for the environment. WeWork, a US-based real estate and co-working startup valued at approximately US\$20 billion, announced that it will no longer have any company events that include meat, and employees will not be able to expense meat as well (*Reuters*). In an internal policy sent to staff, WeWork co-founder Miguel McKelvey commented how the decision was based on the company's aim to reduce its environmental impact, saying, "New research indicates that avoiding meat is one of the biggest things an individual can do to reduce their personal environmental impact, even more than switching to a hybrid car." Though the new policy removes red meat, poultry, and other meats from company menu and expenses policy, the company is not prohibiting WeWork staff or members from bringing meat-based products to the workplace. In addition to its new policy, the company, along with sf.citi is also hosting an affiliate event of the 2018 Global Climate Action Summit in San Francisco called *The Future of Food: Tech's Menu for Sustainability* on September 13, 2018, which will bring "bring together leaders from the private and public sector to discuss how tech can be a leader in building a more sustainable future through food innovation." Speakers at this forum include HRH Prince Khaled bin Alwaleed bin Talal, founder of KBW Investments, Josh Tetrick, CEO of JUST, and more.

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Nitin Anand, Executive Director
and Chair of the Executive Council,
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SUSTAINING SUCCESS

NITIN ANAND

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CHAIR OF THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AT **SKYLINE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE** ON SPEARHEADING THE INSTITUTION'S NEXT LEG OF GROWTH **by SINDHU HARIHARAN**

From ensuring the organization is being steered in the right direction, to maintaining and building its stakeholder relations, while also developing strategic plans for its future, Nitin Anand is someone who seems to have a lot on his plate in his role as the Executive Director of the Skyline International Group, which has, among its many enterprises under it, Skyline University College (SUC) in Sharjah, UAE, where he enjoys the designation of both Executive Director and Chair of the Executive Council. But while others may have found themselves flustered with the tasks at hand in such a position, Anand seems to be managing it all quite effortlessly, and having everything quite under control. So, how does he do it? The secret perhaps lays in the fact that Anand's professional growth has mirrored that of Skyline's own evolution. As an educational institution that grew from rather humble origins in the early 90's to become one of the UAE's (and the region's) trailblazing universities, it is Skyline's growth and resilience that Anand, the nephew of its Founder President Kamal Puri, has tried emulating in his own career trajectory, from being a student at Skyline once upon a time, to becoming a key player in its top management today.

Anand received his master's degree in business administration from Skyline in 2004, and today, he drives and oversees the various business units under the organization's umbrella, which also sees him play a leading role in its inroads into other MENA markets, as well as countries like Pakistan, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. "Through my journey of Skyline, I have witnessed how it has evolved to stay abreast of the latest developments in education, to realize its vision of becoming a university that nurtures the spirit of innovation and creativity, in order to build a knowledge-based society," Anand notes. From his time as an eager student at Skyline, taking in all that the institution had to offer then, Anand now holds the challenging responsibility of understanding the changes in the way students learn today, and how the educational institution needs to adapt to this dynamic world. On a typical day at work, Anand can be seen doing everything from meeting the university's various stakeholders, to guiding the administrative and office support teams, while also developing and executing plans to ensure that Skyline is on the right track with respect to securing its future. "Building relationships with leaders in different industries, and communicating with them the mission and values of Skyline International Group as a whole are also important aspects of my role," he says. "I am handling different businesses under different industries, so I make sure to allocate a few hours of the day keeping myself updated with the latest trends. I also deem it essential to maintain good relationships with Skyline's >>>



Nitin Anand, Executive Director and Chair of the Executive Council, Skyline University College

staff, as I strongly believe in the power of teamwork and collaboration to make the enterprise excel in all sectors. We want each enterprise of Skyline International Group, particularly Skyline University College, to become an organization that encourages innovation and creativity.”

It is this emphasis on innovation that has seen Skyline University College grow from a two-classroom college in 1990 offering diplomas in travel and tourism (it was also the first private educational institution in Sharjah to offer a bachelor’s degree), to counting over 8,000 alumni today for its portfolio of courses comprising of business education, information technology systems, strategic management, leadership, and much more. The campus is currently spread across 40 acres of land in Sharjah’s University City, and fulfills the talent needs of a variety of sectors, including hospitality, tourism, marketing, technology, finance, and more. One of

“WE HAVE PARTNERED WITH TOP IT COMPANIES SUCH AS ORACLE ACADEMY, CISCO ACADEMY, VIRDI, AND EC COUNCIL TO ADVANCE OUR TEACHING STRATEGIES AND NURTURE STUDENTS’ TECHNOLOGICAL CURIOSITY.”

its characteristic features is its Corporate Affairs Office (CAO), which brings together the student community with the industry players in the form of guest lectures, industry visits etc. to ensure the employability of its students and bridge the skills gap. “With our dedication to provide the highest quality education, Skyline has become one of the most successful institutions to offer business and management programs in the region,” Anand says. “One of the things I am

proudest of about Skyline is that it evolves with the time. Although our institution has the highest respect when it comes to tradition, it embraces change.” An instance of this is Skyline’s support to the UAE Vision 2021, which aims at developing a knowledge-based economy—recognizing that the UAE government’s initiatives to drive the growth of the ICT sector can succeed only if there is a pool of skilled professionals to participate in it, Skyline launched its School of Information Technology that offers Bachelor of Science in Information Technology-Enterprise Computing (BSIT-EC), which includes courses on robotics, Artificial Intelligence, Internet of Things, cloud computing, and big data, among others. “We have partnered with top IT companies such as Oracle Academy, CISCO Academy, Virdi, and EC Council to advance our teaching strategies and nurture students’ technological curiosity,” Anand adds.

A major driver for the university to continually evolve and cater to changing times is its firm conviction that every person should have access to good education—regardless of their nationality or social status. “There has been a significant progress in the enrolment and attendance in schools in the MENA region,” Anand says. “However, access to educational institutions is still limited in some parts of the region, and unlike in other markets, the cost of education here is staggering.” While Skyline has continued to invest in and maintain its leading position in the UAE, Anand notes that the institution has, over the years, established offices in other locations like Morocco, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and other countries, to assist prospective students. “And, to give students a chance to achieve a quality education at a reasonable fee, Skyline offers several scholarship programs,” Anand adds. “Skyline [has also] entered into memorandums of understanding with universities abroad, social clubs, consulate, foreign embassies, and the local government to offer financial assistance to deserving students.” However, Skyline’s mission extends beyond democratizing access to college-level education for youth. Anand explains that at Skyline, they also work to ensure that their students attain their academic goals, while simultaneously developing “the right attitude and skills that will help them become socially responsible professionals and competent players in the international stage.” This strategy, he says, gains more significance with the MENA’s education sector seeing a rise of internation-

“I STRONGLY BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION TO MAKE THE ENTERPRISE EXCEL IN ALL SECTORS.”

alization. “In line with this, it is important for students to learn about international competency,” Anand explains. “Skyline encourages its students to develop an international attitude. We strike partnerships with universities abroad and create programs to expose students to other cultures and allow them to collaborate with people overseas. Skyline established an agreement for transfer of credits with various universities across the world like the US, UK, and Canada, among others.”

With the youth making up a significant proportion of the Arab populace, and with the World Economic Forum pegging youth unemployment at 27% in 2017, there is a dire need for the region’s

policy makers and private sector to empower MENA youth, and drastic measures in the sphere of education and entrepreneurship could be the most effective tool to do that. Anand and his team at Skyline are cognizant of the fact that as educationalists, it is their responsibility to play a leading role in this issue, and that’s why the business leader is quite succinct when he says that Skyline wants to help foster the entrepreneurial spirit in its students, and not just support them in their dreams of working for multinational companies. “More than anything, we want them to build their own dreams; create their own businesses so they can provide jobs for others,” he says. “The MENA region

attracts interest from global investors. The UAE, particularly, has been labeled the forerunner entrepreneurial hub. And education plays an important role in teaching young people leadership and entrepreneurial skills that will give them the confidence to innovate and become business owners, thereby contributing more to their country’s economy. Hence, in Skyline, our programs and approach to learning are

“TO GIVE STUDENTS A CHANCE TO ACHIEVE A QUALITY EDUCATION AT A REASONABLE FEE, SKYLINE OFFERS SEVERAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM.”

tailored not just to prepare students to become capable professionals, but also to instill in them the spirit of entrepreneurship so they can generate employment later on. To promote entrepreneurship and innovation, Skyline has allocated funds for students who have qualified and feasible business plan and who aim to start a business venture. Moreover, Skyline established the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Club Centre, a facility dedicated to showcasing the business plans and enhancing the entrepreneurial skills of students.”

With respect to Skyline International Group, Anand notes that the organization today boasts of interests in a variety of sectors, with the company having made the decision to build a diversified portfolio for itself way back in 2005, which it started by making advances in the UAE’s real estate industry. More recently, in 2011, the Group >>>

Skyline University College



“WE STRIKE PARTNERSHIPS WITH UNIVERSITIES ABROAD AND CREATE PROGRAMS TO EXPOSE STUDENTS TO OTHER CULTURES AND ALLOW THEM TO COLLABORATE WITH PEOPLE OVERSEAS.”

acquired a state-of-the-art raw material processing unit for plastic with the production capacity of 1,000 tons per month, and this year, Skyline is opening a new plant in SAIF Zone with a monthly production capacity of 2,500 tons. Growing in other markets was also on Skyline’s agenda. “In 2011, we saw great opportunities in Africa, particularly in Nigeria,” Anand says. “We studied the market, and analyzed how we can expand our operations as a group there. As our core strength is education, we initiated the process and started seeking the approval of the National Universities Commission (NUC) of Nigeria to establish the first private university in the region of Kano; hence, Skyline University Nigeria (SUN) opened on the 19th



Nitin Anand, Executive Director and Chair of the Executive Council, Skyline University College

“IN SKYLINE, OUR PROGRAMS AND APPROACH TO LEARNING ARE TAILORED NOT JUST TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO BECOME CAPABLE PROFESSIONALS, BUT ALSO TO INSTILL IN THEM THE SPIRIT OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP SO THEY CAN GENERATE EMPLOYMENT LATER ON.”

of July.” But that’s not all. Post the early successes tasted in various industries, the Group is now also moving into other areas. “It is targeting high-end international curriculum school set-ups,” he notes. “We are also venturing into the F&B industry. We are looking into establishing food chains

that offers international cuisines. We also see potential in the IT and infrastructure sectors. In the hospitality sector, we are planning to include four- and five-star hotels in our global portfolio. And for the health sector, we want to establish clinics and hospitals.” Anand says that all these (and more) are targets the Group aims to accomplish in “a phased-out manner over next five years.”

At this point, given all of the initiatives that Anand is spearheading at Skyline, one is now bound to wonder about what’s driving the Executive Director to do all that he does. “As the person at the helm of Skyline’s organizational ship, Kamal Puri, Skyline’s Founder President, has inspired me to be resilient, determined, and to always keep Skyline’s vision and mission in

mind in whatever decisions I make,” Anand replies. “He dreams of a university where creativity and innovation are nurtured. This challenges me to become a leader that inspires creativity and innovation among Skyline employees. His example leads me to always create new and better ways of doing things.” But, surely, the road ahead isn’t going to be as smooth as he makes it out to be. “There will be a lot of challenges in the future,” Anand admits. “But I am confident because the university’s 28 years of existence is a proof that by embracing change, using the lessons from the past to move forward, and by keeping true to Skyline’s mission, we can realize the Founder President’s dream for this university.” And that’s something we are all looking forward to seeing here’s to the future. ■



Kamal Puri, Founder President, Skyline

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zuma

**“SUCCESS IN
THE PAST DOESN'T
SECURE SUCCESS
IN FUTURE— YOU HAVE
TO KEEP PUSHING
FORWARD, AND DON'T
TAKE YOUR EYE OFF
THE BALL.”**

Rainer Becker, co-founder, Zuma



COOKING UP A WIN

ZUMA CO-FOUNDER RAINER BECKER

THE CHEF-TURNED-ENTREPRENEUR ON HOW HE MADE IT BIG ON THE GLOBAL F&B SCENE **by ABY SAM THOMAS**

Zuma is one of those places in Dubai that one *may* assume to have been in the Emirate since time immemorial, and so, it may come as a surprise to learn that the multiple award-winning Japanese restaurant is actually celebrating its tenth anniversary in the city just this year. Located at Dubai International Financial Center since September 2008, Zuma's first outpost in the UAE can well be called one of Dubai's premier dining destinations, with its winning combination of setting, cuisine, and service making it an undisputed leader in the city's burgeoning F&B

industry. But, hey, you don't have to take just *my* word for it- I asked Zuma co-founder Rainer Becker to share any business figures that would reflect Zuma Dubai's current standing in the market, and his reply was: "The revenue for Zuma Dubai is upwards of US\$30 million a year. In terms of profits or any other financial information, all I will say is that we can't complain!"

"I AM VERY FORTUNATE THAT WE HAVE AMAZING PEOPLE WORKING FOR US, MANY OF WHOM HAVE BEEN WITH THE COMPANY FOR MORE THAN 10 YEARS. OUR BUSINESSES WOULD NOT BE SUCCESSFUL WITHOUT THEM."

Becker founded the very first Zuma along with business partner Arjun Waney in London in 2002, and since then, the concept -which is a celebration of the Japanese *izakaya* style of dining, and focuses on giving patrons "a truly inspired dining experience"- has found its way (successfully) to several cities around the world, including Dubai. With respect to its origin story though, Zuma came into being essentially thanks to Becker spending six years in Japan as the Executive Chef of the Park Hyatt in Tokyo, during which he fell in love with the food, tradition, and culture characteristic of the place. "My time in Japan inspired me in many ways," he remembers. "And when I returned to



London, my goal was to open a Japanese restaurant that would appeal to a more Western palate, whilst still respecting the ingredients and traditions I had learnt." With Waney by his side, Becker went on to then open the first location of Zuma in London's Knightsbridge neighborhood, and well, it just blew up from there. "We were only ever planning to open one restaurant," Becker admits. "As the business organically flourished, we started to look at other cosmopolitan locations; destinations where our existing customers travelled to regularly, [and] this led us to Hong Kong, Istanbul, and then, Dubai."

But Zuma's growth story didn't stop at Dubai- the restaurant has since made its presence felt in other food capitals like Bangkok, Rome, and New York; the UAE got a second Zuma location in Abu Dhabi in 2014. Zuma's global success can seem a bit perplexing when one considers how simple its offering is- but the outstanding quality it professes makes it stand above the rest. Indeed, this is exemplified at Zuma Dubai, which, despite the multitude of restaurants that have opened up in the Emirate since its launch, remains a favorite of diners not just in the city, but the entire country and the whole MENA region as well. >>>

“YOU HAVE TO BE A VERY DISCIPLINED PERSON TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR.”

“The concept of Zuma, and therefore the key factors [of its success], are actually relatively simple,” Becker says. “High quality products are always at the forefront of Zuma, whether that is food, drinks, music, or design. The team and service are also just as important. When your product is good, and the service is on point, it makes for success.” When asked how he’d describe Zuma to a layperson, he stresses again on the simplicity of it all. “How would I describe Zuma... It’s a contemporary Japanese restaurant that is informal, yet sophisticated, with great food, service, and cocktails. The USP goes

back to product, but also the consistency— we have guests who dine in our restaurants all over the world, and the spicy beef, for example, should be of equal quality everywhere along with the service. We work incredibly hard as a business to maintain this.”

This insistence on maintaining quality and standards can be drawn to Becker’s time as a chef before he became an entrepreneur by launching Zuma— this experience, bolstered by the skillsets of his co-founder, has clearly served the enterprise well. “My heart is still in the kitchen, but I always loved every aspect of running a

restaurant,” he says. “Having learned the ins and outs of it at the German Meisterbrief (the master tradesman certification), and combined it with my experiences at the time, I had the whole concept from A to Z worked out in my head, when we opened Zuma 15 years ago. Arjun Waney, on the other hand, my business partner, was instrumental in comple-

“THE REVENUE FOR ZUMA DUBAI IS UPWARDS OF US\$30 MILLION A YEAR. IN TERMS OF PROFITS OR ANY OTHER FINANCIAL INFORMATION, ALL I WILL SAY IS THAT WE CAN’T COMPLAIN!”

menting my knowledge and experience with his business acumen. I would also say that you have to be a very disciplined person to become a successful entrepreneur, and I believe I am a very disciplined person— a lesson that is my father’s legacy.” Becker also gives due credit for Zuma’s success to the people he has got onboard the venture. “One of the most important aspects of the business is the team,” he says. “I am very fortunate that we have amazing people working for us, many of whom have been with the company for more than 10 years. Our businesses would not be successful without them— they are passionate, they truly understand and believe in the concept! They work towards the evolution, and not the revolution of the concept. Truly understanding the formula and fundamentals behind the Zuma brand is what makes the business a global success.”

Speaking about the Dubai location specifically, Zuma’s success is especially noteworthy considering that it launched at a time when the restaurant scene was markedly different from what it is today. “I am very proud that Zuma Dubai has stood the test of time,” Becker says. “Every restaurant that we open has an element of risk. Dubai, in particular, was a very new marketplace at the time, and the F&B offering wasn’t as extensive as it is now. When we opened in DIFC ten years ago, it was a very different place; there was only one other restaurant [in the locality]. In more recent years, other restaurants have moved in to the area, and it has created a dining destination, which drives customers, as there is



Zuma Dubai



Rainer Becker,
co-founder, Zuma

‘TREP TALK
ZUMA CO-FOUNDER
RAINER BECKER’S TIPS
FOR ENTREPRENEURS
IN THE F&B SPACE

1. Be knowledgeable

“You cannot ask people to do things that you are not able or prepared to do yourself. Learn every aspect of your craft, regardless of your position.”

2. Be passionate

“The restaurant industry is tough, hours are unsociable, it can be stressful, etc. If you are not passionate, you will not succeed.”

3. Failure (most of the time!) is part of success

“You will not always fly high, sometimes you fail. The important part is that you pick yourself back up and learn from it. But don’t make the same mistake twice!”

so much choice.” Becker acknowledges the rise in competition in Dubai’s fine dining space, but claims to be not too fazed by it— according to him, it just keeps him and his team on their toes. “The market has changed significantly,” Becker says. “For one, it is now a lot more competitive, there has been an influx of international restaurant names. The Dubai market is crowded, but not more so than anywhere else; it is probably just felt more, because it happened relatively quickly. I don’t think it’s a negative though— it just means that you have to ensure you are at the top of your game at all times— which is what we try to ensure in all our restaurants anyway.”

As for what’s next for Becker and Zuma: the possibilities are open. For Zuma, we are always looking for sites,” Becker says. “The next opening is scheduled for

Boston next year, and after that, who knows! I would never say never to opening another Zuma in the Middle East, but currently our focus is on opening Roka Dubai, which is one of our other brands, next year. Recently, I have also been occupied with the new restaurant we just rolled out in London called Inko Nito— it is basically a mid-market contemporary

“MY GOAL WAS TO OPEN A JAPANESE RESTAURANT THAT WOULD APPEAL TO A MORE WESTERN PALATE, WHILST STILL RESPECTING THE INGREDIENTS AND TRADITIONS I HAD LEARNT.”

Japanese grill restaurant. So, as you can see, we are constantly keeping busy! Depending on its success we might as well consider putting one in the Middle East— watch this space.” If this response is any indication, then it’s clear that Becker’s entrepreneurial journey is far from done— in fact, there seems to be more in the offing! But, looking back, would Becker have done anything differently along his career? “Honestly, I would not do anything differently, I would do it all again in exactly the same way!” he replies. “I don’t have personal mantras as such, but I do always try to remember to keep two feet on the ground, be humble, and don’t get ahead of yourself! Success in the past doesn’t secure success in future— you have to keep pushing forward, and don’t take your eye off the ball.” ■



Riding high

RAVI BHUSARI

Having built a thriving business over the last decade, the co-founder of **Duplays** is now embarking on a new entrepreneurial pursuit with **nook**, a co-working space dedicated to the health and fitness industry **by TAMARA PUPIC**

Ravi Bhusari,
co-founder,
Duplays



nook's workspace is located at One JLT, Dubai's Jumeriah Lakes Towers

If there were a secret to breaking into the sports industry, it might be too naïve to think that organizing a pick-up game of ultimate frisbee could lead to a business boasting upward of 130,000 registered members, raising more than US\$1.2 million of outside investment, alongside expansions into other markets and business verticals. However, this statement sums up a decade for Ravi Bhusari, who co-founded his Dubai-based sports league business, Duplays, with Davinder Derv Rao in 2007.

“THE SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS MARKETS ARE UNDERSERVED IN THE REGION. AT NOOK, OUR VISION IS TO PIONEER AN INDUSTRY SPECIFIC PLATFORM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THESE SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY.”

Founded as a community for expats by expats, Duplays has grown its customer base by offering affordable and organized amateur sports opportunities, while shouldering the burden of registration, communication, and scheduling. Its strong market traction did not pass unnoticed by regional investors -namely Wamda Capital and BECO Capital- but Bhusari notes that he and his co-founder were keen on not stopping at just that. Duplays is currently going through a transition stage by moving away from a pay-to-play sports services (events management) model, to a platform model that will help empower others to actualize their sports interest. “This means continuing to build our technology offering to make playing sports easier, but rather than just connecting the community to play in our own managed sports leagues, we want to make it easier for people to book sports facilities via our app and website,” Bhusari adds. “We are trying to build Booking.com for sport, focusing initially on our home market of the UAE, and the growth market of KSA.” According to Bhusari, Duplays is currently servicing only a fraction of their membership base with its weekly leagues, which has opened an opportunity for future growth, by

connecting their users with more sports facilities. In this, Bhusari adds, lies the company's unique proposition—building a true platform to connect sports enthusiasts (demand side), with access to third party and internally developed sports facilities (supply side), thereby providing a seamless user experience.

Last year, Duplays made headlines by forming a joint venture with its local partner and Saudi Arabia-based developer, Al Hokair Group, to build community sports facilities in the Kingdom at scale using air-supported dome technology, for an undisclosed amount. The first in a series of new privately-owned football sports complexes has now been built in Jeddah, and should become operational by October 2018. With wins like these in the bag, Bhusari is definitely someone other entrepreneurs can learn from— and he's happy to offer advice for others wanting to secure success for their startup ventures. "Firstly, don't take the first 'no' for an answer," Bhusari says. "If you believe in what you are doing, treat objections as opportunities, and figure out a way to get to a 'yes.' Entrepreneurs are designed to challenge the status quo, and if you believe in your business mission, then follow it through. Secondly,



"EXPANSION OF THE NOOK CONCEPT INTO OTHER LOCATIONS AND MARKETS IS EXPECTED WITHIN THE NEXT 18 MONTHS, AND WILL MIRROR DUPLAYS' EXPANSION ACROSS THE REGION. PRIORITY MARKETS INCLUDE SAUDI ARABIA, FOLLOWED BY OTHER GCC COUNTRIES."

entrust your team to make decisions. I'm a big believer in hiring people better than yourself that complement your key skill sets. And lastly, be amenable to change. The phrase 'the only constant is change' definitely rings true. Ten years on, the conversion of Duplays from Dubai's only de facto adult sport and social club, to now becoming a developer of

community sports facilities and central platform for sport, can only happen with an openness and willingness to accept change, and the buy-in of your team to help you drive your evolving company mission."

This year has seen Bhusari and Rao take a step further with their business by partnering with Dubai Multi Commodities Centre (DMCC) to establish nook by Duplays, dubbed as the region's first sports and wellness co-working space. The concept behind nook is to provide all the necessary tools for aspiring entrepreneurs to seize opportunities presented by the UAE's growing sports, fitness, and wellness industry. Bhusari sees nook as a natural evolution of Duplays' business strategy. He adds, "The sports, fitness and wellness markets are underserved in the region. At nook, our vision is to pioneer an industry specific platform for the development of these sectors of the economy. We want to provide the best possible service and solutions for the industry, to help foster its long-term development and success."

Nook's 10,000 sq. ft. workspace at One JLT in Dubai's Jumeriah Lakes Towers neighborhood offers monthly workspace rental plans ranging from AED2,500 for a shared space, to AED3,000 for a fixed desk, to AED4,450 for private offices— not inclusive of the yearly AED11,000 DMCC-subsidized trade license, and the monthly nook membership fees and company registration starting at AED499. For industry professionals and companies not requiring physical office space, nook also offers a flexible Mobile Startup package that includes a number of time-saving features and services. Flexible payment terms are also available as an additional launch support service for startups getting their businesses off the ground. "We currently have the capacity to offer 200 professional licenses covering 35+ industry activities," Bhusari says. "nook secured more than 10% of its license allocation in the first three weeks of its pre-launch phase, and expects to achieve full membership within the first 12 months of operation. Expansion of >>>



the nook concept into other locations and markets is expected within the next 18 months, and will mirror Duplays' expansion across the region. Priority markets include Saudi Arabia, followed by other GCC countries."

The idea for nook was born in 2015, and Bhusari credits Ahmed Bin Sulayem, Executive Chairman of DMCC, for his tremendous support in its implementation and realization today. This kind of support and mentorship is one of the most unique aspects of the professional networks in the UAE, he says. "Mentorship in this region is key," Bhusari adds. "We leave our families, our friends, our professional networks at home, and come to a new city. Taking the plunge into entrepreneurship is terrifying (and exhilarating) enough, to say nothing of the additional financial risks one has to stomach here. We have been grateful over the years not just to receive mentorship from Endeavor UAE [The Duplays co-founders became members of Endeavor UAE in 2013] and our existing investors, but from friends and business acquaintances, who are more than willing to give advice

and help us. Most people are no more than a LinkedIn or networking event away, and I have met so many incredibly helpful people over the years."

When asked about the main lessons he has grasped from three most critical moments in Duplays' growth —i.e. raising capital from outside investors, focusing on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as a growth market, and being amenable to change— Bhusari's replies make it clear that he has taken the time to reflect on all of his entrepreneurial pursuits so far. "On the investment front, most entrepreneurs aspire to achieve a certain level of success or market traction in order to scale their business, and investment is key for that to happen," Bhusari says. "We have been fortunate to have supportive and patient investors who have championed us. For entrepreneurs, the key lesson to consider is not to rush to accept the first investors who express an interest in your business. What is important is to build a relationship with these people, and they will be with you for the long haul." "On the KSA expansion side,

the key lesson is patience," he continues. "Tapping into this market is not something you can do from the comfort of your Dubai office. Business is always relationship driven, but even more so in KSA. KSA is a unique, fascinating market and you have to put in the time on the ground to assess the opportunities and build relationships with key partners— the Dubai experience does not easily translate into Saudi." And as for being open to change? "On the change side, business in this region is much faster paced than other markets," Bhusari notes. "Be open to change, and adapt as conditions alter. Do not be set in your ways, and pivot where possible if your product-market fit isn't working. Don't be overly in love with your idea, if your customers are not." ■

"KSA IS A UNIQUE, FASCINATING MARKET AND YOU HAVE TO PUT IN THE TIME ON THE GROUND TO ASSESS THE OPPORTUNITIES AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY PARTNERS."



Ravi Bhusari,
co-founder,
Duplays

'TREP TALK

RAVI BHUSARI, CO-FOUNDER, DUPLAYS, SHARES FIVE TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

1. Build your tribe

"Surround yourself ASAP with good people, whether that's co-founder(s) or key first hires."

2. Focus on your finances

"Be laser focused on cash flow— it is the lifeblood of your organization; if you have a business model that has a longer or variable sales cycles, ensure you have adequate capital to get you through the rough patches— everyone will eventually face them."

3. Look for smart money

"Find supportive investors who provide not just capital but active mentorship; be open to advice."

4. Be kind to yourself

"Protect your personal free time and invest in yourself; you are no good to your business or your employees if you are not of sound body and mind."

5. Give back whenever you can

"Don't forget to thank the people who have helped you along your way."



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Funding the future

An unprecedented era of capital abundance is all set to massively accelerate innovation in the world as we know it **by DR. PETER H. DIAMANDIS**

Nothing accelerates technological innovation like cash. Lots and lots of cash. More bucks mean more Buck Rogers.

More cash means more people building, experimenting, failing, and eventually driving breakthroughs.

This past decade, and in the decades ahead, we will experience an unprecedented era of capital abundance that will massively accelerate innovation, and fund crazy ideas and moonshots. Where is all this cash coming from? I'll highlight four areas:

1. Crowdfunding
2. Venture funding
3. Initial Coin Offerings (ICOs)
4. Sovereign wealth funds and mega funds

Let's dive in.

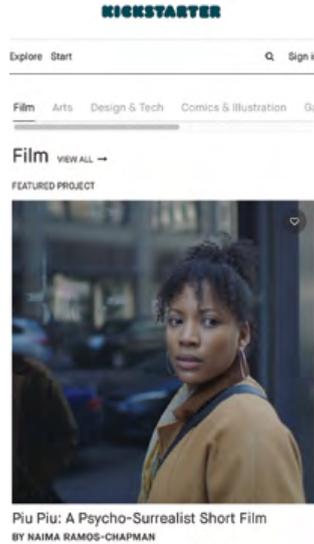
1. CROWDFUNDING

At the low end of capital abundance is crowdfunding, a peer-to-peer network where any person can present their product or service to the world, and ask for funding.

Funding can come in the form of a loan, an equity investment, a reward, or an advanced purchase of the proposed product or service.

Since I first discussed crowdfunding in my last book *BOLD*, the phenomenon has exploded onto the scene, making it vastly easier for an entrepreneur anywhere in the world to digitally pitch their idea, and raise the funds to start their business.

The total worldwide volume of crowdfunding, inclusive of peer-to-peer lending, was US\$34 billion in 2017, with 375 crowdfunding platforms in North America alone. But this too, like many digital platforms, is experiencing double-digit growth. Experts project crowdfunding to reach \$300 billion by 2025.



Kickstarter, one of the most popular reward-based crowdsourcing platforms, has launched almost 400,000 projects, and over \$3 billion has been pledged on the site. The most successful Kickstarter to date, Pebble Time, raised just over \$20 million in only 37 days.

Ultimately, crowdfunding fully democratizes access to capital, allowing anyone with a good idea, anywhere, to get the cash they need to get going. No surprise that Goldman Sachs described crowdfunding as “potentially the most disruptive of all the new models of finance.”

2. VENTURE FUNDING

In contrast, venture funding has been a more traditional source of startup capital over the past five decades, helping to birth household names from Apple and Google, to Amazon and Uber.

Venture capitalists, better known as VCs, raise money from individuals, corporations and institutional investors (e.g. pension funds), and invest that money in exchange for equity into high-growth companies.

Depending on the stage of the company, and the size of the fund, these investments

range widely- from a hundred thousand dollars invested during a seed stage, to hundreds of millions of dollars invested to support later growth-stage companies.

Here again, the world is experiencing staggering global growth. In 2017, we saw new records set in venture investing:

- In the US, venture investments reached \$84 billion
- In Asia, venture peaked at \$48 billion
- European venture reached a new all-time high of \$19.1 billion

Where is this money being invested? Investments in artificial intelligence companies are on the rise, doubling from \$6 billion in 2016 to \$12 billion in 2017, at the same time that biotechnology experienced massive year-over-year growth from \$12.2 billion to \$16.6 billion.

3. INITIAL COIN OFFERINGS (ICOS)

New to the scene of capital formation is the Initial Coin Offering, or ICO, a new fundraising tool emerging out of the cryptocurrency-blockchain realm. An ICO is a way to crowdfund your business venture by issuing your own tokens that can then be used to redeem value in the ecosystem of your startup.

In some cases, the tokens have a clear utility in a company- for example, they may be used to vote in a prediction marketplace. In other cases,

they may be used as a security- they may represent a fractional share of a piece of real estate listed on the blockchain. If you do a good job selling your vision, people will buy those tokens, and you'll end up with the capital you need to start your venture.

A lot of these tokens (coins) can also be traded on major cryptocurrency exchanges. That means that if your project goes well, your tokens will rise in value, and investors will be able to sell them for a nice profit. Perhaps best of all, for the entrepreneur, the capital that comes in via an ICO is non-dilutive, meaning you give investors no equity -i.e., no ownership and no control- in your company, no matter how much your ICO might raise.

ICOs are still highly controversial, though. Their unregulated nature means that scammers have plenty of opportunities to line their pockets.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the total amount invested in ICOs has risen from \$6.6 billion in 2017 to \$7.15 billion in the first half of 2018, despite regulatory uncertainty and restrictions in many major countries, such as China and South Korea.

ICOs are famous for raising money fast and in vast amounts. There are hundreds of examples that will make your head spin, and make you wonder why you haven't already launched your own ICO. >>>



Filecoin, for example, is a blockchain-based decentralized data storage network. The project allows blockchain participants to provide their servers and share their storage. If you let someone store their data on your server or your computer, you get Filecoins, and receive a reward.

The Filecoin project raised \$257 million - split into a \$52 million presale and \$205.8 million in the second round- in only 30 days, the first \$135 million of which was raised in the first hour alone.

King among the ICOs is a fierce competitor to the Ethereum network called EOS, which, according to some, stands for "ethereum on steroids."

EOS is one of the most popular cryptocurrencies trading on the market today. Block.one, the developer behind EOS, has already raised a record-breaking \$4 billion from its year-long ICO between June 26, 2017 and July 1, 2018. During this period, EOS sold over 900 million ERC-20 tokens worth nearly \$4 billion.

The number of ICO's per quarter has also ballooned, from roughly a dozen in Q1 of 2017 to over 100 in Q4 of 2017.

4. SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUNDS AND MEGA FUNDS

When it comes to the motherlode of deployable capital, look no further than sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), which hold an estimated \$6.59 trillion in assets. As the promise and economic potential of exponential startups continue to climb, it's no surprise that SWFs are lining up to invest in the tech

startup world, searching to yield outsized returns. A recent PWC study confirms that SWFs in the Middle East are directing a greater proportion of their assets away from traditional investments such as equity and bonds, and towards alternative assets, following a global trend.

Globally, in 2017, there were 42 SWF deals valued at some \$16.2 billion last year, according to the Sovereign Wealth Lab research center at Madrid's IE Business School.

But this \$16.2 billion pales in comparison with the passion and checkbook of Masayoshi Son's mega fund, the Vision Fund, an initial \$100 billion which he hopes to grow tenfold in the decade ahead.

Why raise such an enormous fund? "I totally believe this concept," he said, of the Singularity. "In next 30 years this will become a reality. I truly believe it's coming, that's why I'm in a hurry- to aggregate the cash, to invest."

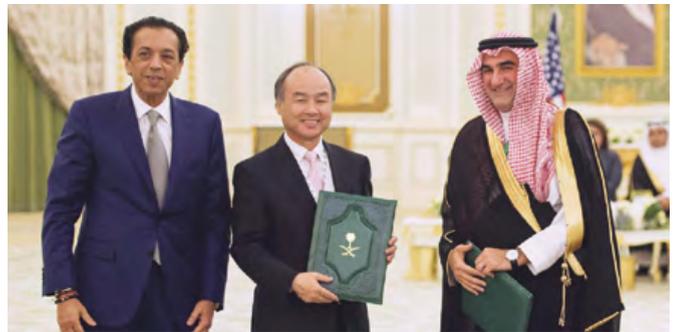
And aggregate the cash he has done.

The Vision Fund had its start in September 2016 when Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, then Deputy Crown Prince of the Kingdom, flew to Tokyo in search of mechanisms to diversify his country's oil-dominated future.

There he met with Son, who pitched him the idea of setting up the largest investment fund in history to finance technology startups.

In less than an hour, Prince Salman agreed to become the cornerstone investor.

"45 minutes, \$45 billion," Son later said on *The David*



SoftBank Vision Fund
Left to right: Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, Group CEO of Mubadala Investment Company, Masayoshi Son, Chairman & CEO of SoftBank Group Corp., and H.E. Yasir Al Rumayyan, Managing Director of the Public Investment Fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Rubenstein Show. "One billion dollars per minute."

Quickly thereafter, other LPs like the UAE-based Mubadala Investment Company and private companies like Apple, Foxconn, and Qualcomm joined in.

Softbank, largely a one-man show when it comes to deals, made about 100 investments in the first year, worth \$36 billion, which is more in dollar terms than Silicon Valley's top two heavyweights, Sequoia Capital and Silver Lake, combined.

Perhaps even more exciting in our abundance of capital thesis are Masa Son's plans to 10x his Vision Fund.

The \$100 billion Vision Fund is just "the first step," according to Son, who said he is already working to establish a second Vision Fund in the next two or three years.

"We will briskly expand the scale," he told Nikkei. "Vision Funds 2, 3, and 4 will be established every two to three years."

"We are creating a mechanism to increase our funding ability from 10 trillion yen to 20 trillion yen to 100 trillion

yen," Son said. 100 trillion yen equals roughly \$880 billion based on current currency rates.

Son said that SoftBank plans to invest in at least 1,000 tech companies in areas like artificial intelligence and robotics over the next 10 years. SoftBank has already invested in a wide range of companies this year, including Brain Corp, Mailbox, Boston Dynamics, Improbable, Nvidia, Slack, WeWork, OneWeb, Didi, and Uber.

FINAL THOUGHTS

For entrepreneurs, this is an exciting time.

Between crowdfunding sites, ICOs, and SWFs, there is no capital-related excuse to put off pursuing your massively transformative purpose (MTP) and moonshot- for those opportunities that will solve the world's biggest challenges.

Helped by the exponential power of new technologies and these abundant sources of capital, the speed at which we can go from "I've got an idea," to "I run a billion-dollar company" is moving faster than ever. ■



Dr. Peter H. Diamandis is an international pioneer in the fields of innovation, incentive competitions, and commercial space. In 2014, he was named one of "The World's 50 Greatest Leaders" by *Fortune*

Magazine. In the field of innovation, Diamandis is founder and Executive Chairman of the XPRIZE Foundation, best known for its \$10 million Ansari XPRIZE for private spaceflight. Diamandis is also the co-founder and Vice-Chairman of Human

Longevity Inc. (HLI), a genomics and cell therapy-based diagnostic and therapeutic company focused on extending the healthy human lifespan. He is also the co-founder and Executive Chairman of Singularity University, a graduate-level Silicon Valley institution that studies exponentially growing technologies, their ability to transform industries and solve humanity's grand challenges. In the field of commercial space, Diamandis is co-founder/Co-Chairman of Planetary Resources, a company designing spacecraft to enable

the detection and prospecting of asteroid for precious materials. He is also the co-founder of Space Adventures and Zero-Gravity Corporation. Diamandis is *The New York Times* bestselling author of *Abundance - The Future Is Better Than You Think* and *BOLD - How to go Big, Create Wealth & Impact the World*. He earned an undergraduate degree in Molecular Genetics and a graduate degree in Aerospace Engineering from MIT, and received his M.D. from Harvard Medical School. www.diamandis.com

IMAGE CREDIT: SOFTBANK VISION FUND



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#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.

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD

GALAXY NOTE 9

If you depend on your phone all day, the new Galaxy Note 9 might be right for you. It sports a 4,000mAh battery for long-lasting power, so you can talk, text, and play games for as long as you like. Galaxy Note 9 builds on Samsung's industry-leading camera technologies with new capabilities that make capturing the perfect picture easier. For example, a notification will appear if an image is blurry, or the subject blinked, or if there's a smudge on the lens, giving you the opportunity to fix the flaw. The device features dual rear 12MP cameras with 2X optical zoom, 10X digital zoom, and Optical Image Stabilization (OIS). And that's not all; there's an 8MP rear facing camera too. The S Pen, the signature feature of the Note series, is now equipped with Bluetooth Low-Energy (BLE) support. With just a click, it's now possible to take selfies and group pictures, present slides, pause and play video, and more. Galaxy Note 9 has a 6.4-inch Super AMOLED Infinity

Display, complemented by AKG stereo speakers, which makes it ideal for entertainment. But don't fret- when it's time to get work done, you can count on DeX for a PC-like experience. Simply connect the phone to a monitor using HDMI adapters, and Galaxy Note 9 can power a virtualized desktop. Galaxy Note 9 is a powerful smartphone with a 10nm processor, and support for the fastest network speeds available in the market (up to 1.2 gigabits

per second) to stream and download without slowing down. Galaxy Note 9 is available with two internal storage options- 128GB or 512GB. Plus, you can insert a microSD card, giving you enough space to keep your favorite photos, videos, and apps. Combine these features with Samsung's proprietary Water Carbon Cooling system, and you've got yourself a pretty slick handheld gaming console as well. The feature-packed Galaxy Note 9 is yours for both work and play.

Galaxy Note 9



Galaxy Note 9



CAPTURE IT ALL

PANASONIC LUMIX DMC-TZ220

Panasonic has updated the LUMIX TZ220 with enhanced zoom power to 15x, and a one-inch large High Sensitivity MOS Sensor

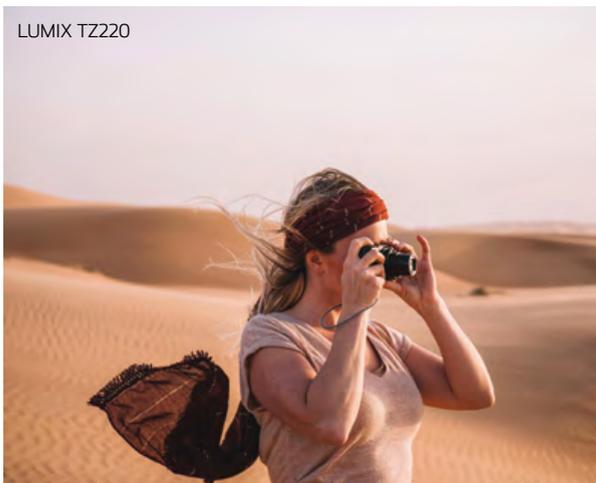
that offers versatility, high picture quality and ultra-high resolution 4K video. This popular compact camera, known as the Travel Zoom,

features a new 24mm ultra-wide-angle LEICA DC VARIO-ELMAR lens and 5-Axis HYBRID O.I.S.+ (Optical Image Stabilizer Plus), which supports any angle of view, while suppressing handshakes in both photo and video recording. It also enables stunning macro shots as close as 3cm. For even more creative snaps, this camera integrates a new L.Monochrome mode to produce stunning monochrome images. LUMIX TX220 has a ton of convenience features too

LUMIX TZ220



like Bluetooth 4.2 and Wi-Fi 2.4GHz for instant image sharing, long battery life with AC/USB power charging, and an Aperture Bracket that lets users have multiple shots with different depth of field. Before you set off on your next adventure, consider getting the latest LUMIX Travel Zoom to capture it.



LUMIX TZ220

FULL STEAM AHEAD

PANASONIC GSE040 GARMENT STEAMER

Dressing for success just got easier with Panasonic's GSE040 Garment Steamer. The steamer, which boasts 1600 watts of power, takes only 55 seconds to heat up, and renders up to 30g of continuous steam per minute to remove wrinkles and creases from your clothes. As the vapor releases wrinkles, it also permeates the fabric to sanitize and deodorize clothes. It features a two-level steam selector for smart garment care, and you can adjust the length of the steam based on the textile

material— standard steam for delicate and thin fabrics, or long steam for cotton and thick pieces. In addition to its effortless wrinkle-removing technology, GSE040 has a lightweight steamer head and a detachable two-liter water tank for easy filling. Last but not the least, maintenance is totally hassle-free with its calc-cut auto-cleaning system, which prevents mineral build-up on the steam holes. GSE040 thus cuts costs and gives you control over your professional attire.



Panasonic GSE040 Garment Steamer



#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 new timepiece from Breitling that's caught our attention, a fresh eau de toilette for the season, and more.

CLASS ACT

BREITLING

Launched as one of the first new watches under Breitling's new CEO Georges Kern, the Breitling Navitimer 8 B01 is all set to impress. The collection takes in a clear influence of historical Breitling timepieces, including a reverse panda dial. For an aviator's watch, the collection goes for a minimalist look- the Breitling logo has been simplified with its winged "B" removed, and only the brand

name is shown in a sans serif font. Powered by the brand's own Breitling Manufacture Caliber 01, the self-winding 43mm watch holds a power reserve of more than 70 hours. Available in black or blue dial, in 18k red gold with a bronze dial, it comes with distinctive designs of various sub-dials. For a clean and functional go-to, here's your timepiece.

www.breitling.com



Breitling
Navitimer 8 B01

Solarissimo Marettimo
Eau de Toilette



KEEP CALM

AZZARO

Concocted by perfumer Quentin Bisch, the Solarissimo Marettimo is reminiscent of refreshing breezes in the Mediterranean. A fresh scent with aquatic notes and accords of citrus and wood, the Eau de Toilette comes in a blue bottle evoking the sun and sea. www.azzaro.com

FOR THE URBAN EXPLORER

BERLUTI

If you're aiming to complete your ensemble with fine leather, you might as well go with a brand that is adept to it. Dating back to 1895, the house of Berluti has been making a name for itself in the craftsmanship of shoemaking. For its SS18 show, the house brings in the Luciano, which

takes its inspiration from one of the brand's signature style, the Lorenzo. This time, the Luciano is more modern and finer, with better cuts and fit, but as comfortable as ever. For a dapper look in and out of the boardroom, pick up a pair of these and you're good to go.

www.berluti.com



Berluti
Luciano SS18

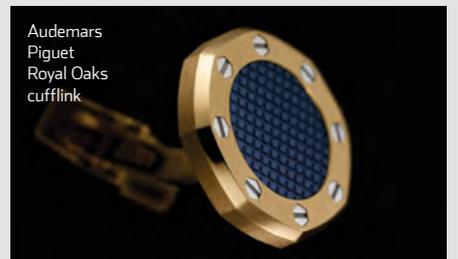
Berluti Luciano
SS18



Audemars Piguet
Royal Oaks cufflinks

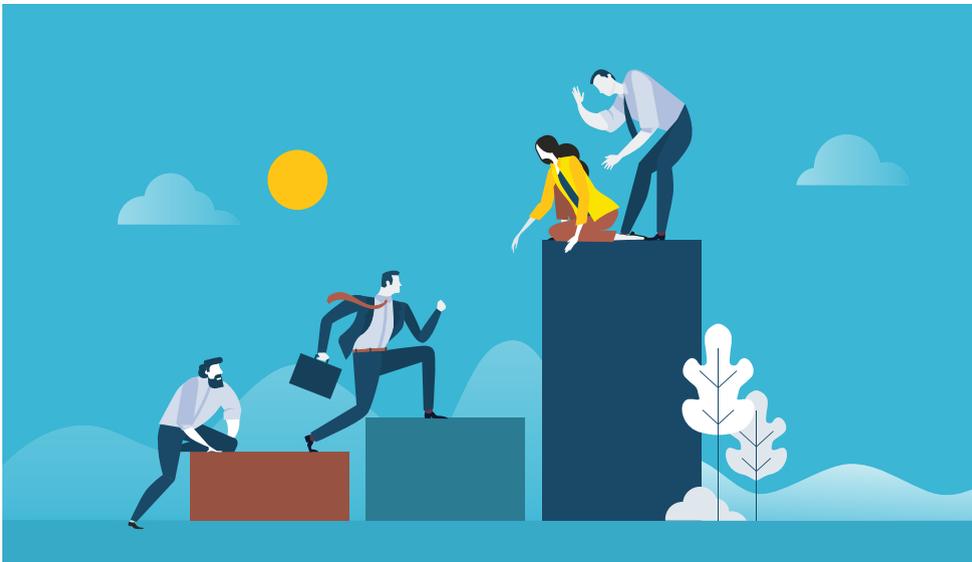


Audemars
Piguet
Royal Oaks
cufflink



EDITOR'S PICK
AUDEMARS PIGUET

Yes, cufflinks may well be forgotten as you put together your ensemble, but don't underestimate the oomph it can give your suit- and Audemars Piguet gives you plenty of options to choose from in its Royal Oaks line. Available in stainless steel with a blue, black, or silver pattern in the center, it features the company's signature octagonal shape. www.audemarspiguet.com



LIVE YOUR VALUES, ENGAGE YOUR PEOPLE, AND NEVER STOP LEARNING

A three-step guide to a sustainable business culture

by **PROMOTH MANGHAT**

Culture. Every organization has one. It reflects your values, your vision, and your mission. If the culture of your organization isn't right, it can harm people's ability to function effectively, making it more difficult—and sometimes painful—to reach your goals.

From my perspective, as someone leading a global business that is active in over 45 countries and has a diverse workforce of more than 16,000 people, the importance of culture cannot be overstated. Much of our growth has come from acquisitions, adding a layer of inherited corporate culture to the multiple geographical cultures. Understanding the importance of culture striving to integrate not only business units, but the people who make up those

business units, can be one of the most important aspects of all merger and acquisition activity. Getting it wrong can have painful consequences, whereas getting it right benefits everyone.

It would be wrong to attempt to homogenize corporate cultures though. As part of the integration process, you have to encourage the cultural differences within different parts of your organization. It breeds tolerance and that is good for business and good for people. Research from McKinsey & Company shows that cultural diversity within a team encourages more objective decision making and has the potential to improve financial performance.

So how then do you create a unified organizational culture while also encouraging the differences and celebrating the diversity?

BUILDING THE LEADERS OF TOMORROW

Your vision and your mission are fundamentally important, not only to the commercial success of the business, but to its cultural success too. That means you need to look for opportunities to initiate changes to the way people interact, the way teams are structured, so you foster a culture everyone engages with.

A few years ago, in one part of the group, there were issues with people failing to collaborate effectively, and relying too heavily on meetings. It seemed to me that these meetings were taking up time, and slowing down the decision-making process—this was a cultural issue, meetings were within everyone's comfort zone. So, I decentralized that part of the business to create regional business units, and then empowered the heads

of those divisions to act with more autonomy. In this way, we created new leaders, and changed the culture without resorting to top-down rules.

Of course, while you're shaping the organization and its culture, an effective leader should always be open to learning new ideas—you won't always have the ideal template to impose on everyone else. For example, the importance of structured, planned communication—both internal and external—was really brought home to me via one of our business units. It was a great learning experience personally, and has really benefited the rest of the group.

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

All businesses have a goal to succeed and grow. But the way in which you evaluate your progress toward that goal tends to be dictated by culture. Not just the culture of your organization, but the wider societal culture in which you are based. For some, success is all about short-term revenue targets and sales outputs, whereas others focus on longer-term outcomes.

Understanding these differences in outlook can help overcome a great deal of potential confusion. If hitting a target jeopardizes an established relationship, risking loss of business in the future, the importance of that target will seem different, depending on where you are in the world.

A sales-oriented culture may struggle to comprehend another where maintaining sustainable relationships with customers and suppliers is seen as more important than a few revenue points—and vice versa. But both have their merits, and both seek to benefit the bot-

tom line. It is crucial that the business leader has the vision and drive to identify the right balance, and strike a happy medium between differing cultural outlooks where necessary.

In his book *Breaking Bad Habits*, Freek Vermeulen—a professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at London Business School—talks about just this. He demonstrates how quick wins can lull firms into being longer-term losers, how outsourcing can quickly boost profits, but also lead to knowledge erosion in the future, for example.

It is only by establishing the right organizational culture that employees will have the freedom to raise concerns over the longer-term implications of decisions that appear to have obvious benefits. Fostering a culture in which collaboration and long-term thinking become second nature can help avoid some of those challenges. I am a great believer in learn fast, fail fast, and this is an outlook we work hard to instill into the Finablr culture. From inclusive decision-making to transparent internal communications, if your people understand your vision and the company's mission, they will become naturally disengaged from short-term thinking, and more inspired to achieve longer-term sustainable growth.

BREAKING THE MOLD

It is also important to remember that changing a business culture takes time—especially in the wake of mergers and acquisitions. It will never be as simple as flicking a switch, no matter how much you wish it was.

If you overlook the importance of culture and cultural alignment, you could find yourself pondering the inescapable truth of the saying, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

Getting culture right across merged organizations is hard work. But the price of failure is even more hard work. So, it really is worth the effort. Make sure you back all your plans up with communication and engagement. Make yourself available, and stay committed to the process over the long-term. It can't all be done over emails and intranets—it must be high touch and personal.

There is no substitute for personal interaction—of the real face-to-face kind. It helps you understand the individuals you will be leading, and how you can inspire them. It helps them gain trust in you and your vision. And when it comes to avoiding the trap of stereotyping people, nothing is more effective than actually getting to know people.

When we started working in the UK, I would visit our operations there every month, so I could spend

IT IS ONLY BY ESTABLISHING THE RIGHT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE THAT EMPLOYEES WILL HAVE THE FREEDOM TO RAISE CONCERNS OVER THE LONGER-TERM IMPLICATIONS OF DECISIONS THAT APPEAR TO HAVE OBVIOUS BENEFITS.

time with colleagues. You need to invest an entire day in someone. As well as the meetings, make sure you have time to eat lunch with them, and maybe even dinner too. Then, you can start to understand each other. They will become one of the key players in your vision—the nucleus of change. Over time, you can gradually expand that nucleus, bringing more people into the fold. Gradual change should be the objective.

To give another example, as part of our commitment to open dialogue and transparency, we started doing town hall meetings. But we soon discovered nobody wanted to ask questions—either out of fear, or respect, or some other worry. So, we changed things. People were asked to submit their questions in advance, we would respond, and they could then ask

about those responses if they wanted to. There were one, two, three, four town halls where no one spoke up. But by the fifth one, a few people asked questions in the open. And that's when you know that the process of change is really underway.

Such differences may seem inconsequential, but they are important when it comes to establishing a working culture. At the heart of that culture is the way your values are expressed through people's everyday actions—the way you live out those values, and the way you bring them to life.

In the final analysis, the way people behave at all levels within the organization reflects the very essence of the company. Get the culture right, and you'll be in a strong position to grow a vibrant and successful business. ■



UAE Exchange team

IMAGE CREDIT UAE EXCHANGE



Promoth Manghat is Executive Director at Finablr, and Chief Executive Officer at UAE Exchange Group. www.finablr.com | www.uaexchange.com

GET (BACK) IN THE ZONE

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO **KEEP MOMENTUM UP**
IN YOUR COMPANY by **SUHAIL AL-MASRI**

If your company is already finding success in the industry, and you believe that the overall performance is up to standards, then you most likely feel that there isn't sufficient reason to switch directions or experiment in your business, and risk dropping the ball entirely. However, it is a common occurrence for some companies that start out well to reach the point of hitting a solid wall, and then beginning to fail through a mix of insufficient experience, unmotivated employees, and sluggish growth.

Just like many other things in life, businesses go through cycles of growth, inertia, decline, and repeat. Although the launch stage such as startup kick offs and new product introductions can be incredibly difficult to master, when established businesses go through a stagnant phase or a crippling decline in performance, the challenge can become insurmountable.

But on a positive note, there are usually several signs that will show if your business is losing its momentum, and falling into a trap of stagnation. These signs can be used to detect inertia early on, and with the application of some corrective measures, momentum can be restored and kept at high levels.

Indecisiveness is what often prevents us from developing or improving. However, decisions are what turn a plan written on a piece of paper into reality and, hopefully, success.

BEGIN MAKING THE TOUGH CHOICES. FOCUS ON GETTING ACTION TO FLOW AGAIN BY INTRODUCING THE PLAN AND SEEING IT THROUGH COMPLETION.

Here are the signs that show a company or a business is losing momentum:

1. LOSING FOCUS OF YOUR COMPANY VISION

One of the clear signs that show your business is going through an unwanted slow period is your inability to apply your vision, or see it in action. It is very easy for companies to lose focus when balancing numerous tasks and priorities, and the company quickly becomes obsessed with “doing things” with no attention to strategy, improving processes, or reconnecting with the end goals.

Having the right balance at work is vital for a business; it helps you stay focused on what will actually grow and enhance performance. This is why it is necessary to regularly revisit projects and tasks and evaluate priorities and how everything connects back to the company's goals and vision. Doing so may also necessitate changing operations, staffing, or resource allocation.

2. INCONSISTENT BRANDING

Businesses live off consumer as well as employer branding strategies, which are mainly the marketing responsibilities with a crossover to the HR department. Optimum marketing strategies highlight the added value to your audience. For consumers, they should always know why they need to make a purchase or become a partner with you. Likewise, employer branding can shape your future and existing workforce and their contribution towards your company success. In fact, the Bayt.com *Employer Branding Poll* showed that 95% of MENA job seekers want companies to engage with them via online job sites, so that they understand what their brand is all about.

Now, the issue here often is either lack of balance between consumer and employer branding, or the inconsistency in brand definition and communication. Externally, inconsistent consumer branding will confuse clients and reduce their likelihood of continuing to do business with you, as they no longer comprehend your value proposition. Internally, an inconsistent employer brand will frustrate your employees and deter potential talent. Both factors are likely to damage your momentum and performance as a business.

3. LIVING IN THE SAFE ZONE

New and mature businesses need a steady supply of fuel to continue expanding. That is not only done by attracting new clients and converting leads, but also by actively seeking



BEING ACTIVE IS THE MAIN DRIVER OF BUSINESS SUCCESS. FOR MANAGEMENT, THIS MEANS EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW PRODUCTS OR FORGING NEW PARTNERSHIPS.

new ideas, projects, partnerships, product developments, and such. When your company sits in the “safety zone” for too long and stops hunting for new business opportunities, then the needed momentum to grow and avoid dips is washed away.

Momentum requires momentum. Being active is the main driver of business success. For a sales department as an instance, this means not relying solely on existing client stacks and expanding to new territories. For management, this means experimenting with new products or forging new partnerships.

4. NEGLECTING KEY CLIENTS

Clients who believe in the quality of the work and services being delivered to them will continue to do business with you. However, feeling ignored and neglected will automatically send your most loyal clients straight to your competitor.

The issue often is that businesses stop nurturing relationships with clients and partners once they’ve checked off their short-term objectives (i.e. sold a service, signed an agreement). If you have noticed that you are losing some of your key customers, then this is a sign that progress

and momentum have been lost, especially in terms of how much you invest in maintaining your relationship and added value to the consumer.

Now, as these signs start to arise at your company, you must always be aware and prepared to lessen their impact on performance and growth. Here is the reality: to manage growth, you must face some risk. Think about it this way, risk is always accompanied with either an opportunity or a failure. However, if risk is handled right, then opportunity is its companion.

Here is how to embrace growth in your business without losing momentum:

1. INVEST IN YOUR TALENT

It all goes back to who are the brains and hands that are operating your business and determining its activity level. This means, investing in the right tools for

talent acquisition can on its own ensure you are prepared for challenges, and have the capacity to maintain high business momentum.

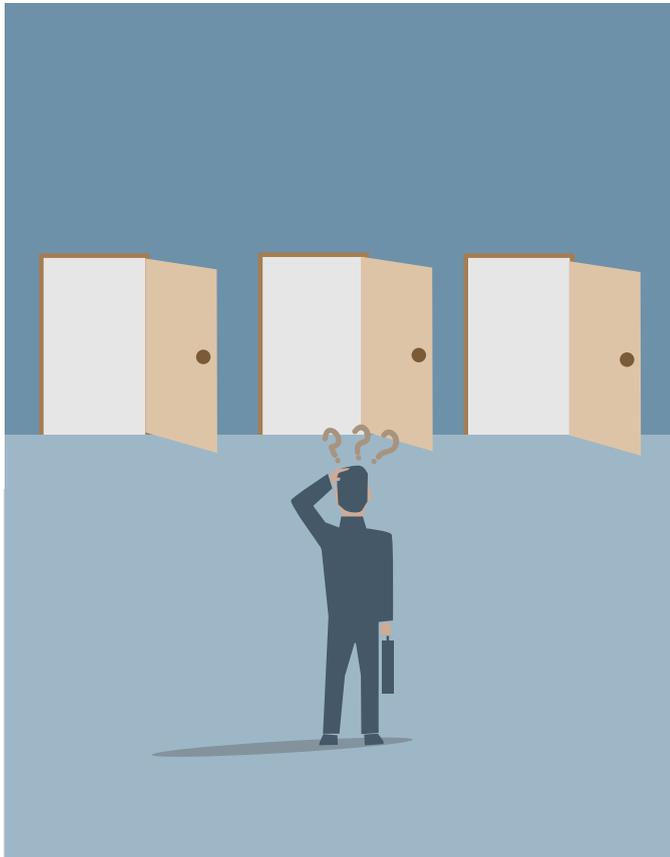
But investing in talent is not just about sourcing, screening, assessing, and hiring. The process goes beyond these steps, and extends to onboarding, training, and professional development.

A Bayt.com poll showed that 85% of MENA professionals would leave their job for better training and career development. What’s more, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.3%) cited increased productivity as the greatest advantage of training and professional development, while the remaining one-third (28.7%) cited increased productivity in addition to increased employee satisfaction, improved employer brand and culture, and improved succession planning. >>>

The Bayt.com Employer Branding Poll showed that 95% of MENA job seekers want companies to engage with them via online job sites.

Top Channels for Employer Branding





Companies that do not regularly invest in talent acquisition, development, and retention tools will sooner or later face the threat of diminishing productivity and poor performance.

2. MAKE THE TOUGH CALL

As human beings, indecisiveness is what often prevents us from developing or improving. However, decisions are what turn a plan written on a piece of paper into reality and, hopefully, success. At times, where no decisions are being made regarding major business challenges or unclear situations, then your company becomes stale and the business declines.

Begin making the tough choices.

Whether that includes phasing out a failing product, restructuring a dysfunctional department, or hiring new talent, focus on getting action to flow again by introducing the plan and seeing it through completion.

It all goes back to who are the brains and hands that are operating your business and determining its activity level.

INVESTING IN THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR TALENT ACQUISITION CAN ON ITS OWN ENSURE YOU ARE PREPARED FOR CHALLENGES, AND HAVE THE CAPACITY TO MAINTAIN HIGH BUSINESS MOMENTUM.

Of course, you will need the input and buy in from your teams to ensure that decisions are accepted and acted upon as well as to resolve any existing issues or concerns.

3. PLAY TO WIN

Every business wants to win. Nonetheless, if you notice that your business strategy changes with time to become a defensive one, then growth is likely to either slow down or stop altogether.

Even if this is merely at the psychological level, running a business with the goal to avoid danger or losses is completely different from a business that uses a mindset of non-stop growth and experimentation.

Communicating to your teams that the goal is to always grow, but also supporting such message with the right environment and tools, will instill in them the drive, creativity, risk taking, and forward-thinking abilities that are necessary for maintaining high business momentum.

4. EMBRACE CHANGE

The most harmful action that any business can take is being unwilling to change. Success isn't a one-time event, and it begs for change in order to keep going. Success specifically either drives the company to a bigger success if done right, or to a disastrous point.

From a leadership point of view, you must first accept constant change, seek to understand it, and develop mechanisms to deal with it to your benefit. Trusting the people that you manage, and leading them to implement the change will also help you keep your operations steady in face of turbulences.

Innovation is often the key ingredient in dealing with changes. Create an environment where change is seen as a challenge to overcome, not a threat or an excuse to let performance slow down.

Simply put, reaching the short-term desired profits and outcomes should never serve as your business's ultimate goal. In order to keep growth and business momentum at its highest level, both a long-term mindset orientation for your teams as well as investments in the right tools and resources will guarantee that a good moment does not turn sour. ■



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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Change-maker and catalyst

SERVCORP EMPOWERS BUSINESSES IN BAHRAIN, THE GCC'S FASTEST-GROWING MARKET

When assessing the relative performance of key nations in the Gulf and Middle East, the IMF World Economic Outlook predicted that in 2018, Bahrain would continue as the fastest-growing GCC economy. While Bahrain has long been seen as one of the key gateways into the region - especially in terms of its prowess in financial services - the kingdom is now offering powerful advantages as a hub par excellence, with the top performance of its own economy being the ideal platform for reaching the \$1.5tn market of the GCC. Indeed, Bahrain is currently enjoying non-oil growth in excess of 5%, according to the Bahrain Economic Quarterly, the prestigious

market barometer prepared by the Economic Development Board. What's more, that non-oil growth is observed across an amalgam of key sectors, embracing advanced hi-tech fields as well as traditional skillsets. For example, Bahrain is seen as a Centre of Excellence for high-value manufacturing and industrial services, while also providing state-of-the-art environments for healthcare and medical equipment, engineering services and - very significantly - renewable energy.

THE SME EQUATION

As is also the case with near-neighbours the UAE and Oman, SMEs play a key role in driving economic growth in Bahrain - and are also prime movers in delivering some of the trending changes as to how and where the work is done. Interestingly, Bahrain (much like Oman in this regard) has a high proportion of micro-businesses: there are no fewer than 85,000 micro enterprises in the kingdom, alongside 6,735 fully-fledged SMEs. Economic success and change is being driven very much 'from the ground up' in Bahrain, with an environment offering a very pure seed-bed for entrepreneurship.

Start-up, business growth and in-bound investment are all within the remit of the Bahrain Economic Development Board (EDB). While being the first point of contact for investors looking to establish their businesses in the kingdom, the EDB is a key resource for SMEs throughout their journey from set-up to enterprise-level operation. The EDB exists to enhance the ease of doing business and reduce any hindrances to successful set-up - thereby helping significantly boost an economy in which micro-business and SMEs play a formative role.



Bahrain Financial Harbour



SERVCORP AND THE 'NEW' WORKING ECONOMY

Fuelled by economic growth and the commitment of the EDB to encourage and incentivise business start-up, we are seeing another factor becoming increasingly important: where and how can a business best set up an office? Plus, how should it do so in a way that is affordable, fast and projects a highly professional image from Day One?

Enter Servcorp - providers of the world's finest flexible workspace solutions - a company that is itself part of the economic story of Bahrain, deeply rooted in local market dynamics and with a presence in Manama since December 2006. Representing 40,000 members worldwide, across 54 cities in 23 nations, Servcorp is also well-placed to understand the very particular requirements of SMEs, multinationals and micro-businesses, with their need for value and a time-saving, one-stop platform.

With its finger very much on the pulse of change, Servcorp works closely with the EDB to create initiatives and working environments that fully reflect changing workplace trends and preferences. A key focus here is the Virtual Office - a concept effectively created and pioneered by Servcorp more than three decades ago - which offers a practical, innovative and highly affordable route to market.

A Virtual Office allows small and medium businesses to benefit from all the advantages of a prestigious address, landing phone numbers and office support, without committing to dedicated office space. The reality is that Servcorp has invested more than \$100 million in IT and telecoms to ensure clients receive the best service possible. Plus, as a specialist in Flexible Workspace solutions, Servcorp can meet the needs of many styles of business, meeting the needs of the spectrum of industries represented in the Bahrain economy.

Examples of the world-class solutions on offer include Servcorp's ownership of two floors in the prestigious Bahrain Financial Harbour (BFH), totalling in excess of 20,000 sq. feet and featuring state-of-the-art facilities and fit-out. All of which represents one of the foremost suites of serviced offices in Bahrain. In addition, Servcorp provides more than 80 registration desks in the Diplomatic Commercial Office Tower, enabling businesses to receive a CR (Commercial Registration) from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. The focus is to provide a solution for everyone, suited to individual businesses' workspace requirements, with the options of a serviced office, virtual office, business registration desk or Coworking space.

CELEBRATING PARTNERSHIP

Servcorp's Flexible Workspace innovations reflect a close understanding of the methods and policies of the EDB - and indeed, this relationship was celebrated at a recent event, taking place on July 1st in the Servcorp facility



Dr. Simon Galpin, Managing Director of the Economic Development Board, Bahrain

on Level 22 of the Bahrain Financial Harbour, and dedicated to discussing the EDB's activities and initial results for 2018.

The event was the first in a series titled 'Servcorp Community Meets', dedicated to networking and the sharing of market intelligence between Servcorp members and expert agencies and practitioners. The Guest of Honour was Dr. Simon Galpin, Managing Director of the Economic Development Board, Bahrain.

As part of his well-received keynote speech, Dr. Galpin spoke about the activities of the EDB and the measures being taken to empower SMEs in their critical role at the centre of economic growth. He emphasized his commitment to core factors such as reducing capital outlay and removing - wherever possible - the formal hurdles to growth. In this respect he referenced the initiatives undertaken by Servcorp as a proponent of the Virtual Office, and the key advantages offered by the prestigious new BFH facility - which is closely aligned with the values and innovations that the EDB is currently pioneering.

Commenting on Servcorp's role in supporting the development of Bahrain's important SME and micro sectors - and alignment with the aims of the EDB - Laudy Lahdo, General Manager, Servcorp Middle East, said: "Servcorp has always been driven by the need to provide solutions in markets where the dynamics of business



Laudy Lahdo, General Manager, Servcorp Middle East

are changing rapidly and where entrepreneurs have to move quickly and cost-effectively in order to take advantage of economic growth. Offering a wide variety of workspace solutions in Bahrain is part of that commitment to the ease of doing business, providing practical, innovative and affordable workspaces. We are primarily facilitators - and this drives our close relationship with the EDB, who work on behalf of investors and the business community to make Bahrain a regional leader across diverse industry sectors.

Together, we see Flexible Working as a passport to channelling and nurturing growth and to propelling the kingdom's role as a regional powerhouse economy."

www.servcorp.bh



The CFO of the future

(No, they are no longer just the “finance guy”) by ADAM MAN-CHEUNG

by ADAM MAN-CHEUNG

All competent businesses have competent chief financial officers (CFOs). Indeed, it is difficult to envision any serious business venture—startup, local corporate, or multinational—without a CFO at the helm, spearheading value creation, strategy development, and, of course, financial reporting. A brief survey of history, however, reveals that the spirit of the CFO is, quite likely, still in its infancy. The birth, so to speak, of the CFO position can be traced back to as recently as the 1960s, following which it has experienced a drastic flux in terms of duties and responsibilities.

We, at Michael Page, have had front-row seats in witnessing the CFO’s evolution from a back-office bookkeeper to a strategic, tech savvy business partner. As the demands of business have grown with heightened competition, access to education and technology, and global connectedness, so have the number of hats worn by the CFO, who was initially a finance manager, or, more generically, a “finance guy.”

Gone are the days of the rigid job description entailing budgeting, book-keeping, and tax reporting. Today’s CFO is, among others, a leader, a trusted advisor to senior executives, a systems and operations expert, a master negotiator, and a technical specialist. The expansion of the CFO’s scale and scope remains underway, presenting a host of challenges and, naturally, opportunities for the modern-day business.

How best to tackle the challenges and appreciate the opportunities at hand? Enter Michael Page’s *CFO and Financial Leadership Insights* report. The culmination of extensive primary research by way of surveying top global CFOs and industry experts, our *Insights* report adds concreteness to the sometimes “fuzzy” nature of the modern CFO’s job description. Our analysis sheds light on four broad ideals the best

CFOs must personify in dealing with new-age business issues such as compliance, technological disruption, talent management, and cybersecurity. These ideals are, in no particular order, that of Coach, Pilot, Scientist, and Engineer. As a Coach, the CFO must project strong leadership and mentorship to motivate their troops. As a Pilot, the same CFO must align policies and strategy in order to navigate turbulent markets. The Scientist within the CFO must guide their organization to the bleeding edge, whilst the Engineer develops feasible solutions across the business to achieve business goals at all horizons. We find, and indeed agree, that the top CFOs must not only rigorously master each ideal, but also diplomatically prioritize between them on a circumstantial basis.

In a similar manner, the top business issues identified by our CFO network are interconnected. In fact, this interconnectedness is exponentiated by the ideal chosen—Coach, Pilot, Scientist, or Engineer—when evaluating a problem. Resultant solutions, again, are fluid and related.

Consider the issue of compliance. Studies by Thomas Risk Management, a U.S.-based insurance firm, reveal that a fresh regulatory alert occurs every 12 minutes within a business. 2018 heralded a complete rethink of user data compliance with the European Union’s introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). At first glance, the impact of the GDPR was a seemingly trivial surge in privacy policy update



Adam Man-Cheung is the Operating Director of the UAE Finance, Banking and Secretarial teams for the Michael Page, Middle East. He is responsible for a team of consultants who cover executive c-level positions through to middle management finance and banking roles. During his tenure within the Group, he has specialized in key hires for both local and MNC organizations. His sector coverage includes, but is not limited to oil & gas, banking & financial services, FMCG, retail, hospitality engineering, manufacturing, shipping, mining, consultancies and business services. Adam has nine years of specific Middle East Finance experience, and originally joined Michael Page in 2003, where one of his achievements was setting up a brand new office in Kent. He graduated from the University of Sheffield, UK in 2002 with an Accounting and Finance degree. www.michaelpage.ae

e-mails by companies. Behind the scenes, however, their respective CFOs spent many months tinkering with updated data warehousing systems as Scientists, managed expectations across all levels of their firms as Coaches, and executed feasible implementations to maintain compliance as Engineers, with a strategic, birds-eye perspective as Pilots.

Cybersecurity -once a buzzword within academia and industry- is now a household term demanding attention across all units of society. By some estimates, north of a million cybersecurity attacks occur globally every day. WannaCry remains fresh in our memories as a ransomware that almost instantaneously plagued entities across 150 countries last year. Needless to say, businesses must fortify their armor. Surely, the CFO mustn't be responsible! On the contrary, the Scientists within our research group strongly expressed the importance of IT skills; the Coaches focusing on providing related training across the board. The Pilot sees a warning light while relaxing in their metaphorical cockpit, immediately tasking the Engineer with securing the business' digital assets. A task for a team of experts- who also happen to be key characters assumed by the same person! At this juncture in our discussion of

AS A COACH, THE CFO MUST PROJECT STRONG LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP TO MOTIVATE THEIR TROOPS. AS A PILOT, THE SAME CFO MUST ALIGN POLICIES AND STRATEGY IN ORDER TO NAVIGATE TURBULENT MARKETS.

deeply detailed, technical matters, it is instructive to take a step back, and appreciate the value of optimality in operations: not too much, and surely not too little.

"Information overload," perhaps one of the severest problems faced by society at large, was first introduced as a concept by the philosopher Denis Diderot in 1755. Nearly three centuries later, our CFO respondents, such as Philippe de Briey (EU CFO, Monsanto), posit that time-consuming, transactional aspects of finance and business in general be automated, freeing up resources for strategizing by the Pilot, and soft skills development by the Coach. Ryan Mangold (CFO, Taylor Wimpey) interestingly claims that "the soft skills of the CFO are ultimately more important than the technology," and rightfully so. The Pilot needs to negotiate high-level matters, whilst the Coach nurtures their teams to eventually do the same; though "they" would be greatly hindered without the laborious systems implementation by the Scientist and the Engineer. Thus, the modern-day CFO is tasked with the rather elusive goal of developing granular data streams and encouraging their analysis within a perspective prioritizing commercial feasibility and broader business objectives.

Michael Gary Scott -from the hit US comedy, *The Office*- is perhaps known more for his comical antics than his words of wisdom. Nonetheless, he once told his subordinate that "people will never run out of business." Our research respondents resonate with that statement, adding that the battle for (techni-

cal) talent in finance has never been fiercer. In particular, it is critical to get "the right people in the right roles," says Bob Braasch (CFO, Marathon Capital). One of these right people will inevitably become CFO of an organization, consequently being required to uphold the four characters introduced earlier. In this respect, our CFO respondents believe it is their responsibility to develop strategy, vision, and a clear path. Florence Rocle (VP Global Finance Services, Sodexo) says that "if you define too many objectives, or the strategy is vague, you can go in so many different directions and end up doing nothing." The Engineer and Scientist must implement an appropriate talent pipeline for the Finance function, and perhaps the broader business, whilst the Pilot leverages incoming talent with a chessboard view incorporating the nurturer approach of the Coach.

Our hypothetical characters' strengths, competencies and solutions to a vast array of issues -in addition to the above- are studied at length in our *Insights* report, accessible on our website. To reign in our discussion, there are some key value-generating takeaways I wish to emphasize.

Multinational behemoths benefit from high caliber CFOs just as much as garage startups. Said high caliber CFOs must now amalgamate competence and experience in technical finance, management and leadership, systems and controls, risk management, technology, and strategy, to name a few. To clarify, any perceived burden generated by these demands is completely overpowered by the potential represented by top finance executives, focusing on the four characters with an eye toward the important issues raised in our report. An increasingly synchronized world with consistently diversifying business institutions demands all-embracing CFOs. Our *Insights* report will help navigate your journey to find, or become, a CFO of the future. I conclude with the almost deceptively utilitarian advice of Jim McNey (Senior VP & CFO, North Kansas City Hospital): "You've got to go out. You've got to get educated. You've got to stay current on what's going on. You can't ever quit learning." ■

Check out Michael Page's *CFO and Financial Leadership Insights* report online: www.michaelpage.ae/cfo-financial-leadership-insights

CFO and Financial Leadership Insights

Four roles for 2018
We look at the biggest challenges facing CFOs from SMEs to multinationals - and the four approaches needed to overcome them.

Our interviews with Chief Financial Officers from diverse sectors and regions showed four distinct approaches to solving these issues, which can be broadly defined as the **Coach**, the **Pilot**, the **Scientist** and the **Engineer**. Click below to explore the definitions of each and their added value to the CFO's decision-making process.

MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Three reforms needed to stimulate entrepreneurship, innovation, and employment in the GCC

by HUDA AL LAWATI

In the GCC, the contribution of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to the overall gross domestic product (GDP) remains small, and the pace of innovation, while accelerating, is still in need of major improvement. SME contribution stands at 20% of GDP in Saudi Arabia. By contrast, in Europe, SMEs represent 58% of GDP according to Eurostat, and they create 70% of all jobs.

Our governments recognize the importance of the SME sector, especially as a tool to create jobs, and have put in a lot of effort to stimulate young minds to innovate and/or set up and run their own businesses. SME funds, VC funds, incubators, and accelerators focused on the tech space, one-stop shops aimed at easing complexity, conferences and hubs that aim to congregate talent in an ecosystem have all been set up in recent years. Large organizations are also playing their part as corporate social responsibility increasingly becomes a measure for rating companies and their leadership teams.

However, some key areas fundamental to the development of the SME sector, and essential for entrepreneurs and innovators to thrive, have not been addressed properly to date.

Before young men or women even get to the stage of requiring funding or an ecosystem to work within, they have to arrive at the stage of ideation, followed by a decision to take risks. Following successful fundraising, these individuals enter a new stage of competition, and strive for survival in an environment, where, historically, a culture of monopolistic tendencies by large family-owned and other firms has developed. Let's take each of these stages, and examine the challenges associated with them.

EDUCATION REFORM THE IDEATION STAGE

Ideation needs a foundation of relevant and decent education, or access to information. We are spending a lot of resources of time and money in startup workshops, conferences, and accessible information platforms, but the reality of the matter is that by the time you are at the age of benefitting from these initiatives, you have already missed out on a lot of preparation.

Where we need to intervene is at the early stages of elementary and preparatory education. Granted, this investment will take time to bear fruit, but it is essential. Private schools still represent less than 20% market share across the GCC according to UNESCO, where English is introduced in grade 4. In today's world, that already puts public school graduates at an early disadvantage vis-à-vis their counterparts. A lot of them struggle. In 2017, UAE started taking some measures to teach more science subjects in English for grades 10, 11, and 12 as many public school pupils fail the high school exit test that measures their level of English readiness in grade 12.

Holistic education is also a gap within the public system. Whereas private schools run entrepreneurship camps and have career counselors to help kids think about future aspirations, public school kids are often reliant on what is known to their parents or what they access on social media, which tends to be skewed towards fashion and food, limiting ambition horizons considerably.

A memorizing and regurgitation approach is encouraged at the expense of a thinking and problem-solving approach across the board. An enhancement of the schooling systems particularly public syllabi, is one of the most important areas of focus when looking to diversify our economies, and build an SME growth engine for healthy, productive countries.



LEGAL REFORM THE RISK-TAKING DECISION

In Silicon Valley, you can meet any number of people who call themselves serial entrepreneurs, and wear their one, two, or three startup failures as badges of honor. Here though, we find it difficult to embrace failure as part of any learning journey. Culturally, we are not very tolerant of failure, but this is only a very small part of the real issue at hand.

There is a more tangible, practical aspect of risk-taking associated with starting up or running a business in many of the region's markets, which is embedded in the lack of a true limited liability regime. The capitalist system has thrived on the concept of limited liability, whereby the risk that you take with a venture is limited to that which has been contributed into the venture, and nothing more. However, we have not implemented this truly into our corporate law.

In fact, even today, and despite being signatories to human rights charters that forbid debt imprisonment, many of our markets continue to put failed entrepreneurs owing money and crooks who have defrauded others out of money in the same place—jail. There have been measures to improve bankruptcy laws in the recent past, but this >>>

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SOME KEY AREAS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SME SECTOR, AND ESSENTIAL FOR ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS TO THRIVE, HAVE NOT BEEN ADDRESSED PROPERLY TO DATE.

imprisonment law, combined with authority to issue travel bans due to money owed by people, is a real risk that entrepreneurs in developed markets do not have to take.

The law has actually led to a weak credit rating system, whereby instead of investing in strong credit check and diligence departments, lenders simply rely on postdated checks and IOUs, because no matter how well intentioned you are, they can put you behind bars to get their money back. Once imprisoned, most of the systems have no exit other than repayment or settlement, meaning that it acts a bit like a ransom case.

On top of this, even directors and officers of any entity that is in default of payment are at risk of imprisonment and travel bans, so companies that are new and therefore risky, or those that are in distress and in need of experts, actually find it difficult to enroll the support they need.

It is imperative that the limited liability concept is properly and completely embedded into our legal systems. Without this, the funding initiatives are not truly supportive of entrepreneurs, and could, in fact, end up being exploitative.

REGULATORY REFORM COMPETING AS A STARTUP

GCC markets are considered tax havens given the low or zero level of corporate taxation depending on the country you are in. However, in many cases, this is compensated by exorbitant set up and running costs, as well as fees that can scarcely be absorbed by a struggling startup.



Despite the many one-stop shops and investor friendly campaigns, the reality remains that in the UK, you can be up and running as a new business for as little as GBP100- that is an impossibility in our region. Even recent freelancer licensing schemes entail over AED7,500 of costs before accounting for any visa needs that you may have.

For businesses setting up under specific regulators, multiple authorities (economic departments, relevant ministry, municipality, civil defense, etc.) pose a huge challenge. The authorities seldom communicate with each other, and what may pass with one can be blocked by another.

Furthermore, barring a few free zones that offer “flexidesks” at exuberant rates, no authority would even agree to look at any application without reference to the “premises” being used. The practical ramification of this requirement is that many entrepreneurs burn hard earned money in renting

space they cannot use for up to a year in some cases, especially if food, municipality, or health-care authorities are involved.

Costs of operations are also high regardless of size—whether you are an established multi-billion-dollar group or a startup, the same level of visa costs has to be paid to secure expat workers.

Unfortunately, all these are the ingredients for perpetuating monopolies and putting them at a permanent advantage versus newcomers. Large groups, with existing cash flows from established presence in various sectors, are always better placed to bear the set up, rental, visa, and other costs of a new business or concept.

When comparing this to an environment with corporate tax, it's easy to see why the latter is more supportive of entrepreneurs— you do not pay taxes if you are making losses, whereas, in the former, you are paying high fees (albeit not termed taxes), regardless of performance or stage of growth. ■

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Huda Al Lawati's career has spanned 16 years in strategy, investment and portfolio management across emerging market private equity and corporates. As Chief Investment Officer for Savola Group, a strategic investment holding group comprising one of the largest food and retail businesses in the MENA region (\$5.5 billion market cap), her role encompasses strategy, portfolio management, M&A and investor relations functions. Prior to being Chief Investment Officer at Savola, Huda was a Partner and Chief Investment Officer for MENA at the Abraaj Group, as well as a member of the Global

Investment Committee. Her experience has spanned several sectors from both investment and operations gaining including F&B, retail, FMCG, insurance, ecommerce, ride sharing, hospitality, healthcare, education, temporary power, and oil and gas. She started her career in 2002 with Schlumberger in Oman. She serves on the board of directors of Panda Retail Company, Herfy and Savola Foods Company, as well as on the board of directors the Young Arab Leaders. She is also a co-founder of a Dubai-based social startup, Billbareed. Al Lawati holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Neuroscience and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Economics (Honors) from Brown University.

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Roadblocks to innovation

Small business owners in the UAE sound off on their experience working with the country's financial institutions **by TAMARA PUPIC**

Top 3 challenges for entrepreneurs in the UAE
[% of respondents qualifying topic as (very) challenging]



The relationship between banks and small-scale ventures in the UAE has always been close (by its very nature), but also quite intense—by choice, apparently. On one hand, the local banking sector often loudly trumpets its support to SMEs, shrugging off practices that have left those ventures feeling sidelined by more established business players. On the other hand, almost two-thirds (65%) of UAE entrepreneurs find banking services very challenging, according to a recent whitepaper by Dubai Startup Hub (DSH), the entrepreneurship support arm of Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in partnership with global consulting firm Roland Berger. In order to analyze the reasons behind this discontent, we at *Entrepreneur Middle East* put together an online survey that sought responses from UAE-based entrepreneurs on their experiences with banks in the region. The feedback was then analyzed to identify the important themes and issues emerging, after which a few of the respondents were additionally interviewed via phone or email. In addition, we contacted a number of locally-based banks requesting them to comment on how challenging they find working with entrepreneurs and small businesses; the responses of those who replied have been reproduced in this article.

The DSH whitepaper stated opening a bank account as being the number one obstacle faced by entrepreneurs here. The majority of entrepreneurs and founders surveyed by DSH noted that it took them one to three months just to open a bank account. Rachel McArthur, the founder of Digital Ink Media, a content services provider for digital, broadcast and print businesses, conducted a thorough research of all the available options when opening a bank account. This process started with her requesting assistance from the free zone in which Digital Ink Media was registered. “As far as I am aware, free zones believe it is not their responsibility to give financial advice; therefore, you may ask, but don’t expect to get any information on what banks to go for,” McArthur says.

“SOME PEOPLE WAIT A FEW MONTHS, USING A SAVERS ACCOUNT IN THEIR PERSONAL BANK ACCOUNT IN THE MEANTIME, TO MAKE SOME CASH BEFORE OPENING THEIR ACCOUNT.”



Rachel McArthur, founder, Digital Ink Media

“SOME BANKS ARE DEFINITELY ANTI-SMES. THEY SEE THEM AS A WASTE OF TIME, BECAUSE THEY CANNOT MAKE MUCH MONEY FROM THEM.”

“During my search, which just involved visiting different banks, a friendly customer service representative of a bank told me that there’s no point even applying, because my business was too small for them to care. I thought that was hilarious. Some banks are definitely anti-SMEs. They see them as a waste of time, because they cannot make much money from them. From personal and friends’ experiences, UAE-owned banks are better for SMEs than international brands, because you’ll find those that offer a reasonable minimum amount, plus they’re more clued in to free zone regulations, and connect some services to their online banking system.”

As the co-founder and CEO of ChefXChange, an online platform to search and hire chefs locally for private or corporate events, Karl Naim led the processes of setting up his business in three different markets- the UAE, the UK, and Lebanon. From his experience, the process of opening a bank account

in the UK is straightforward and quick, often lasting only a week, whereas he describes the same as painful in Lebanon since he was requested to submit a lot of paperwork, previously obtained from different ministries, and to deposit share capital of LBP30 million (US\$20,000) in cash- wire transfer or other payment options were not accepted. When asked about the UAE, Naim says, “It is straightforward, provided that you have already registered your company and have all the requested documents. However, depending on whether the UAE company is owned by individuals or a foreign holding company, the needed documentation can become complex and require certification that comes at a cost. The whole process can take up to a month.”

Jimmy James, founder of Plantshop.ae, a green online store launched in the UAE in November 2015, points out to a lack of expertise amongst bank employees when dealing with more complex startup cases. Plantshop.ae was initially registered as a UAE mainland company, but earlier this year it was re-registered as a holding company under ADGM in Abu Dhabi in order to receive investment from 500 Startups. That was when James’ challenges started. “We had to open a holding company account, because investors outside the UAE will invest only in a holding company which is registered in a free zone,” James says. “So, when we went to a bank to open a holding company account, their compliance department failed to understand our business model. The officer who took our application didn’t know that this kind of company existed in the UAE. I had to educate him what it

BANKER VIEWPOINT

Rehan Ali, Head of Business Banking, Corporate and Institutional Banking, National Bank of Fujairah (NBF) on working with the UAE’s small businesses



“SMEs represent over 60% of the GDP growth in the UAE, and as such, they are considered as the economy’s backbone. Due to many reasons shaping the macroeconomic climate, we have seen entrepreneurs voicing their concerns over the lack of funding to the sector. The reality is that many banks have exited the sector completely, and many have still not returned to SME lending, often citing the risks associated with the sector. As for NBF, we pride ourselves for being the best financial partner for our clients focused on supporting their needs and growth aspirations. Testament to this, the bank has continued with SME lending when a number of other

banks stopped financing to the sector following massive losses, as the economy slowed due to the three-year slump in oil prices.

As such, NBF has been the steady player in the segment, and this approach has benefited us very much as we see stress subsiding for the sector and growth opportunities emerging. Lending to small and medium-sized enterprises is one of the core pillars of our business with SME lending traditionally ranges between 20-25% of total loans. Given the consistent support we have provided to SMEs, we currently have 8-10% of

the UAE’s SME business in the banking sector as a whole.

Based on our experience, we understand that each SME has its own set of challenges and needs. As such, the bank doesn’t follow a one size fits all approach. Instead, we work closely with business owners to understand their challenges, and recommend products and services that help them meet their needs. This in-depth understanding builds towards trust-based relationships and take away the tension that other banks may face when working with SMEs, as we put transparency and client-centricity at the core of this relationship.”

www.nbf.ae

actually was. Then, the compliance department rejected it again, also because they weren’t able to understand it. We talked to other banks, and eventually we found one person in one of the banks who understood our business model.” >>>

The DSH whitepaper stated opening a bank account as being the number one obstacle faced by entrepreneurs [here](#). The majority of entrepreneurs and founders surveyed by DSH noted that it took them one to three months just to open a bank account.

BANKER VIEWPOINT

Wasim Saifi, Deputy CEO - Consumer Banking and Wealth Management, Emirates Islamic Bank on working with the UAE's small businesses



asset acquisition and expansion requirements for business owners with Business Banking Packages ranging from Business Platinum, Business Gold to Business Premium, to suit the needs of different business types. As part of our commitment to SMEs and startups, we recently signed an agreement with Dubai Economy to offer a customized banking package for e-traders with lower

“SMEs and startups play a critical role in the UAE economy, representing over 90% of the total number of companies in the country. As a leading Islamic financial institution and as part of our efforts to contribute towards the growing entrepreneurial ecosystem in the UAE, Emirates Islamic is committed to supporting startups and SMEs with best in banking solutions, supported by superior customer service. The bank provides financing solutions to manage cash flow,

balance requirements, no monthly fees and reduced transaction charges. Emirates Islamic also provides online banking solutions under the smartBUSINESS platform to facilitate on-the-go banking. Via smartBUSINESS, transactions such as local and international remittances, requests for Demand Drafts, telegraphic transfer etc. are all made possible with the click of a button, aimed at enhancing the productivity and efficiency of businesses.” www.emiratesislamic.ae

The DSH whitepaper also shed light on the difficulties arising from insufficient guidance and lack of clarity relating to often complex documentation and verification processes, as well as limited empathy and competence of bank staff. One of the report's recommendations was to urge banks to focus on emerging business banking procedures, and help build a (better) system that helps foster innovation. However, Charles Wright, founder of Geem, a digital e-sports platform, established in April 2017, says that a limited awareness on startups is not limited to the banking sector, but extends to payment gateway services providers as well, who, ironically, are often startups themselves. Wright says, “The payment gateway system here is fundamentally flawed, in such that some of them will only accept new companies, if they've got minimum transaction orders every month. But how can somebody who has just set up a business have a minimum transaction amount? So, I think that the whole ecosystem is flawed and very tentative around startups, and I personally don't think that entrepreneurs of today should be punished for the errors of the entrepreneurs from the years gone by.”

Back to the banking sector, another similar issue –banks failing to keep pace with UAE's innovative decision-makers and regulators– was raised by an *Entrepreneur* reader who requested to remain anonymous. TECOM Group and Dubai Creative Cluster Authority recently launched the Go Freelance initiative, offering a freelance permit to education and media experts for an annual fee of AED7,500. However,



Charles Wright, founder, Geem

“THE LAST THING I NEEDED WAS TO LOCK A LARGE PORTION OF MONEY AWAY IN A BANK ACCOUNT, WHICH, I THOUGHT, COMPLETELY DEFIED THE OBJECT OF STARTING A BUSINESS.”

local banks' capabilities to enable its implementation, in terms of staff training and clear guidance, appears to be questionable at the moment. “I went to them to request a reference letter for my freelancer permit application, and I explained what I needed the letter for, asking about the procedure that would take place once my current company cancelled my visa. All that was explained clearly, meaning that once my final salary would be sent to my account, the account would be frozen. Once we got to the next part, it was a bit hazy. New documents for the unfreezing would be required, and a salary certificate/contract was mentioned. I pointed out I would not have a salary certificate, because I was not going into the traditional full-time employment, but would be freelancing. I then had to go through the painful exercise of explaining what a freelancer actually is. I then had to hear vague answers



Issue 1: It often takes 3-1 months to open a bank account

The clear majority of entrepreneurs and founders stated that it took at least 1 month - and in many cases significantly longer - to open a bank account. This is in stark contrast to the indicative «time for approval» that UAE banks state on their website. Anecdotal evidence even points to a few cases where founders frustrated with this situation abandoned their plans to set up a business in the UAE.



about what would happen with unfreezing, what happens to credit cards, timelines, with the answer, ‘Well, just get all the documents and then let’s see. We must have other customers like this.’”

Shelina Jokhiya, a former corporate lawyer, was also put in an awkward position when founding DeCluttr Me, the UAE’s only licensed home and office professional organizing service, five years ago. She set up the business in a free zone in which, she later learnt, local banks did not place great trust in, and thus rejected her application to open a bank account with them on those grounds. Eventually, she found a bank that accepted her application. “There is an issue there with banks not trusting a lot of free zones,” Jokhiya says. “I went to several banks, and, in the end, opened with a bank I was happy with, and also because they had the best minimum balance requirement, which was AED 1,000 for an SME account. However, last year, we were suddenly informed that the minimum balance had to be

AED50,000, and if you don’t meet it, you’ll have to pay AED250 per month. Obviously, I’m a micro SME, and I’m not making AED50,000 a month, and thus I have to pay that fee every month. It has all become onerous. For micro-SMEs and SMEs, a lot of them won’t reach that minimum amount every month, so it’s an issue.”

Jokhiya’s experience is in line with a note in the DSH whitepaper saying that requests relating to minimum balance requirements left room for significant improvement, which was reconfirmed by all our interviewees. Wright adds, “We are a product-based business, so we needed to set up an account, and we needed some kind of a payment gateway, and to open a payment gateway, we again needed to work with a bank, so I began the pursuit of finding a bank account I would be happy with. I looked at online portals, comparing the accounts, and there were some which had very low minimum balance. We are a startup, and cash is king at that stage. >>>

“WE WERE SUDDENLY INFORMED THAT THE MINIMUM BALANCE HAD TO BE AED50,000, AND IF YOU DON’T MEET IT, YOU’LL HAVE TO PAY AED250 PER MONTH [...] IT HAS ALL BECOME ONEROUS. FOR MICRO-SMES AND SMES, A LOT OF THEM WON’T REACH THAT MINIMUM AMOUNT EVERY MONTH, SO IT’S AN ISSUE.”

The DSH whitepaper also shed light on the difficulties arising from insufficient guidance and lack of clarity relating to often complex documentation and verification processes, as well as limited empathy and competence of bank staff. One of the report’s recommendations was to urge banks to focus on emerging-business banking procedures, and help build a (better) system that helps foster innovation.

Shelina Jokhiya, founder and CEO, DeCluttr Me



So, the last thing I needed was to lock a large portion of money away in a bank account, which, I thought, completely defied the object of starting a business. Basically, it was giving the bank my money for them to sit on. That is difficult when you don't have funds to burn, and that can really stifle what you are up to."

Eventually, Wright chose a bank with the lowest minimum balance requirement (AED25,000); however, as in Jokhiya's case, he is obliged to pay an AED400 penalty per month when he is not able to maintain it. "We were looking for a bank that was going to give us the most fertile ground for growth, and by that, I



Jimmy James, founder, Plantshop.ae

"WHEN WE WENT TO A BANK TO OPEN A HOLDING COMPANY ACCOUNT, THEIR COMPLIANCE DEPARTMENT FAILED TO UNDERSTAND OUR BUSINESS MODEL. THE OFFICER WHO TOOK OUR APPLICATION DIDN'T KNOW THAT THIS KIND OF COMPANY EXISTED IN THE UAE. I HAD TO EDUCATE HIM WHAT IT ACTUALLY WAS."

mean having cash in the position in which we can use it," he says. "I have put a lot of money into the business myself to be told that GBP5,000 to GBP7,000 worth of money will be blocked, and I couldn't touch it. But at the same time, we need a bank account, so what is one to do? It's binary. You either get one or you don't, so you are almost forced into this position. I have a lot of friends in the UK who have set up their businesses with GBP5,000 or GBP10,000, and they have grown their businesses immeasurably over the years. But if you have only that amount of money here, it would be impossible to set up the business. In terms of entrepreneurship as pushing boundaries and taking risks, with this, you really limit the opportunities for people to enter the market."

McArthur agrees that to be asked for a minimum balance of a certain amount is not convenient for most small business owners, since they usually start off with very little capital. "Some people wait a few months, using a savers account in their personal bank account in the meantime, to make some cash before opening their account," she says. "Bear in mind though, that the sooner you open your account the better, particularly if your free zone requires for you to submit a financial audit report every year. It certainly makes accounting easier. The downside to the minimum balance is that you can consider it as cash you cannot use. Go under the balance and you'll have to pay a fine."

Another issue raised by the DSH whitepaper relates to high transaction fees. Naim has found those services

to be very expensive in the UAE. He states that local transfers are free or AED1, whereas international transfers can cost up to \$50, and this is in addition to a monthly fee of AED200 charged by his bank. In both the UK and Lebanon, these services are much cheaper, he says. McArthur agrees and adds, "This is where they make their money," she says. "You also need to pay a monthly fee for the privilege of having an SME account. Another thing to look out for is that your bank will try to sell you things you probably don't need. Like some types of insurance, or an investment portfolio. They will make you think that you cannot legally run a business without certain add-ons, but check with your accountant before signing up to anything. A lot of the time, it's just a sales pitch. At the end of their day, they're doing their job, but the process can be so overwhelming that you might think it's critical to sign up to add-ons. Take your time."

There is one more explanation for the lack of motivation of bank staff to service startup and freelance clients properly. Namely, banks hardly see new ventures as commercially attractive as other customer segments, due to their low initial business volume and unproven ability to survive and expand. Wright notes: "We are in the beta stage, and our numbers are not going to be good for some time, and I told them that from the outset, but I've been with my bank for 12 months now, and I've had only one call from our relationship manager," he says. "I have a friend who has a recruitment company, and is putting a lot of money in his account, and he is



Karl Naim, co-founder, ChefXChange

"A CORPORATE CREDIT CARD CAN ONLY BE ISSUED AFTER SIX MONTHS OF OPERATIONS AND ACTS MORE AS A DEBIT CARD GIVEN YOU NEED TO HAVE AN AMOUNT BLOCKED ON YOUR CURRENT ACCOUNT. THAT'S NOT IDEAL FOR CASH FLOW PURPOSES."

getting a call once a week or once a month. So, there is a clear focus on the accounts that are bringing in cash, as opposed to fledging businesses that are really trying to do something progressive, and which haven't quite hit the jackpot yet. In my opinion, the whole ecosystem for banks is geared towards protecting themselves with very little leeway towards entrepreneurs and businesses who are trying to do something a little bit different."

In 2014, Standard Chartered made headlines when it announced it was winding up thousands of SME accounts in the UAE. It aimed to almost entirely exit the SME banking sector in the UAE, retaining only a small number of high-value customers. Jokhiya warns that a similar action by locally-based banks would be detrimental to the UAE's economy after the VAT introduction. "In my

case for example, I am at a threshold of AED135,000 to pay VAT, and if you meet that threshold, you have to open a bank account, and so firstly, what if banks don't want to open a bank account for you?" she says. "And secondly, what if banks choose to close our bank accounts? I paid my VAT a few weeks ago, so I'm trying to do everything legitimately, but if they choose to close our bank accounts, how can I pay my VAT then? The banks are trying to alleviate their risk, but don't know how to help the SME sector."

Overall, Naim explains that he has found the UAE banking system to still be lagging behind the UK, especially in terms of technology and costs, but to be much more advanced than Lebanese banks. He adds, "Most of the UAE banks have decent online banking which is a must for a startup like ours. We do a lot of transfers to our suppliers (chefs) on a regular basis. The ability to do this from your laptop, adding beneficiaries and lo-

cal/international transfers, is vital. Having to have to go to the bank for these would be detrimental. The only downside of UAE banks we have dealt with is they do not provide credit facilities to startups. A corporate credit card can only be issued after six months of operations and acts more as a debit card given you need to have an amount blocked on your current account. That's not ideal for cash flow purposes."

In conclusion, Wright is keen to offer practical advice to the country's banking sector. "They are very happy to offer gym membership to their credit card holders, but when it comes to entrepreneurs, there is nothing," he says. "For example, one bank can say, 'We'll give you \$5,000 Google AdWords credit or similar.' I would be all over that. But nobody is doing anything progressive here to try and lure entrepreneurs in. If it was me, I would incentivize, and try to be a bank that is incubating the best startups in the region." ■

BANKER VIEWPOINT

Hussam Alhashimi, Executive Vice President, Head of Priority Banking and Business Banking, Emirates NBD, on working with the UAE's small businesses



quicker and easier by maintaining clear and transparent book keeping and accounting practices, regular preparations of annual audited balance sheets, ensuring routing of all transactions through the banking system, robust financial planning and budgeting processes, a well thought out strategy

"SME customers can help facilitate the process of opening a new bank account better by ensuring availability of clear documents required to start a new banking relationship such as a valid trade license, board resolutions where applicable, operating instructions and information on ownership. Potential borrowers can make the loan application process

and business plan, and strong corporate governance in place to provide the right level of information and added comfort. Maintaining adequate capital to meet both working capital requirements and long-term commitments are also important requirements to ensure continued financial health of the business."

www.emiratesnbd.com





Left to right: Andreas Gollwitzer, head of MINI Middle East, and Vilhelm Hedberg, CEO and co-founder, ekar

Leading the way

Seven lessons (from firsthand experience) to prepare you for *your* entrepreneurial journey **by VILHELM HEDBERG**

The road to creating a brand that you want consumers to love, and most importantly use, is one riddled with pitfalls and stress.

But, ultimately, when you make your dream a reality and bring your idea to conception, the rewards far outweigh this sometimes problematic journey.

Four years ago, I was in my swimming pool—where all the best ideas happen—talking with friends about my positive car share experience in Europe, and saying it was a shame that the UAE didn't offer the same mobility solution.

Fast forward to today, I am fortunate to be CEO of the first and most rapidly growing car share program in the Middle East, ekar, boasting more than

50,000 members who pay per minute to use over 500 cars via a mobile app.

Thanks to the guidance and support I received from the early stages of ekar's humble beginnings, I now envisage the Middle East as having car share members outnumber car owners by 2025.

This vision will be achieved in major part by successful capital raising and staffing. We are achieving a 20% average month-on-month growth since inception, and secured over US\$4.5 million by our Series A in January 2017, and are now closing our Series B round with a \$20 million capital injection.

Since the launch of ekar's partnership with the RTA, Etihad, and Emirates in 2017, we have witnessed a car share

revolution—but it could not have been possible with the mentorship of those around me. ekar had three employees in December 2016, and will have over 100 employed by end of 2018, making ekar one of the fastest-growing startups in UAE history. As such, I wanted to share my key learnings with other budding entrepreneurs, in a bid to share the valuable lessons learned.

1/ Be smart with your business plan

The business plan is where that little idea you came up with in a swimming pool becomes more than just a thought. Seeing your idea on paper is exciting, but tread with caution. It is good business practice to overestimate costs and underesti-

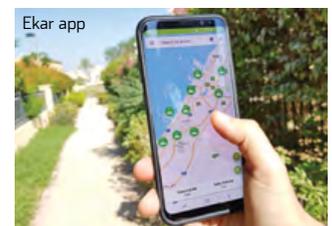
mate the potential success of your new venture. Forecasts are never perfect, they are a guide, but why add undue stress to yourself by making unrealistic figures that you may not end up hitting? The most important factor is not numbers, but the vision and passion you put into creating your brand; we have no crystal ball, but you can count on grit and determination to be your friends in the process.

2/ Build your tribe

It is said that, as an individual, you are the culmination of the five people you spend the most amount of time with. If these five people are sporty, most likely, you will be too; if they are into video games, you will no doubt spend quite a bit of time on the sofa doing the same. When I started ekar, I decided that I wanted to surround myself with like-minded entrepreneurs who I could share ideas with, and talk openly about any issues or difficulties I was facing.

3/ Mentor up

Be sure to have mentors, and surround yourself with the grey-haired rockstars who have been through the set-up cycle, and have learnt lessons in the process. One of my key mentors throughout the startup process was Bob Farrow, who now sits on the ekar board as an advisor. Bob poked holes in the business



Vilhelm Hedberg is the co-founder and CEO of ekar, the Middle East's fastest growing car share app. Vilhelm was born in Caracas, Venezuela to Norwegian parents. After spending his adolescence in England, his family later moved to Florida in 1993 where he attended high school and later graduated with a BBA from the University of Florida. Vilhelm later went on to earn an MBA in International Business from EAE Barcelona. Vilhelm holds over 10 years of experience in the fields of Quality Management and Logistics, his first role in the UAE being at Wilhelmsen Lines, where he was responsible for the shipment

of over one million automobiles throughout the Middle East. His career quickly progressed and he soon became Partner at QMS Global, one of the largest ISO Certification companies in the world where he was responsible for the development of QMS Global FZ LLC, representing Asia and Africa. 2016 saw the launch of Ekcar, the Middle East's first pay-as-you-go hourly car rental service. In 2016, Ekcar was selected by the RTA as the provider for 100 vehicle car share project, and with other key clients, including Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways, the success of the company can only develop. www.ekar.ae

plan, and grounded my expectations, which was just what I needed, and looking back, ekar couldn't be where it is without his advice and mentorship.

4/ Cater your business to the customer

Having spent most of my working life handling B2B companies and campaigns, I can't reiterate enough how completely different the B2C market is. And as such, market research is key, and something to invest time and energy into. Doing the research legwork upfront at the start will diminish costs in the backend. Also, speak with other players in your market to learn about their experiences.

5/ Your enterprise has to be social

Social media is your friend! This is the best way to communicate with your existing and potential consumers. Don't worry if you don't feel confident in handling any social media campaigns yourself— this can be outsourced (and at great pricing) to make sure that you don't miss out on reach, which is crucially important as you gear up to launch your company.

6/ Put together a dream team

When building your team, remember that the compatibility between partners, investors, and employees is equal to, or even more important than, their skillset. Your corporate culture is what builds a great brand, and ensuring that all involved are aligned to the same vision is critical. Each and every person who works for with ekar is a potential brand ambassador, with a wide network of connections to positively endorse the brand, so we work to ensure that there is strong compatibility between all stakeholders.

7/ Find investors who are right for your enterprise

Building capital is so crucial in launching your brand so selecting the best investors is critical. When we were speaking with partners for our Series A raise we had four interested parties offering four very different services. In the end we chose to work with Audacia Capital as they wanted to not simply invest financially but also added huge value in investing their time to offer counsel and strategic insight, they became an extension of our team and we enjoy working with them collaboratively to this day. ■

THE FUTURE OF FOOD

The stock prices of food giants may be dropping- but interest in food startups is on the rise **by SAAD UMERANI**

Here's a look at some of the news headlines in the food business that we've been exposed to in the recent past:

- The Hershey Co., maker of the eponymous Kisses, announced in December 2017 that it is to acquire SkinnyPop parent Amplify Snack Brands for about US\$1.6 billion.
- RXBar, maker of "whole food" protein bars, was bought by Kellogg's in a \$600 million deal in 2017.
- Hormel Foods Corporation acquired Justin's Nut Butters for \$286 million in 2016.
- Also in 2017, Danone acquired White Wave, whose portfolio of branded businesses specializes in organics and health-focused products that command a price premium. The \$12.5 billion deal was Danone's biggest in over a decade.
- Meanwhile, the retail world is still reeling over Amazon's \$13.7 billion deal to acquire Whole Foods in June 2017.
- In a substantial \$2.3 billion deal, Nestlé, the maker of Kit Kat bars and DiGiorno's frozen pizza, acquired Atrium Innovations, a global leader in nutritional products, in 2017 as well.

As the above headlines show, companies like Nestlé have been hit by the pervasive trend for healthier, more natural food, which has reduced demand for Nestlé's crucial confectionary. As consumer awareness grows, people are looking for better healthier alternatives to the usual "full-of-sugar snacks." Bigger brands are also trying to get into the healthy game by acquiring healthy food players. The healthy food market is growing at 30% year-on-year as compared to 3% of conventional packaged foods— presenting a huge opportunity.

But why are these guys acquiring companies instead of creating new brands?

As customers move towards the healthier food trend, they have started to lose trust in the larger companies to produce something that's actually healthy, and rightly so— we know that "Diet Coke" is not really "diet," some people claim it's actually worse than the normal version of the soft drink.

At the same time, larger players are also looking to maximize margins. Whereas smaller companies are creating products out of a real need to bring something that's good for people into the market. Customers are trusting these smaller players more, given their authenticity and personal stories, as opposed to yet another product from a conglomerate.

Not only is it hard for the larger players to build trust in the healthy food space, they also tend to lack innovation when it comes to producing something new. Who would have thought of healthy popcorn, or healthy truffles— the latter is something we do at my enterprise, Protein Bakeshop.

As for the rise in acquisitions: large F&B conglomerates are buying food startups, because we have something they don't: we have a story, a heritage, an authenticity. The food giants can't recreate authenticity within a brand that is already standing— for example, consider Snickers Protein: it's still a Snickers, thus people will be wary of trusting it as a protein snack.

Keeping this in mind, it makes sense for the big corporations to buy the little fish, as the storytelling is done, the trust has been created, and it's already bought into by the consumer. The latter is one of the hardest parts in creating a trustworthy, popular food business— especially in this health conscious, considered purchasing day-and-age where people buy into a story or reputation more than ever. Up and coming brands are more innovative— this is innovation happening at the grass roots!

One can expect to see a lot more of this kind of consolidation in the future, where bigger guys will continue to buy the smaller healthy snack players, and build a healthy food portfolio. There is also going to be a lot more innovation in form, price, and taste for healthy foods. It certainly looks to be a good time to be in the food business— especially when it's healthy. Watch this space.



Saad Umerani is the co-founder and CEO of Protein Bakeshop, a Dubai-based healthy snacks company founded in 2014. Protein Bakeshop develops healthy, guilt-free snacks that don't compromise on taste. The inspiration for the flavors comes from existing snacks that people know and love. Saad is also the Founding Partner at Enabling Future, a venture capital firm based out of Dubai that makes seed and early stage investments in companies in the US and MENA. www.proteinbakeshop.com

Accelerators are playing an increasingly critical role in building and nurturing entrepreneurial communities around the world, including emerging economies.

"EARLY EVIDENCE DEMONSTRATES SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL OF ACCELERATORS TO IMPROVE STARTUPS' OUTCOMES, AND FOR THESE BENEFITS TO SPILL OVER INTO THE BROADER STARTUP COMMUNITY."

Ian Hathaway,
Harvard Business Review

BOOSTING POTENTIAL

What can an accelerator do for your startup? We headed to Sharjah and asked participants in Sheraa's program to tell us their experiences **by SINDHU HARIHARAN**

As an early-stage entrepreneur, a typical day in your life may see you juggling the art of refining your product, along with your efforts to capture those initial sales to win over the market. And though you may be quite adept at this juggling act, you may agree that businesses are rarely built in a vacuum. With a prominent and well-promoted boom in the region today in the entrepreneurship and startups space, there are

countless programs, ranging from incubators, accelerators, startup hunts, and other support organizations, to help you grow your company. The challenge then lies in understanding the value of each of these drivers, and ascertaining which one is right for you and your startup.

Consider startup accelerators, for instance. Accelerators are playing an increasingly critical role in building and nurturing entrepreneurial communities around the world, including emerging economies. If you've been

keeping track of the pace at which new accelerators seem to be launching across the MENA region, you'd be happy to hear what Ian Hathaway in the *Harvard Business Review* has to say about the role of accelerators: "Early evidence demonstrates significant potential of accelerators to improve startups' outcomes, and for these benefits to spill over into the broader startup community." However, the author is quick to note that "the measurable impact" accelerators have on the ecosystem and its participants is the most important factor—but that's also not too easy to measure. "Not all accelerators are created equally; quality matters," he notes.

So, what exactly are accelerators, and what is it that makes them a valuable support system for startups, that are often vying with one another to get into an accelerator? Typically, accelerators select startups (usually in their early stages) in batches, and in return for a small share of equity, they offer advice, space, sector guidance, investor connections, and mentorship. Programs usually culminate in what's usually called a "demo day," where startups have a chance to pitch to a gathering of investors. While the benefits may seem attractive for any entrepreneur just starting



Sheraa space



Zaina Kanaan
and Rania Kanaan,
co-founders,
Charicycles

“IT PULLS YOU AWAY FROM YOUR DAILY ROLLERCOASTER, AND LETS YOU SEE FAR BEYOND YOUR NEXT STEP, WHICH IF ACCELERATED IN THE RIGHT TIME COULD BE A PIVOTAL POINT FOR ANY BUSINESS.”

out, and current trends too are heavily stacked in favor of an accelerator program for your early-stage venture, it would be safe to say that entrepreneurs remain quite confused when it comes to decisions on accelerator programs- more so in a nascent entrepreneurship community like that of this region.

So, is an accelerator the right choice for you? If so, what are a few key factors you must be cautious about before getting into one? Well, the journeys of your peers could come in handy to help you navigate your way through this critical decision- and so we talked to a bunch of UAE-based entrepreneurs who have gone through the accelerator program at the Sharjah-based entrepreneurship enabler Sheraa to share their experiences with us- and what the rest of you can learn from them.

RETHINKING THE BUSINESS

Co-founders (and sisters) Zaina and Rania Kanaan of UAE-based startup Charicycles are entrepreneurs who stress that an accelerator’s biggest benefit is to help give you a bigger picture of your business and its direction. “It pulls you away from your daily roller coaster, and lets you see far beyond your next step, which if accelerated in the right time could be a pivotal point for any business,” say the duo. The entrepreneurs, who graduated from Sheraa earlier this year, believe they have more clarity today on their market and business thanks to the stint.

There’s also the intense and immersive experience of >>>



Vaibhav
Doshi,
co-founder,
RentSher

ECOSYSTEM ENABLERS

Q&A with Sheraa’s Venture Growth Manager **Tarek Ahmed**

What are the key challenges that early-stage startups that enter an accelerator typically face?

“The main challenge that startups in the accelerator face is raising funds in the region. They need support in not only getting investor-ready, but also connecting to the right investors and pitching their idea in an investor-friendly way. Other than that, they also come in with a lack of focus. They need help in pinpointing their key focus areas and sharpening their growth ambitions. In most startups, one other key challenge is the founding team leading and executing all tasks. This leads to founders finding themselves overwhelmed and overstressed by the amount of work and drowning in the details of the day-to-day. They need help in pulling themselves out of the daily grind to get a bigger picture of their business, where it is headed, and then set priorities accordingly.”

ACCORDING TO YOU, WHAT ARE A FEW ASPECTS IN WHICH ACCELERATORS IN THE MIDDLE EAST SHOULD DIFFER FROM THEIR GLOBAL COUNTERPARTS?

“Accelerators in the region are catering to a younger ecosystem, rather than the more mature markets that can be found globally. This means that one of the key pillars in the program is the education component, which highlights the entrepreneurial mindset and differentiates the way startups run from the more commonly known corporate structure. Accelerators are the foundation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, building up the startups and providing them with the support needed on each stage of their journey.

1. Support in business set-up

As policies and procedures for business set up is not

transparent in emerging markets and early-stage startups can’t afford expensive consultancy services, accelerators come in to help with the paperwork. A majority of the time, just the hassle of the set up can deter aspiring entrepreneurs from going any further. In an accelerator program, not only is the process laid out in a more clear and concise way, but the experts are always around to help with any hiccups, allowing the founders to focus more time on the startup itself.



Tarek Ahmed

2. Intermediary between investors and startups

As investors -both from the region and globally- don’t have the most trusting view towards the founders from the region, accelerators are building an integral intermediary platform. Accelerators are the entities bringing together both parties. Therefore, it is important that accelerators in the region should have a different operating model, instead of getting startups onboard for the sake of equity. Accelerators need to work closely with the startups to identify their unique growth needs, which would make them ready for investors. The trainings are tailored to the problems startups face specifically in this region, while also utilizing latest growth tools and techniques. The end result is a more confident startup, with better market-fit and more investor-ready.”
www.sheraa.ae



Sheraa space

the programs that compress years' worth of practical learning into a few months. For instance, Vaibhav Doshi, co-founder and CEO of UAE-based online rental portal RentSher, says a good accelerator can provide one or more of the following: a tailored agenda and support for growth, quick access to network of investors and mentors, a conducive co-working space, seed funding, and industry specific expertise. Advising entrepreneurs

on the decision to enter an accelerator, Doshi says, "If you are in need of two or more of the above, then look for a good accelerator, else look for specific support." RentSher too graduated from

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE SMART ABOUT WHERE YOU INVEST YOUR TIME AND WHAT YOU COMMIT TO."

Sheraa earlier this year. "This was our first experience with any accelerator... Sheraa team, the mentors, and the curriculum forced us to rethink why we are doing what we are doing, and to formulate the core strategy. Where we benefited the most was getting concrete feedback on our value proposition, brand positioning, and the growth strategy," says Doshi.

For Mashal Waqar, the co-founder and CEO of The Tempest, a digital media and technology entity, the process of evaluating an accelerator begins with a self-assessment by entrepreneurs of their own strengths and weaknesses. "Joining an accelerator takes commitment in the form of time and efforts- both need to be effectively utilized by entrepreneurs," she says. "You've got to be smart about where you invest your time and what you commit to." Her pick for key aspects to consider include institutional partners to the accelerator, the investor network, the time commitment, and other

The process of evaluating an accelerator begins with a self-assessment by entrepreneurs of their own strengths and weaknesses.

"JOINING AN ACCELERATOR TAKES COMMITMENT IN THE FORM OF TIME AND EFFORTS- BOTH NEED TO BE EFFECTIVELY UTILIZED BY ENTREPRENEURS."

Mashal Waqar, co-founder and CEO, The Tempest



Mashal Waqar, co-founder and CEO, The Tempest

portfolio startups, among others. “During our accelerator program, all the startup founders got to pitch to Sheraa’s VVIP board, which included the likes of H.E. Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, Fadi Ghandour from the Wamda Group, and Badr Jafar from Crescent Enterprises,” she says, when speaking about her experience at Sheraa.

Alper Celen and Ritesh Tilani, co-founders of joigifts.com (summer 2018 graduates of Sheraa), point to a dilemma in every first-time entrepreneur’s mind- the funding that the accelerator can provide and how much equity they’ll have to give up for it. “There are more important considerations,” say the duo. “If an accelerator specializes in the vertical or domain that your venture is focused on, you’ll get much more out of the program.” They wish to remind founders of the larger benefits

of an accelerator: “They [accelerators] are especially great for less experienced entrepreneurs, who could use help putting some structure around the challenges they face.”

Yousif Al Abd, the co-founder of Solva Technologies, an electric scooter manufacturing startup, emphasizes on perhaps one of the biggest gains from an accelerator experience- being surrounded by like-minded ambitious founders. “From our experience, we learnt that being part of an accelerator gives you a family that supports you to endure rough times, which are so often in a startup’s life,” says Al Abd. Not to mention, the entire process of being associated with a prestigious accelerator also acts as a positive validation for your startup- for potential investors, and for the public in general.

THE RIGHT FIT

While the benefits of an accelerator program are clearly aplenty, like any business decision, there are also challenges that you need to consider and work around. As joi’s Celen and Tilani point out, all said and done, going through an accelerator program can definitely be “a bit of a dis-

traction from the actual business,” given the demands on a founder’s time. “It’s a balancing act, and spending time going through the program requires a trade-off with time working on the actual business’s day-to-day activities,” say the entrepreneurs. This is why Charicycles’ founders Zaina and Rania Kanaan too >>>

‘TREP TALK

Entrepreneurs on the key benefits their startups enjoyed thanks to their time at Sheraa Sharjah

ZAINA AND RANIA KANAAN

**Co-founders,
Charicycles**

“It’s in being surrounded by so many other ideas and startups that are learning and growing, and also in particular having access to leaders in their industries during the fire side chat, which allowed for learning transparently on what these leaders are doing right and what they’ve done wrong.”

YOUSIF AL ABD

**Co-founder and CEO,
Solva Technologies**

“Working with Sheraa and The Catalyst [a tech startup accelerator based in Masdar City Free Zone] has given us access to the following advantages. [Firstly], visibility to investors and access to capital- Many investors are invited to different presentations during the programs which help entrepreneurs get connected directly to interested investors who are on the look for the next big thing. Both Sheraa and The Catalyst invest in startups that show the industry serious novelty in the solutions they bring to the market.

[Second], market access- the advance publicity can help validate your product/service and give you a structured timeline to work through. So, you keep those future partners ready and waiting for your launch, which builds your momentum in the market by providing you with the so-called early adopters. [Third], accelerated learning- the intensive program enables rapid improvement of essential business skills such as sales, marcomm, finance and even some technical skills in such a short time. [Finally], continued support- building relationships during the program allows entrepreneurs to seek support, reach to investors, or get feedback as they proceed.”

VAIBHAV DOSHI

**Co-founder and CEO,
RentSher**

“[Firstly], B2B business development support- through the support of Sheraa, and under the Arab Supply Chain Impact Initiative we were able to get a MoU with Shurooq Sharjah and contracts from other Sharjah-based entities to be their rental partners. We already secured business of more than AED100,00. [Second], strong exposure- we had the opportunity to present the RentSher story to an esteemed audience at Sheraa showcase day. [Finally], mentorship- Sheraa had some high-quality faculty members and mentors guiding us during the program. Also, the Sheraa team itself is very supportive and worked closely with us to shape our growth strategy and priorities.”



Yousif Al Abd and Mohamed Al Abd, co-founders, Solva Technologies



Ritesh Tilani and Alper Celen, co-founders, joigifts.com

consider the skill of “keeping the ball rolling” very critical for entrepreneurs in this phase, so that traction isn’t lost. Another pitfall from the time at an accelerator could be the presence of too many opinions floating around you- while offered with good intent, it can often be very confusing, and at times frustrating for any entrepreneur, says RentSher’s Doshi. “If you work on incorporating every bit of feedback you get, you may be completely lost. So, as a founder you need to be clear on what is the core idea, what is negotiable and what is not and work accordingly,” he adds. “Too many cooks can spoil the broth,” add joi’s Celen and Tilani, who urge founders to collect as much feedback as possible, and then “sift through” the guidance.

One also needs to be clear on what the accelerator *actually* offers you as a startup. “It’s possible that your startup may be at a much-later growth stage, and the program caters to startups at an earlier growth stage- in such a case, the mentors, resources, and program structure may not be as effective to you, as it would to another startup,” says The Tempest’s Waqar. She also warns on potential burn-out

“WE’VE CONTINUED TO SCALE UP, PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE SOUL-SEARCHING WE DID WHILE WE WERE AT SHERAA, AND THE RESULTING FOCUS.”

for entrepreneurs trying to do it all. “This is where having good co-founders can prove to be invaluable,” she notes. Al Abd of Solva Technologies also sounds a warning note about resource burn as well. “With a turbulent vision and a certain extent of flexibility, accelerators might indirectly channel entrepre-

neurs into different visions and approaches, resulting in a higher cash burn, which leads to ending the life of a startup,” he says.

Luckily for entrepreneurs, there are some straightforward ways in which they can ensure they extract the best out of an accelerator. The first rule, and perhaps an obvious one, is to make sure you do your homework, Waqar notes. “Identify where you need help, and where you want to grow. Don’t go into a program clueless,” she says. “Understand that proactiveness and researching how the program can benefit you most is your job.” Celen and Tilani also advocate a similar mindset, urging entrepreneurs to “talk to as many people as possible. You never know when or where you’ll find your next mentor, advisor, or customer.”

Waqar also advises keeping an open mind when it comes to receiving feedback from mentors. “If they’re able to point out flaws, that’s actually really good feedback,” she notes. “When you’re completely delved into your product and your startup, you may be missing out on a third-person/outsider perspective. It definitely helps to

A dilemma in every first-time entrepreneur’s mind is the funding that the accelerator can provide and how much equity they’ll have to give up for it.

“IF AN ACCELERATOR SPECIALIZES IN THE VERTICAL OR DOMAIN THAT YOUR VENTURE IS FOCUSED ON, YOU’LL GET MUCH MORE OUT OF THE PROGRAM.”

Ritesh Tilani and Alper Celen, co-founders, Joigifts.com





A lecture at Sheraa

be able to get good feedback in that aspect.” Al Abd adds, “It won’t be an overstatement to say that during our participation in Sheraa, we benefited from casual conversations as much as we did in classes or coaching sessions. Preparation is always important and increases entrepreneurs’ chances for success.”

For the Charicycles founders, benefitting from an accelerator is all about some good ol’ time management. “Being part of an accelerator and benefiting from it means making time to actually do the work, show up to the classes, and hold extra meetings outside of the scope of the program.” RentSher’s Doshi agrees, and believes that to maximize value out of the experience, entrepreneurs should “review each agenda item, and communicate with the accelerator team, if they want to focus on some other topics, or be exempt from a particular session.”

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER

And for those among you who prefer to go by tangible evidence to back up these claims by your peers, you’d be happy to hear how the stint at Sheraa has changed the lives of the entrepreneurs we spoke to, and how it impacted the trajectory of their enterprises. For RentSher, for instance, the Sheraa stint has led to betterment of critical areas of their business. “I would say that we became more organized on some aspects of the business, increased internal communication within the founding team as well as the rest of talent, and lastly started to work with some other cohort members for business partnerships,” says Doshi. The joi founding team too admits of noticeable differences in their operations. “We’ve continued to scale up, partly because of the soul-searching we did while we were at Sheraa, and the resulting focus,” say Celen and Tilani. “It

“BEING PART OF AN ACCELERATOR AND BENEFITING FROM IT MEANS MAKING TIME TO ACTUALLY DO THE WORK, SHOW UP TO THE CLASSES, AND HOLD EXTRA MEETINGS OUTSIDE OF THE SCOPE OF THE PROGRAM.”

allowed us to identify some of our strengths and cut out some of the noise. It helped us widen our network a little bit; we also got more exposure in Sharjah, which is a market we were keen to tap into, and we now have some additional corporate contacts in that market thanks to Sheraa.”

With respect to a digital media company like The Tempest, the gains on the brand recognition front have been one of the biggest advantages. “There’s a lot of growth that happens professionally and personally- I’ve grown as

an entrepreneur in a way I’d never imagined!” Waqar claims. “Being a younger entrepreneur, I found the network access to seasoned entrepreneurs invaluable... We’ve worked on a stronger offline and online presence through partnerships and retaining monthly users. We’re focusing on the metrics that really matter, and the biggest achievement- successfully closing a fundraising round in the summer!”

For a very early-stage venture such as Solva Technologies, Sheraa has been a support to it right from creation to establishment. “The monetary grant we received helped us develop our hardware division, which was crucial to initiating our operations,” Al Abd says. “Thanks to Sheraa, we have strategized ourselves in the UAE market, as they’ve granted us access to many government entities, investors and clients. Today, having Masdar and BP investment, we are expanding our team, accelerating our growth and strategizing to tap into other countries in the region, while building the ‘brain’ that will drive the electrification process of the logistics industry through utilizing big data analytics and blockchain technologies.”

All said and done, it’s pretty clear that participating in an accelerator can be helpful to your startup, but there’s not much doubt that entrepreneurs should be extremely discerning in choosing a program that fits their specific needs. While a good accelerator program can send entrepreneurs into the orbit of greater success, one can’t put too much onus on the accelerator alone to be the magic potion- as hustlers, the responsibility is on you to make best use of the opportunity. *Carpe diem!* ■

“WE GOT FUNDED!”

Summer slowdown? Not for these startups that sealed large funding rounds in this period! **by SINDHU HARIHARAN**



Cartier Blue Stainless Diver's Wristwatch available at The Luxury Closet

THE LUXURY CLOSET

www.theluxurycloset.com

The Luxury Closet, a Middle East luxury resale marketplace, has successfully raised US\$8.7 million in growth funding in a round led by existing investors Middle East Venture Partners (MEVP) along with participation from Wamda Capital, Precinct Partners, Tech Invest Com, Saned, and Equitrust. At a time when fundraising concerns dominate the minds of small businesses across the region, The Luxury Closet has managed to steadily raise finances in the market over the years- in April 2015, the

e-commerce startup raised \$2.2 million in a seed round, and closed a \$7.8 million Series B round in October 2016, with its investors continuing to back the startup on its successive rounds. The current funding proceeds, however, are quite different in their utility for the startup's founder and CEO Kunal Kapoor. “In the earlier invest-

“WE NOW HAVE 22,000 UNIQUE ITEMS ON THE SITE, WHICH MAKES THE CATALOGUE COMPARABLE TO SOME OF THE BIGGEST MALLS IN THE REGION.”

ments, the company helped create a solid foundation in terms of bringing the team and the required infrastructure in place, and getting the second-hand model right,” notes Kapoor. “[But] we now have clear metrics and strategy of where the future growth needs to come from, and the funding will allow us to achieve these goals,” he says.

The Luxury Closet is a Dubai-based luxury e-commerce portal that specially focuses on the pre-owned segment with over 60% of their sales reported to come from high-end luxury brands like Louis Vuitton,

Chanel and Rolex- brands that rarely discount their merchandise. The startup, however, gives consumers a choice to buy their wish list of items pre-owned at “a discount averaging 60% from retail.” According to a statement by the company, with studies estimating that there's likely \$500 billion worth of luxury goods sitting in closets globally, The Luxury Closet is striving “to bring the untapped supply of luxury items online.” With respect to what the startup intends to do with the latest capital injection, Kapoor says their top priority would be to edge closer to their mission statement- to build “the largest community of sellers” from the region, and ensure a seamless experience for them. “The funding will also allow us to expand our warehousing facility, and build a client experience center. We also plan on growing our team and bringing in top talent to be a part of our road to success,” adds the entrepreneur.

Explaining the steps that constituted the fundraising process, Kapoor notes that the round was “overwhelmingly subscribed by existing investors.” As for the pitches made to other external investors, the startup started with



Kunal Kapoor, Founder and CEO, The Luxury Closet

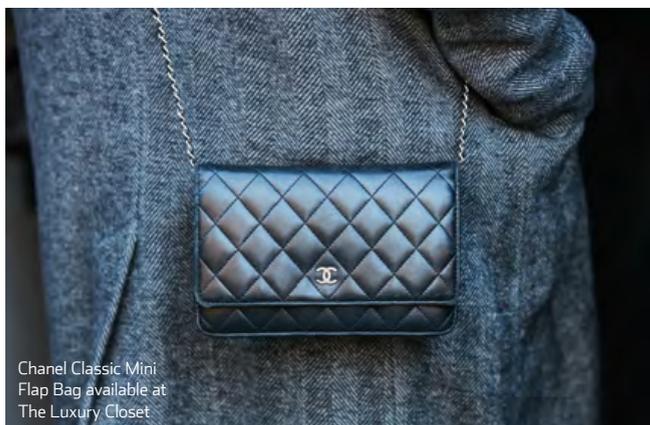
IMAGES COURTESY THE LUXURY CLOSET

analyzing how big the business can be, and then went on translating this into a financial business plan using historical metrics, plus assumptions on how the metrics needed to further evolve. “In addition to the financial plan we built an info memo that explained to investors the key highlights of the company, the model, plan, how we are going to get there. The process took about two months to complete,” says Kapoor. “Next, we started our marketing phase, which was to reach out to regional and international prospective investors, and narrowed on the right partner through multiple rounds of meetings.” As for some of the key aspects that excites the company about aligning with such top tier investors, Kapoor says that the solid industry understanding and the wealth of advice that such investors bring in can come in very handy for them in scaling their business. “Investors also know what other investors look for and have a wide network; their assistance in fundraising is key. However, most importantly, they are our ambassadors who are constantly spreading the word about the company and connecting us with others who will help us build the company we dream of!”

The entrepreneur is also optimistic of the potential of the market they operate in. Kapoor cites analysts’ predictions that the MENA luxury market could be worth over \$12 billion by 2021, with the second-hand vertical by itself expected to be over \$900 million. “In developed markets, one in ten luxury purchases are pre-owned, while if we look at watches alone, it’s one in five purchases,” Kapoor notes. “We are barely scratching the surface as in the Middle East, the segment is underserved and there is massive room for growth. We now have 22,000 unique items on the site, which makes the catalogue comparable to some of the biggest malls in the region. However, this number can be multiplied many times over.” This brings us to the startup’s key business proposition,



Mont Blanc Alexandre Dumas available at The Luxury Closet



Chanel Classic Mini Flap Bag available at The Luxury Closet

which did turn heads when it launched, but one can’t ignore the substantial improvements in the luxury industry since then, with brands realizing the importance of getting online. However, Kapoor believes that perhaps the only way to buy high-end brands at a discounted price today in the region is to buy them pre-owned, and that’s where The Luxury Closet stands out. “We see this as a competitive edge that will allow us to build unique business and a focal point for luxury buyers and sellers across the world. Dubai is an amazing city to start a luxury company, and we hope to expand further outside the region,” he says.

The mention of Dubai also brings to light Kapoor’s own entrepreneurial journey—quitting his job as a Sales Manager at Louis Vuitton in 2010, with the aim of starting his own business, Kapoor came up with his statement of purpose as “to build a saleable company that sold a product that I loved, where I had some expertise.” Talking about how he arrived at a model to make luxury goods more affordable for people, Kapoor says, “I researched the model, and found two variations— an offline-only model operating in countries like Japan and Hong Kong, and an online model prevalent in the US. We later adapted the two together, an online store with an option to pick up items.” As for the startup’s plans to keep the momentum going, along with an eye on “unlocking the best closets in the region,” Kapoor says they also plan to sign contracts with major retailers in the region, which will facilitate access to supply of new items. “On the demand side, we will grow our international buyer base; for example, the US is a fast grow-

ing market for us accounting for over 20% of our sales,” says Kapoor. Seems that sky is the limit for this startup, and we, at *Entrepreneur*, wish them all the best!



Kunal Kapoor, Founder and CEO, The Luxury Closet

‘TREP TALK

Kunal Kapoor, founder and CEO, The Luxury Closet

What are your top tips for the region’s entrepreneurs to secure funding for their ventures?

“In terms of tips, I think that what I learned most is that you have to choose a business that has a large addressable market. Going after something small will take much more effort, ending up in a smaller business.

The second tip is in creating a team. Great people give you tailwind, and not so great ones give you headwind. It’s key to hire the right people at the right time, while it’s impossible to get it 100% right, it’s an area where you have to make most decisions right.

The third tip is to have technology at the core of the business and automate processes once you get them right. I think the combination of the three will make a fast growth business that can run the marathon that’s required.”



Mawdoo3 co-founders
Mohammad Jaber and
Rami Al-Qawasmi

provide users easy access to content in their mission to enrich the state of Arabic language online. “Serving B2B solutions by using Arabic Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools kit for companies that want to cater to Arab users, as well as investing in our own products and services through ai.mawdoo3.com [are some of our objectives],” says Rami Al-Qawasmi, co-founder and CEO, Mawdoo3.com. “Our success story with Mawdoo3 [has] built for us many investment opportunities with different investors on both local and foreign funds... As a result, we selected the investors who [had] belief and trust in our mission and vision, along with our capability to continue our journey forward to success.”

Commenting on the funding, Tarek Fahim, Partner, Endure Capital, said, in a statement: “If you think being the number one Arabic destination worldwide with more than 45 million monthly unique visitors is enough, think again: this is just the beginning. Mawdoo3’s unique data sets and technical talents give them a head start on the AI race. We at Endure Capital are proud to be a part of their journey.”

MAWDOO3

www.mawdoo3.com

Jordan-based Mawdoo3.com, an Arabic content website that reports more than 45 million unique users a month, has raised US\$13.5 million in a Series B round led by UK-based investment firm Kingsway Capital with participation from US-based investors Endure Capital. Launched in 2010, Mawdoo3 hosts nearly 150,000 articles online covering a wide-range of topics ranging from lifestyle, health, education and food. The company took its aim to create an Arabic content repository online a notch above earlier this year, as it announced plans to launch Salma, an Arabic version of voice assistants such as Siri and Alexa. According to Mawdoo3, Salma will be deployed to answer questions from their platform, thus creating a new channel for Arabic content. “Salma will be used as an Arabic

voice interface service for businesses in multiple sectors including travel, automobile, telecom and electronics, enabling consumers to engage and transact with these businesses via voice,” says a statement by Mawdoo3.

The startup aims to utilize the funding proceeds to expand Mawdoo3’s library of Arabic content, and leverage emerging tech like AI to

“OUR SUCCESS STORY WITH MAWDOO3 [HAS] BUILT FOR US MANY INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES WITH DIFFERENT INVESTORS ON BOTH LOCAL AND FOREIGN FUNDS... AS A RESULT, WE SELECTED THE INVESTORS WHO [HAD] BELIEF AND TRUST IN OUR MISSION AND VISION, ALONG WITH OUR CAPABILITY TO CONTINUE OUR JOURNEY FORWARD TO SUCCESS.”

التصنيفات لصفح المواضيع تسجيل دخول تسجيل دد



IMAGES COURTESY MAWDOO3

I ask Al-Qawasmi about the fact that their latest round seems to have come from investors outside the region, and what could be its implications for the startup, and the entrepreneur admits that “existence of foreign investors will give [Mawdoo3] access and reach to international markets, and give us a global perspective that will facilitate the recruitment of talent to raise the level of our work and develop it on with global standard.”

Mawdoo3, according to Al-Qawasmi, is a result of observing a huge gap between trusted and credible Arabic content online and the number of Arabic internet users who search for the information in their native language. “According to internetworldstats.com, there are more than 421 million

Arabic speakers worldwide, with 184 million of them are internet users; on the other hand, the Arabic content available online forms less than 1% according to w3techs.com, which include a lot of untrusted sources like user-edited or generated blogs and forums,” says Al-Qawasmi. The co-founders (Al-Qawasmi and Mohammad Jaber, who first met during a volunteering event) thus decided to “empower Arabic language” with Mawdoo3.com. Jumping spontaneously into the world of entrepreneurship, the duo borrowed the required initial money from their families, and registered their company. “[We] started with a very basic website that was developed internally with very limited resources,” says Al-Qawasmi. Being pleased

with the progress –which was not without challenges such as finding high quality writers– the duo developed and trained an eager team to scale Mawdoo3. And the entrepreneur believes that with Salma, Mawdoo3 users will now also be able to reach information they seek, simply with their voice and dialects.

And as for what sets the startup apart from other content platforms, Al-Qawasmi says that along with hosting the largest Arab user base in the world, Mawdoo3 has “set standards to ensure that [their] contributors provide trusted content to the readers.” The friendly user interface also helps them provide an enjoyable user experience for the tech-savvy Arab audience, he adds. According to Al-Qawasmi,

the improved adoption and acceptance of entrepreneurship in the MENA region, and specifically nations like the UAE, has also rubbed off on Mawdoo3, helping the enterprise gain more attention as a success story in the digital/online industry. Along with this, developments in the areas of emerging tech such as artificial intelligence, and support of government entities like Smart Dubai are a few other factors that make the Mawdoo3 team optimistic about the company’s future.

“MAWDOO3’S UNIQUE DATA SETS AND TECHNICAL TALENTS GIVE THEM A HEAD START ON THE AI RACE. WE AT ENDURE CAPITAL ARE PROUD TO BE A PART OF THEIR JOURNEY.”

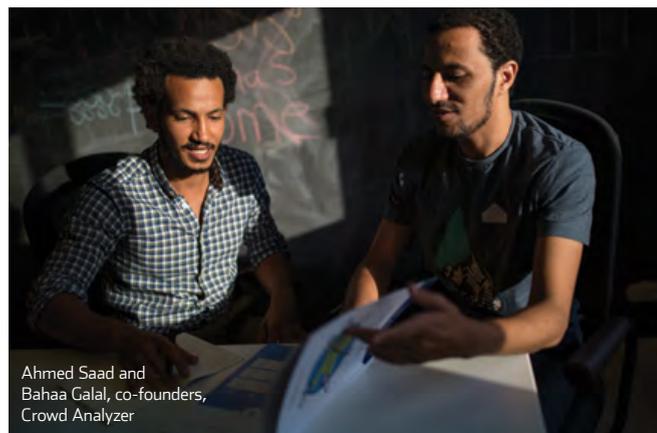
CROWD ANALYZER

www.crowdanalyzer.com

Gone are the days when social media used to be just a communication platform. Business owners today realize that they need to leverage the role of social media as a marketing tool to reach the right people at the right time. And for this, companies need to make sense of all the unstructured data that’s produced by way of conversations on the internet. This activity –popularly referred to as social media listening– is what Dubai-based startup Crowd Analyzer specializes in, and in its endeavor to revolutionize the social media marketing industry, the startup has raised US\$1.1 million in a pre-Series A round led by Dubai’s Wamda Capital alongside Kuwaiti VC firms Arzan VC and Faith

Capital, and Saudi Arabia’s Raed VC.

Launched in 2013, Crowd Analyzer aims to provide companies across sectors in the Middle East with the “monitoring and analytics tool” they need to grow their businesses. “We are taking solid and steady steps to recruit and hire the right caliber of developers and experts to maintain the standard of our services,” says Ahmed Saad, co-founder and CEO, Crowd Analyzer, commenting on how they intend to make best use of the financial boost. “Also, we are expanding in the region. We already have our head office in Dubai, an office in Cairo, and will soon open an office in Riyadh. The rationale behind this expansion is to stay very close to our clients and prospects in the region,” he adds. As for how they clinched the



Ahmed Saad and Bahaa Galal, co-founders, Crowd Analyzer

investment, Saad says the team followed a practice of “planning and facilitating their fundraising process a year ahead by keeping our investors up to date with our progress and news on a quarterly basis. We reached a point where our investors already know what funds will be allocated for.”

The startup, which counts major large corporations as clients across the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other GCC nations, wants to “change how everyone looks at social media,” with their Arabic-focused social media monitoring service. “It all started when Bahaa Galal [the co-founder >>>



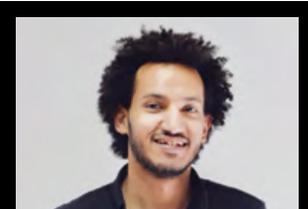
of Crowd Analyzer] was developing a software that understands Arabic content, and analyzes its sentiment,” recalls Saad. “Alongside, I was intending to start a tool that conducts market research by analyzing content on social media. It was very primitive, we didn’t have much of a structure, but we realized that our ideas complemented each other, and we took off from there.”

From then on, participating in several industry challenges, and also winning them with their solution, the duo launched a beta version of the tool in 2013. “The highest social media penetration in the world is in the Middle East. Hence, the

need for social media listening is growing more and more crucial for all businesses and industries.” Having commercially launched in 2017, Crowd Analyzer serves various purposes for companies that employ their services—from monitoring brand reputation, campaign analysis, competitive analysis, crisis spotting, and much more. Reporting a growth of 349% in 2016-2017 (the year of its launch), and a 30% growth rate quarterly in 2018, Saad says the startup is developing their product to cover more functions, and is revenue generating since January 2016. “We made a profit even before raising funds,” he adds.

“THE HIGHEST SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION IN THE WORLD IS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. HENCE, THE NEED FOR SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING IS GROWING MORE AND MORE CRUCIAL FOR ALL BUSINESSES AND INDUSTRIES.”

For the uninitiated, Saad explains social media listening as essentially the collection and monitoring of data relating to a keyword that a company is looking to monitor. This collection of data is done from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, various other social forums, blogs, and news websites, and a tool (such as that of Crowd Analyzer’s) gathers data in real-time, and analyzes it instantly. Admitting that the startup may not necessarily be the only social media listening tool out there in the market, Saad adds that they are proud to be the ones that provide “the most accurate analysis” for Arabic content. “Hence, we are developing a tool that will, and must be used by all enterprises that have customers or prospects on social media. Who’s not on social media anyway?,” rightly asks the entrepreneur. ■



‘TREP TALK

Ahmed Saad, co-founder and CEO, Crowd Analyzer

Based on your current experience in raising funds, what would be your three top tips for the region’s startups to secure funding for their ventures?

“[First], keep your investors close, and potential investors closer; send them updates to inform them about your business, and keep your company known until it’s ready to receive their funds. [Second], processes are really important. We already have records since 2017, and that is very useful for our fundraising. Keep the documents ready for investors. Our records are very accurate and available all the time. [Finally], keep on developing and growing. You don’t want to help a company [just] survive or [to] keep it safe- you need to validate what these funds are going to be spent on. Something is wrong if you have too much cash, or if you don’t have any cash.”



Crowd Analyzer team

IMAGE CREDIT: CROWD ANALYZER

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Founder Osama Natto presenting Visoul at a Dubai Startup Hub event

Seeing the bigger picture

Feeling lost in life? Osama Natto's **Visoul** can help you find your way

by **MEGHA MERANI**

Soul searches don't typically begin when we're feeling fulfilled. Most seekers admit that it's usually when you hit your lowest point that you embark on a quest for answers. Because it's only when you're at your highest peak that a fall can hurt so much that it drives you to look inwards. That, in a nutshell, is how Visoul was born— a "Visualizing the Invisible Workshop-In-A-Box" kit that allows people to discover the inner self through a visual, self-executed, guided experience. While Visoul hasn't officially launched yet, it has, interestingly enough,

already sold more than 400 kits to people belonging to 90 different nationalities across three continents. The comprehensive four-part "personal accelerator" series is essentially a response to the question: "Do you feel lost in life?" It includes art supplies, diagrams, symbol cards, and a creative range of other thought-provoking tools with step-by-step instructions designed to give individuals tools to "find" themselves, and move on to the next chapter of their lives. After finding your life's purpose in stage one, the following stages empower you to disengage from obstacles, and create a goal-oriented 18-month plan while embracing empowering beliefs.

How did Visoul come to be? "This started from a very dark moment in my life," admits Osama Natto, founder of Visoul, a product built by his startup, Natto Innovation Labs. Natto, a Saudi national who moved to Dubai four years ago, chokes up as he described how he felt just "disconnected" from himself and his life at that point in time. "I was at the height of my career. I was launching successful entrepreneurial programs in universities to help student entrepreneurs launch businesses. I was making a lot of money... millions... I was being invited to speak internationally... I was very highly sought after and celebrated. However, what people didn't know is that this was a very

dark time in my life... I wasn't happy, I wasn't fulfilled, and money did not have a value. So, it was, like, one day, I have AED200,000 in the account, and the next day, I wouldn't even have enough to pay for a ticket for a flight I missed, and I would literally be crying at the airport because my phone is disconnected, my credit card is blocked, and I can't even take a Careem or Uber back. This is a true story."

He adds: "It affected my health big time. It affected my relationship with my kids, and it also affected my marriage, leading to an ended relationship." Watching his world collapse around him, Natto bravely decided to take some time off from work, in order to confront his inner demons and went into a self-discovery phase. As a single dad, he also needed to stay home to take care of his kids. "I started to wake up before sunrise and take walks barefoot or swim at the beach to try to connect with nature," he says. "I would walk a lot. It was winter time and very foggy at the Dubai Marina. I would ask questions: who am I? Why am I here? Why am in this place, in this situation? And... what went wrong?" Unable to answer his own questions, Natto started to seek explanations from books and people.

From studying different religious texts and cultures, to consuming books and reaching out to professionals from different specialties worldwide including neuroscience, psychology, coaching and art therapy, Natto read all he could and spoke to anyone who might help him find answers. Slowly, bit by bit, the fog in his mind began to clear. "I started to see different elements of what each person is trying to say from the dif-

ferent domains,” he explains. “Being an engineer, I would go back and use software to diagram things. So, I actually diagrammed emotions, feelings, human needs... and as I put all these diagrams on screen, I started to see the full picture, and I started to use that as my own cockpit to pilot me through life.” Through this self-designed process, Natto was able to slowly go back, and improve his health and his relationship with his children.

One day, Natto met a former colleague and friend who wanted his advice on some important life and career decisions. “On the table, I asked him to flip the paper mat and draw the same diagram,” Natto says. “An hour later, he found all the answers, and asked me where I got this. I told him it was something I invented for me, and he immediately

said: ‘Why don’t you sell it?’ And I said, who is going to pay for this?” But while Natto pushed away the idea then, a few months later, he began toying with the premise of selling his mind map diagram to help others explore their own responses to the eternal questions. Natto’s initial idea was to print the diagram on an A1-sized chart and give it to people to color it in and write on it. But this felt too “confined”, he says, which is when he moved to images that people could place within instead. The well-researched visual images in the kit are designed to trigger people to unconsciously project their true answers to realize what they truly want. “Today if you ask people ‘Who are you?’, they will say something like I’m a Master’s degree holder, or a banker, or something like that... Basically, something about their job and education,” he explains. “But really, who are you?”

Printing images on his home printer, while his kids and their friends helped him cut them out, Natto’s vision slowly formed into a product spread out on his dining table. And the idea of packaging the kit as a box was born thanks to his then 15-year-old daughter Dana. “My daughter just went to her room and got a shoebox, and started putting things in because the dining



Osama Natto, founder, Visoul



The Visoul kit



A user making use of the Visoul kit

“I ACTUALLY DIAGRAMMED EMOTIONS, FEELINGS, HUMAN NEEDS... AND AS I PUT ALL THESE DIAGRAMS ON SCREEN, I STARTED TO SEE THE FULL PICTURE, AND I STARTED TO USE THAT AS MY OWN COCKPIT TO PILOT ME THROUGH LIFE.”

table was getting messy,” he says. “Because it’s just what we had at home.” As for the supplies to create all of this, Natto would head down to the nearest hypermarket to shop at the lowest possible prices. An unfathomable contrast to his former technology business life -where he had 64 people and three agencies working for him on a single project- Natto, with his limited funds, then went about designing his own flyers using Microsoft PowerPoint, and further distributed the flyers himself in his neighborhood to test waters for his could-be product. He also placed a Facebook ad, but targeted it to appear within a limited vicinity. “I didn’t want [too many] people to see it from where they know me, and say ‘Oh, what’s Osama doing now?’” And Natto’s efforts paid off that same evening. “I remember, on that day, at

8.36 p.m., I got a notification that said payment received,” he says, a tremor of both still incredulous pride and deep humility in his voice as he relives the overwhelming burst of emotions. “That was a life-changing moment. I couldn’t believe it. People found it and actually went and paid without knowing who is this guy and what’s this product. It was exciting.” There was no looking back after that.

Visoul, as a process, is made up of four stages titled *Realize*, *Disengage*, *Fulfill*, and *Submit*. The first stage, *Realize*, takes about two hours, and is about realizing what you truly want in life. “People think, ‘this is what I want, the university I want, the degree, the job, the spouse, the car...’ But you’ll be surprised,” says Natto. “This is the first slap in the face. It’s like oops! I’m a medical student but I want to run a business, or I’m in Dubai but I should be in Newcastle- true stories.” The charting -a combination of pictures, writing, colored lines, and symbols- drills deep into one’s self, layer after layer, until you arrive at “This is what I really want to do with my life.” The next step is to *Disengage*, and “find out what’s holding you back, and how to get rid of it.” Natto remarks: “It’s a very difficult stage. You can’t skip the visuals, and if there’s something you’re hiding >>>

inside you –childhood trauma, a grudge from a relationship, a situation with a teacher or boss– and you haven't dealt with it properly, then it's going to come out." The visuals include walls, bricks, chains, weights, broken or bleeding hearts, daggers –and other representations that translate to who or what your obstacles are– which then leads to "Chapter 99."

"'Chapter 99' is the final chapter in your lousy life," Natto explains. "It's a book that's empty and the participant is required to write the story of how he or she broke all those chains, demolished all those walls, dropped all the heavy weights and achieved everything. So, they write it in past tense like it's already happened." Stage three, *Fulfill*, then helps simulate the route to fulfilling all your desires the way you want. "You will actually see your roadmap," Natto insists. "This is the magic of science." The final stage, *Submit*, deals with "submitting and creating a belief system for yourself regardless of your spiritual, religious, or cultural background," he says, crediting

Dubai's multicultural community for the push to develop a product that doesn't conflict with anyone's beliefs, yet still helps them reach what they want.

Natto's drive to keep iterating with Visoul was, and is, propelled by two big motivators: first, that he found his own purpose, which includes helping people; and second, more importantly, that he's been inundated by a flood of gratitude-filled messages from happy customers impacted by the life-changing exercise. Now was the time to start looking at how he could create a business that he could grow and expand. So far, his company has received US\$200,000 in investment, of which \$100,000 came from revenue, while Natto invested \$100,000 of his own money. To get a cost-effective business license, Natto approached Dubai SME, a resource for UAE nationals that provides support, information and outreach for the growing small and medium enterprise sector. "I went told them my situation, showed them pictures of my dining table, and explained that I can't afford to

pay to set up an office," Natto says. "What I love about the UAE is that they treat Saudis just as they do Emiratis. They asked me to come meet a committee. At the meeting, the committee simply said, 'We are not here to interview you, we are here to see what you need to help you.' It was really a touching moment, and a week after I received an email with a license for a year for a nominal amount. I think of them as angels, and thank them every day."

The founder has also received support and guidance from Dubai Startup Hub, the entrepreneurship arm of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce, on how to fine tune his product for the market and specifically the corporate sector. "Both these organizations have been like angels sent to

"FOR THOSE WHO SAY IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO START A BUSINESS FROM HOME IN THE UAE OR REACH MATURITY WORKING FROM HOME, I AM LIVING PROOF."

help me," he insists, applauding the support available to startups in the UAE. "For those who say it's not possible to start a business from home in the UAE or reach maturity working from home, I am living proof." With his legal and operational structure now in place, and all his past-life entrepreneurial experience kicking in, Natto says his company is now ready to receive investors and is looking to attract money "not to build, but to expand." "We do have money to take us till the end of the year, so we are building the business to attract high quality investors at a higher valuation," he adds.

Natto Innovation Labs has plans to both upsell and cross-sell its Visoul kits, as well as develop new specialized kits focusing on career, relationships and a deeper version to delve even further into the soul's journey. The company also intends to create an online subscription model where people can get updates and upgrades. Natto is also looking to integrate technology and potentially create the same experience in virtual reality. Most importantly, however, the founder is eager to quantify results to derive research and observe trends. Currently available in both Arabic and English, Natto says Visoul has even been used by people from Turkey and Germany with limited English proficiency. "They still managed to do it, which just shows you how simple it is. It's pieces of the puzzle, and you look and say, 'Oh my God!'" Having hoisted himself out of a dark crevasse to commence his journey to his current peak gives Natto unquestionable faith in his product and its future. He says: "I was seeking answers, and this tool changed my life personally." ■



Participants making use of the Visoul kit

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MAKING TRAVEL SMARTER (AND EASIER)

DUBZ wants to enhance your travel experience

by **PAMELLA DE LEON**

It's the last day of your holiday, and as you check out of your hotel, you wonder how you can spend those extra few hours in a foreign city, without having to lug around your luggage. Say hello to DUBZ then, which is a luggage pickup, storage and delivery service in Dubai, offering travelers time and comfort by getting bags picked up or dropped off, stored, and even checked in (yes, from your hotel or home, instead of the airport) during the day—a convenient service for every traveler. How did DUBZ come about? Out of firsthand experience, of course. “I was on a personal trip in Georgia,” DUBZ co-founder and CEO Omar About Faraj says as he recalls the

origins of his enterprise. “My last day in the country was spent dragging my suitcases, as my flight was late in the evening, and my hotel check-out time had been at noon.” Facing the usual hassle with luggage, Faraj says, “This was not the first time I had faced such an issue. Despite all the advancements in travel and aviation, luggage remains a key hindrance for travelers around the world.” In a bid to solve this pain point, Faraj, along with Mustafa Maghraby, Chief Commercial Officer, and Samer Sobh, Chief Operations Officer, launched DUBZ in 2017 to enhance the traveler’s experience, starting off by providing a pick-up service from and to the Dubai airport. Today, through the DUBZ website, travelers can ar-

range a pick-up, and have their luggage checked in and collected by a dnata agent from their home or hotel anywhere in Dubai, allowing travelers to then enjoy their day baggage-free. Users can then save time by skipping baggage drop-off and check-in queues at the airport, with their boarding pass and baggage tags provided on the spot. As for their business strategy, Faraj asserts their four key pillars: “maximized efficiency of our logistics, experimental customer acquisition process, fully digitized sales and customer service processes, and plug and play model with airport operations.” The CEO notes that a key enabler of their business model is “continuous authority alignment to ensure that DUBZ processes meet security requirements and are compliant with airport procedures.” He also commends the startup’s USP: “Our vision is to create luggage freedom.” He lists three main features: home check-in, where passengers can check in their baggage early in the day from their doorstep, and at the airport, they can head directly to their flight without queuing. Next up, belt pick-up and delivery, wherein passengers don’t have to wait for their bags to arrive in the airport, as DUBZ would collect customers’ baggage from the belt and deliver them to the customers’ location. And, finally, deliver to airport, wherein passengers can handover their carry-on bags early in the day from their doorstep, and collect them later when they arrive to the airport. In a video pitch on their YouTube channel, co-founder and COO Sobh notes that their operations is also a key strength, as they have their own fleet and

agreement with key logistic partners within Dubai. The startup also has a cloud-based backend, with their security solution approved by Dubai Police, which includes their processes like securely locking and sealing every single bag they receive. The startup’s revenue model



Omar About Faraj

‘TREP TALK

Omar About Faraj, CEO, DUBZ

What are your top tips to entrepreneurs starting a business in MENA?

- 1. Team, team, team.** “It is critical to have a founding team that, one, has complimentary skillsets, and, two, have an efficient and transparent communication process.”
- 2. Figure out ways to do more with less.** “As a startup, especially in the early stages, resources are quite scarce, hence the founding team has the duty to achieve positive results and establish visibility in the market through continuously hustling and find creative and low-cost solutions to their business needs.”
- 3. Accept failure and bounce back.** “In a startup, facing challenges and even failures are commonplace. Hence, learning from failures and finding the strength to bounce back is critical to achieve success down the line. At the end of the day, the only people who do not fail are those who do not try.”



DUBZ team

is based on a fee per bag charged to customers, though Faraj says they're looking to increase their services and revenue streams to grow their target customer base.

And it's gaining in that arena— a few months into launch, the startup joined and graduated as one of the winners of Intelak's first cohort, an aviation, travel and tourism incubator. Following that, in June 2018, dnata, an air service provider and part of the Emirates Group, acquired a majority stake in DUBZ, which also saw it forging strategic relationships with flydubai, Saudia Airlines and flynas. "This puts us on the path of strong growth, as within a very short time, we were able to serve hundreds of passengers," says Faraj. The CEO commends that their involvement with Intelak propelled them to gain interest from other investors; however, the team knew dnata would be the ideal partner as it offers "both financial strength, strong expertise and connection in travel and aviation." Prior to the completion of the acquisition, Faraj recalls, that they spent significant time

working closely with dnata to develop new products, build strong partnerships with airlines, and assess the commercial viability of their services. "This period was instrumental in not only allowing us to launch with a strong impact, but also work on perfecting the partnership and governance model with dnata," says Faraj. For the partnership, Faraj and his co-founders evaluated potential partners based on "financial strength, leadership in travel and aviation, and openness to innovation." Partnering with dnata certainly has its perks: Faraj says that with dnata, they can offer customers a "seamless experience," as they are easily integrated with airport operations, plus leverage dnata's brand and their connections with travel players to build more strategic partnerships, and thus increase the credibility and appeal of their brand to the market. As a startup that's partnered with a corporation, Faraj advises other entrepreneurs in the process of making similar decisions to find a partner that believes in the team, is willing to take risks, and has faith in the startup. Most importantly,



Faraj points out how the partnership should bring in a "clear and differentiating competitive advantage," and provide your enterprise the "stability to innovate and experiment in the market."

As for what's next, with the boost from their partnership with dnata, the startup is looking for significant growth. Faraj asserts that in the next few months, it's all about strong growth, new partnerships, and further innovation in their product lineup. They plan to do so by expanding their airline coverage, building strategic partnership with key travel players and assessing international opportunities by leveraging dnata's international presence. "Our goal is to scale up the business, while maintaining the agility and service standards we've achieved since inception." ■

THE INVESTOR'S VIEWPOINT

Steve Allen, Divisional Senior Vice President, UAE Airport Operations, dnata

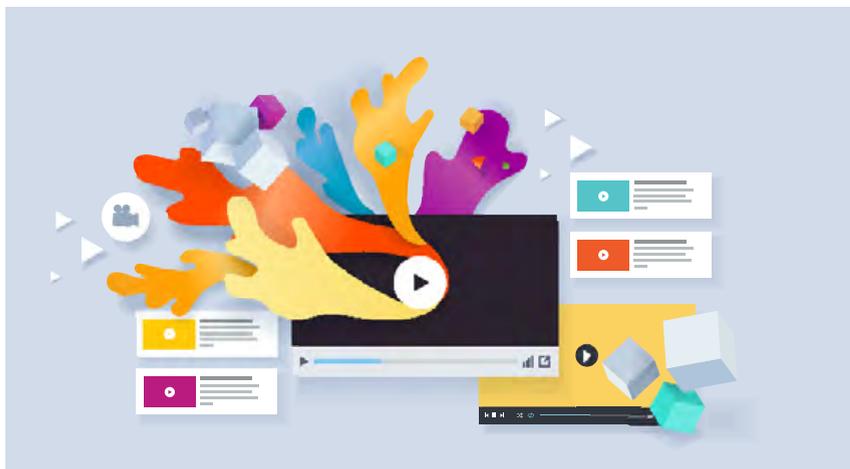
What factors led to dnata's decision in acquiring a stake in DUBZ?

"As one of the world's largest air services provider, we are always on the lookout for new ways to expand our service portfolio and improve customer experience, while embracing innovation and new technology. We also constantly seek new acquisition and partnership opportunities that complement our business streams and deliver value to the company and our stakeholders. The airport baggage service is a relatively new innovation in the industry supported by the latest technology. We felt that engaging with innovative entrepreneurs would be the most agile way of building and understanding this market and therefore this mix of experience and reputation with entrepreneurialism is a perfect fit. DUBZ has a solid business plan and a great team, which has already proven its ability to deliver outstanding results as a winner of Intelak, a travel, aviation and tourism incubator co-founded by the Emirates Group, GE, and Dubai Tourism. With its customer-oriented approach, innovative services and proven business model, in DUBZ, we found the partner we're looking for."

Do you see dnata evolving as a profitable business with their model? Financially, what excites dnata in the deal?

"Since its launch, the company has seen strong demand for its services. dnata's meet & greet and lounge services provider, marhaba, international airlines, flydubai, flynas and Saudia, as well as several hotels and malls have already added DUBZ services to their offering and there are ongoing discussions with other partners as well. DUBZ brings us a new way to drive service excellence and delight our customers and we are confident that our partnership will benefit all stakeholders and contribute to the continued success of the business."

DUBZ website



Rediscovering courage

The advertising industry doesn't need more data—it needs more creativity **by SERENE TOUMA**

One of my favorite quotes, which I happily brandished as shield *and* weapon during my social and digital media marketing days is: “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don’t know which half.” Coined by John Wanamaker, a successful American merchant, religious leader and political figure in the early 1920s, considered by some to be a pioneer in marketing, the phrase is laden with mystery— a sense of “if only I knew!” In dramatic fashion, I would then pull up the spreadsheets riddled with numbers and URLs, and proudly show off that we *did* know which half, and went about proudly re-allocating those budgets to optimize for conversion.

Sexy, right? Not really, but what made the advent of social and digital media marketing so special is that it removed the mystery. We did away with the unknown. Phew. I even went so far as to wonder aloud and obnoxiously why anyone would even buy a billboard ad, with no CTR data attached, to promote their product or brand. Because at the end of the day, it didn’t answer the million-dollar (or more) question: what *actually* drove those sales?

Today conversion pixels will tell you exactly which Facebook ad sold exactly which pair of artisan shoes to exactly which 34-year-old female with an interest in artisan handbags. It was like magic, but also like looking behind the curtain in Oz, and finding some wires, switches, and lines of code— but sadly, no wizard.

Data. A four-letter word if I ever heard one.

Now that I’m back in the completely comfortable yet completely exciting world of Advertising with a capital A, I can’t help but think about just how much has changed.

Professionally, I’m torn. Watching reruns of *Mad Men*, I find myself longing nostalgically for an era I am inexplicably jealous I didn’t get to experience; a time when creative work was printed out on solid boards and stood to attention, loyally at the side of the creative director who would perform for the crowd, and managing to wow the account team too while he (almost always a he) was at it. The skeptical but hopeful client would revel in the private performance as he (almost always a he too) snacked on a feast of shrimp cocktail and pas-trami sandwiches in a Madison Avenue boardroom. The account team would schmooze, while the creative direc-

tor, a mythical force and bottomless well of ideas (as far as the client was concerned), would breeze in and out of the room, anointing it with an air of creativity and cool. Before the day was out, as cocktail hour came to a close, the creative would be sold and the campaign sent to print.

Romantic, right? Maybe. But who knew if the billboard sold any cars? Or if the print ad really moved the needle in convincing men going through a midlife crisis to buy a Jaguar over a Mustang. There was no way of really knowing, and by not really knowing, ad men like Don Draper could continue to sell their performance, and sell the creative that may not have necessarily converted the consumer, but that may have instead inspired them to dream.

The absence of hard and fast conversion data made linking sales objectives to marketing ones nebulous. There was no CTR to review, no optimization of creative, and certainly no tracking pixels. And free from performance driven KPIs, ad agencies were free to do true brand-building work; the kind of work that helped build the most iconic brands of our time, from Coca-Cola and Nike, to McDonald’s and Volkswagen.

Today, we are faced with a deluge of due diligence when it comes to ideas. At every opportunity, ideas are shut down. Risky creative, previously the name of the game, is now seen as unmeasured. For the would-be game changers and trailblazers, creativity itself starts to feel like a very lonely, tough and uphill battle. When making decisions from a place of fear, rather than a place of boldness, data becomes a really easy shield to hold up. A defensive weapon in the face of risk. The “what ifs” by the devil’s advocates weigh too heavy, collapsing the idea away.

But it’s not the 50s or 60s anymore, and half a century later, as a woman with thoughts and ideas in my own right, I’m grateful for that. When I consider Peggy Olson, and watch her pitch creative work that draws on intelligent insights and ultimately points to undeniable human truths, I’m reminded that there is a happy medium. A balance between knowing your consumer and category, and trusting your gut and intuition. And taking a risk.



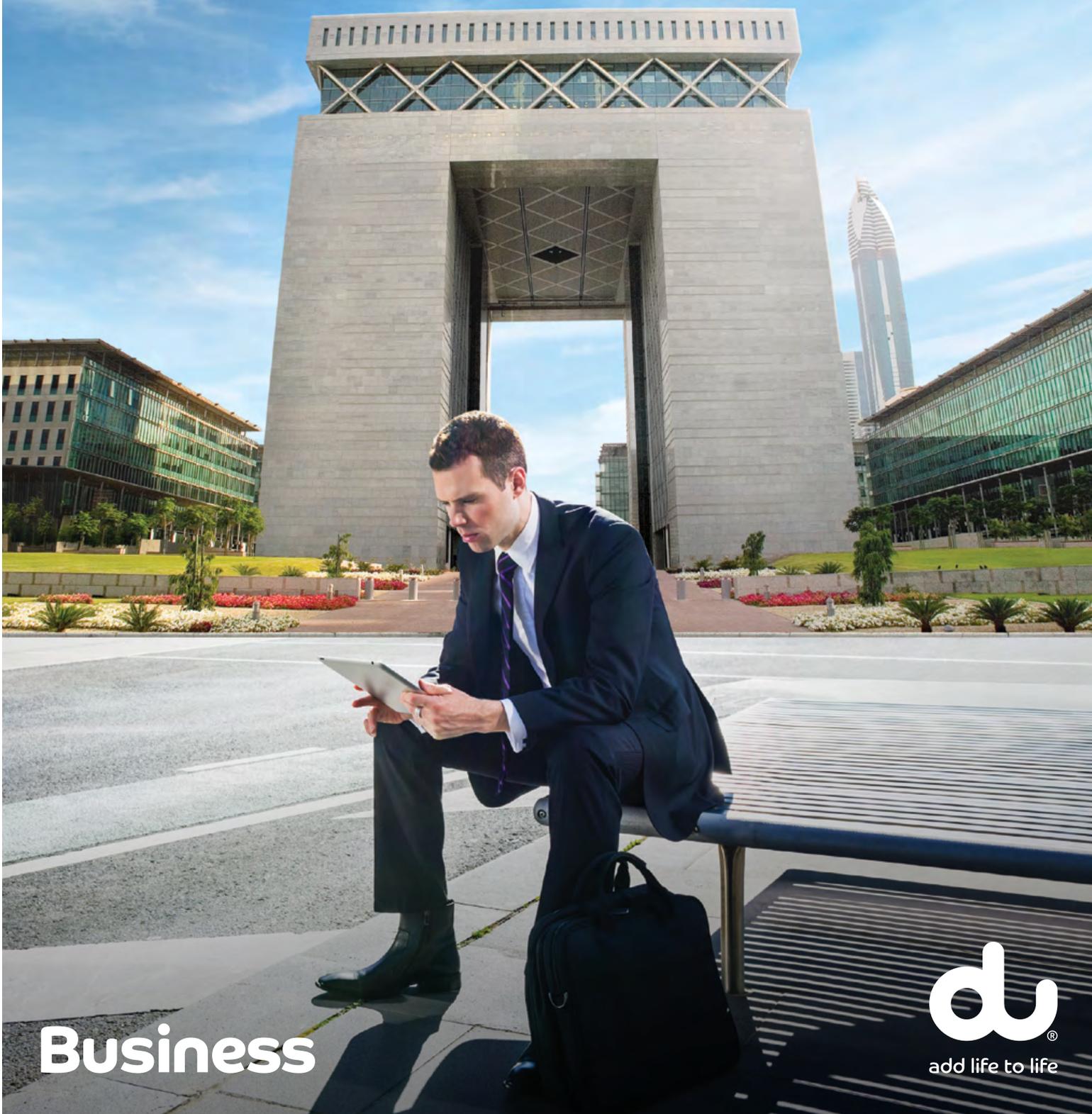
With a background in PR, digital and social media and content marketing, Serene Touma has a passion for finding new and creative ways to build brands, and is always in relentless pursuit of insight- and outcome-led strategy and execution. She is an objective-driven thinker who is always in search of the most effective big idea. Today, she is part of a growing team of strategic planning managers at FP7/Momentum where she helps big brands tell meaningful stories.

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