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Dr. Thumbay Moideen
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founder, Jo Loves,
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EDITOR’S NOTE

Hard hat
Joining a startup (and staying the course) requires imagination and flexibility

When I compare my life before and after working at a startup, I find that one of the things I miss most about the former is, curiously enough, something that often irritated me during my time in that setting. I’m talking about the structure that working at a corporation imposes on you as an employee. Corporate life means that you’re almost always operating within the paradigms set by the management of the enterprise.

While I remember feeling quite constricted by that kind of an organizational structure, nowadays I find myself often longing for this kind of definition in my day-to-day life in the entrepreneurial realm. That being said, I believe it’s pretty much impossible to work in a startup with that kind of rigidity governing you. In my opinion, being open to change (and reacting quickly to it) is part and parcel of the equation when working in a startup environment.

I bring this up because I’ve been coming across people with corporate backgrounds who join startups, and then look to be lost and underperforming in their roles there. As I see it, this usually happens because they are wholly unprepared for work in their new settings. Mostly because it requires them to, more often than not, don a variety of hats alongside the role they had taken on in the first place, and do a lot more than what a job description lays out.

In a corporate, employees are often obliged (and even encouraged) to “stay in their lanes.” Doing the same in a startup would see you getting called out for not showing initiative! I do feel sorry for the seasoned executives who find themselves in the latter scenario at startups, but, at the same time, if they thought this was going to be all about, say, flexible hours and fun lifestyles, well, they have no one else to blame but themselves for drinking the startup Kool-Aid.

Working at a startup is hardly, if ever, as glamorous as it may seem on Instagram- rest assured that startup life is more about “#WorkHard” than “#PartyHard.” You’ll almost certainly be doing more at a startup than what you used to at your former place of work, and you’ll also be putting a lot more of yourself in this endeavor than probably any other thing you’ve done in your life thus far. This means that the whole experience will be incredibly fulfilling, and there will be a real sense of pride you can bask in at the end of it all. But simultaneously know that this won’t happen overnight, and that you’ll need to be in it for the long haul. And if you can’t handle that heat, then get out of the kitchen.

Aby Sam Thomas
Editor in Chief
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aby@bnepublishing.net
The Paradox
Have we been celebrating Earth Day by hurting mother earth?
Dubai Startup Hub launches Co-Founder Dubai program by MEHRA MERANI

Dubai takes an innovative approach to supporting startups as it is designed around their unique needs and aspirations, adding that the holistic program complements other initiatives offered to entrepreneurs in the UAE under the Dubai Startup Hub platform.

“Co-Founder Dubai will provide both new startup businesses and aspiring co-founders with far-reaching benefits, including comprehensive training, matchmaking days, a dedicated curriculum and high-caliber talent, ultimately enabling startups businesses to grow in the region,” Sycheva noted.

Dubai Chamber launched Dubai Startup Hub in 2016 as an online platform to connect startups, entrepreneurs, developers, venture capitalists and students, enabling them to learn about new opportunities and create new partnerships that stimulate economic growth.

Applications for Co-Founder Dubai can be submitted through Dubai Startup Hub’s website, dubaichamber.com/dubaistartuphub/cofounderdubai.
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When I asked Dr. Thumbay Moideen to reveal what he considers having been a pivotal moment in his career so far, I thought the Founder President of Thumbay Group would have a hard time deciding between the many successes he has seen along his business’ trajectory as his answer for my query. However, Dr. Moideen didn’t have to think too long before he responded, and he surprised me by choosing to not talk about one of the many wins he has seen along his entrepreneurial journey, and instead pointing me to an instant in his life in the UAE that essentially led him to all of his accomplishments later down the road. »»
This was in 1998, after Dr. Moideen had been invited to look into the feasibility of establishing a medical college in the Emirate of Ajman by H.H. Sheikh Humaid bin Rashid Al Nuaimi, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Ajman. At the time, there was no other institution in the UAE like the one Dr. Moideen was trying to set up in Ajman, and as such, he had roped in consultants to do a study on whether this was a business that could actually, well, work. This process was what led Dr. Moideen to realize that he had what was pretty much an unsurmountable roadblock to his business plans coming to fruition: the UAE’s Ministry of Higher Education did not, at the time, allow for expats to own licenses for running institutions catering to higher education, and as such, Dr. Moideen wouldn’t have been able to go ahead with setting up the medical school he proposed. Dr. Moideen duly informed the Ruler of Ajman about his predicament, and that’s when something amazing happened: H.H. Sheikh Humaid awarded the Indian entrepreneur with a royal decree that’d allow him to establish the educational institution he proposed in Ajman. This laid the foundation for the creation of Gulf Medical College, the UAE’s first privately owned medical college (which evolved into what is today Gulf Medical University), and by extension, of Thumbay Group as well, which has become an international business conglomerate with Dr. Moideen at its helm. It’s easy to see now why Dr. Moideen remembers this moment so fondly, and as he speaks of it today, there’s still an element of surprise that can be detected in his voice, as if he has yet to come to terms with how this particular episode unfolded in his life. “No expat had done this before,” Dr. Moideen remembers, smiling. “We came into existence with a decree… I can never forget that.”

Dr. Moideen tells me this story a few weeks before the launch of his enterprise’s latest development, the AED1 billion Thumbay Medicity in Ajman. Spread over a total area of 1 million square feet, Thumbay Medicity is all set to be a regional hub for medical education, healthcare, and research, with the ability to serve more than 20,000 people on a daily basis with its advanced facilities in a variety of fields. Besides housing Gulf Medical University, a statement from Thumbay Medicity noted that it will also be home to medical institutions like Thumbay University Hospital, Thumbay Dental Hospital, and Thumbay Physical Therapy.
and Rehabilitation Hospital, as well as outlets of Thumbay Pharmacy and Thumbay Labs, in addition to leisure and hospitality amenities like Body & Soul Health Club and Spa, Thumbay Food Court, The Terrace Restaurant, Blends & Brews Coffee Shoppe, and more. In addition, there is also the Thumbay Housing Project at the site, which is set to accommodate 2,500 staff and students at Thumbay Medicity. The sheer scale of the project is enough to make one sit up and take notice of it, but Dr. Moideen points out that the offering that Thumbay Medicity brings to the UAE market also makes it very unique: “It is a combination of education, healthcare, and research, which is very rare in the country,” he notes. “There is no one else.”

Thumbay Medicity is also a testament to the enterprising spirit of Dr. Moideen—remember that all of this started with him daring to dream big 21 years ago. Sure, he did have experience working in his family’s timber and real estate business in India before he came to the UAE, but Dr. Moideen readily admits that he had no experience in the healthcare sector when venturing into this arena in 1998. But what Dr. Moideen did have was courage and conviction, and lots of it too—and it’s safe to say that these qualities have driven him to where he stands today. Regardless of the hurdles he found along the way, Dr. Moideen kept finding ways around them, and moved on ahead with his career and business. “I stuck around,” he says, quite simply. “I love to do what I do. I love my job; that’s it... I enjoy what I am doing, and I look forward to each day.” And that explains why Dr. Moideen continues to spearhead the business as Thumbay Group gets going on its next stage of growth. In terms of future plans, Dr. Moideen says that the company is quite keen on building up its global presence—he’s particularly hoping to launch more universities outside of the UAE; in fact, Dr. Moideen reveals that his enterprise is already looking into setting up campuses in Serbia, Egypt, and Ghana.

On the healthcare side of things, there are two routes Dr. Moideen wants to make use of to grow Thumbay Group’s interests in that field. “One is building our own hospitals and running them as well,” he says. “The other is by creating our own healthcare management company—so, we are managing hospitals in India, Africa, etc., and that business is growing rapidly.” The company has already taken up hospital management contracts in India, Kenya and Tanzania; another in Oman is also on the cards. “In addition to our new and upcoming healthcare projects in different parts of the world, we are also keen to acquire existing hospitals, either on long-term leases, or on a management basis,” he adds. In the UAE, given the sectors Thumbay Group currently operates in, Dr. Moideen is quite confident that the business is only going to prosper in the years to come.
Our business, whatever we do, is related to community and the population,” he explains. “Education, healthcare, laboratory, retail, etc.– everything is related to the population. The good news [with the UAE] is that the population is growing. The government says that two more million people will come [here] in the next two years– which is good news for us. They’re our customers, we have to cater to them.”

Besides all of this, Dr. Moideen also reveals that he is intending to take Thumbay Group public by 2023– which will be a major landmark for the enterprise.

As Dr. Moideen talks about his future plans for Thumbay Group, it becomes quite clear that this award-winning entrepreneur has no intention of resting on his laurels; his dreams remain as big and grand as ever, and he’s focused on seeing his business scale greater heights. It is this kind of attitude that has led Dr. Moideen to achieve all that he has accomplished so far– persistence and perseverance are the qualities that matter, according to him. “To be very frank, the very fact that I held on, and continued pursuing what I wanted to do is maybe one of the reasons for my success so far,” Dr. Moideen says. “But there are other reasons too. One, I definitely feel God has been kind to us– we were blessed. Two, I got good support from the government– our business had many ministries involved in it, and the local sheikhs, they supported us wholeheartedly. Lastly is our team– we have a very committed team, who are as charged up [for the business] as me.” Of course, these are the characteristics that will stand the business in good stead as it moves ahead with its next set of goals, and it definitely helps that Dr. Moideen is leading Thumbay Group from the front on this particular path. “I believe that if we stagnate, we die,” he declares. “So, we have to keep growing– we have to progress.”

Dr. Thumbay Moideen, Founder
President, Thumbay Group

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Dr. Thumbay Moideen, Founder
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CRAFTING CREATIVITY

JO MALONE, FOUNDER, JO LOVES

The “English scent maverick” on her second entrepreneurial innings, and why she believes success is a journey

by TAMARA PUPIC

The story of Jo Malone serves as a testament that entrepreneurial spirit never fades. In 1983, the then 21-year-old Malone started up her fragrance and scented candle business Jo Malone London from her kitchen, opened her first store in London in 1994, and five years later, sold the company to Estée Lauder Companies for an undisclosed amount, remaining its Creative Director until leaving the enterprise in 2006. Then, owing to a non-compete agreement signed with Estée Lauder, Malone was prevented from launching a new fragrance or skincare brand for five years. For others, being internationally praised as a self-made entrepreneur might have been enough, but what happened after those five years was one more detail that set Malone apart from her peers. “When it came towards the end of that period, I realized that the desire to create fragrance was just too powerful for me,” Malone remembers. “And so, I decided to try one more time, and see if I could build it again.” And that’s how the Jo Loves brand came to be, Malone’s new scent, bath, body and candle collection, which she launched in 2011.

I spoke with Malone at The Retail Summit held in February in Dubai, and when we meet at the lobby of The Atlantis Dubai, I can see that she is relaxed around journalists, and generous with warmth and empathy, while also answering all my questions with complete honesty, which, for her, I notice, hardly needs to be a conscious effort. And thus, she opens up that starting a business for the second time round was probably one of the hardest things she had ever done. “For the first two years, I regretted that decision every single day of my life,” she says. “It was hard, because no one knew that I had left [Jo Malone London], and I had the responsibility to the Lauder family, and to the consumer, and also to myself. Sometimes, regardless of what you most want in life, you have to be respectful of the people around you. Relationships are a golden ticket in life. On the other side, if I hadn’t done it, I would have denied myself as a person. I would have denied that one thing that had motivated me, and had made me happy. So, I really had to think differently.”

“MY VOICE IS IMPORTANT, NOT JUST FOR MYSELF AND MY BUSINESS, BUT BECAUSE PEOPLE TRUST ME WHEN I SAY SOMETHING, AND I NEVER TAKE THAT FOR GRANTED. I FEEL THAT IS A RESPONSIBILITY THAT IS BECOMING MORE AND MORE APPARENT IN MY LIFE.”

“WHEN WE WERE RECRUITING, I WENT TO THE THEATRE INDUSTRY, AND I FOUND PEOPLE WHO USED TO BE ON STAGE. THEY CAN PERFORM, DANCE, SING, AND TELL GREAT STORIES. SO, PEOPLE WORKING IN MY SHOPS HAVE NOT COME FROM THE RETAIL INDUSTRY AT ALL.”
In 2011, when launching Jo Loves, Malone was stepping into a changed business environment; however, she also knew that certain preconditions for a successful brand wouldn’t have changed. “The market was different, especially in the way how we communicated, but the consumer still wants to be inspired by brands with which they can identify,” she notes. “That is a constant which will continue a hundred years from now. The consumer is not just buying your product, they are buying into a story that you have created, and they want to connect with you. It is really a privileged position to own a business, because the consumer is choosing to come into your four walls, regardless of whether it is online or bricks-and-mortar. That has not changed.”

Jo Loves’ product line-up currently includes 13 fragrances, priced GBP70 for 50ml fragrances and GBP115 for 100ml. The brand also features candles in eight different fragrances, with costs ranging from GBP55 to GBP350 for luxury candles, and it offers bespoke fragrances as part of its signature Candle Shot experience. The company is 100% owned by Malone and her husband Gary Willcox, who takes care of the company’s operations and business development, thereby allowing Malone to focus on creativity and product development. However, Malone points out that the process of building a team capable of following her vision has not been without setbacks. “In fact, I’ve made a lot of mistakes in building the team, and the second time, I have made more mistakes than the first,” she says. “I now employ more women than men, and I’m happy with my core team, but to take the business globally, you need [more than that]. A general manager who is in place at the moment is actually following my dream and my vision, instead of her own. She is a great leader. But I’ve had a few who wanted to take the business, and run it in the direction that they thought was right, and that was not what I wanted. So, I’ve learnt from both sides.”

In her frank style, Malone continues to talk energetically about her quite innovative approach to conveying the brand message to the consumer, for which she had to build a team capable of executing it. “Creativity is the only currency that never devalues,” she declares. “I think and create all the time; for me, that is the most natural thing in the world, and for me, it’s very easy, but the difficult part is passing it down onto the team. We are a brand about stories. With each fragrance and each candle, I’m telling you stories about my life, about how I see a glass of rosé wine, or about how I hear jazz music. The difficulty is how you can take those authentic stories, without them just being written down, but instead, you bring them alive. So, when we were recruiting, I went to the theatre industry, and I found people who used to be on stage. They can perform, dance, sing, and tell great stories. So, people working in my shops have not come from the retail industry at all.” One example is Adam Ellis, the Head of Education and Customer Experience at Jo Loves, whose background in theatre productions has been instrumental in the success of Jo Loves Fragrance Brasserie Bar, a bespoke experience that allows Jo Loves customers to select their desired fragrances and create
INNOVATOR

“SUCCESS DOESN’T MAKE YOU RICHER, SMARTER, PRETTIER, OR HAPPIER, IT JUST GIVES YOU A CHOICE. THAT’S ALL THAT IT DOES. SOMETIMES PEOPLE STRIVE FOR SUCCESS, AND THEY MISS THE JOURNEY.”

The Jo Loves bespoke store in London

a personal plate of scented tapas. “That one little tapas bar creates the most amazing storytelling and emotional connection to the brand. We call it ‘the first kiss,’ meaning when you kiss the consumer for the first time with a brand, it opens up our world for them. It converts 98% of the time into sales. We don’t charge for it, it’s just something we engage with as a very different way of approaching retail.”

In 2008, Malone was awarded an MBE in the Queen’s birthday honors list for promoting British creativity and industry on the international stage. A decade later, she was awarded Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE) by the Prince of Wales for her contributions to the fragrance industry. Speaking of receiving a CBE from the Queen, Malone says, “I remember walking through the gates, thinking, ‘How did I get here?’ I think that it keeps your feet on the ground, it keeps you humble. I don’t ever want to presume that this is my right. I’ve worked hard in my life, and I always try to make my world much better and happier for those around me. But there are moments when I realize that I’m sitting there, not only because I’ve worked hard, but also because my voice is important. My voice is important, not just for myself and my business, but because people trust me when I say something, and I never take that for granted. I feel that is a responsibility that is becoming more and more apparent in my life, which is to speak for those who don’t have a voice.”

And Malone knows very well about the struggle of making one’s voice heard and acknowledged. Dyslexia hampered her success in school which she left at the age of 15, and started working as a florist, interestingly at the very same place where situated today is Jo Loves’ bespoke store in London’s Belgravia neighborhood. A year later, her mother suffered a stroke, and the then 16-year-old Malone had to quit her job to look after her. It led to her working as a facialist and making her own bath-oils to send to her clients as gifts, out of which her first fragrances were born. When asked about the biggest hurdles she encountered in both life and business, she replies, “My lack of education has actually motivated me. I’m not saying that it is a way forward, certainly not something I’d want for my son, but don’t be frightened. Not all entrepreneurs are academics. They think with a different head, and if you are entrepreneurial, sometimes your lack of education pushes you into a different mindset. Similarly, my dyslexia is not a disability, but an ability to think differently, and if this world needs anything at this moment, it is people who think differently. Dyslexics find solutions quicker than most people, and they would go a different route.”

The period after the sale of Jo Malone London to Estée Lauder Companies was characterized by the birth of her son, but also by her fight against breast cancer about which she says, “Fighting cancer at 38 was definitely a challenge, but I reacted to cancer in the same way I run my business. I found the best person who I believed could save my life. I trusted him. Similarly, I find the best people that I can, and I say to them, ‘I can’t do what you can do, but I’m going to support you.’ So, I allowed the chemotherapy to do its work, and there were many dark days within that year, but I came through it as a much stronger person. Now, I think, telling my story and allowing people to see the things that didn’t go right and the times that were tough makes us all stronger, although we sometimes think it makes us weaker. It makes us stronger, because
if you come through that, you have arms full of hope in your hands, which you can pass onto somebody for them to think, ‘If she’s gone through that, she did that, I can as well.’ For me, that’s an important thing.”

This statement corresponds to what was happening during our meeting at The Atlantis Dubai—our interview was often interrupted by people approaching Malone to express how touched and inspired they were with her story, a man sitting quietly in a corner behind us was nodding intently as she was answering my questions, and all of this was because they found spending time with Malone quite uplifting—just as I did. “Success doesn’t make you richer, smarter, prettier, or happier, it just gives you a choice,” she says. “That’s all that it does. Sometimes people strive for success, and they miss the journey. Success is about today, right now, every moment; so, at the end of each day, I think to myself about what did I do that took me one step ahead. On some days, I’ll run a thousand steps ahead, and on some days, it’ll be just one step, or I’ll stand still— but I never want to go back in life. For me, success is one step, and even if it’s only one step towards my goal and my dream that I’ve made, it’s been a successful day. It’s a good mindset, because it makes me productive, and it doesn’t make me bitter. Sometimes, if you can’t grasp hold of success, you can get frustrated, instead of creative. That’s the flip side of me, and I have to watch myself on that.”

Malone applies this sort of awareness to her business as well. “As fragrance houses, we are looking at predicting what the future will bring, but there is a lot responsibility with this, because sustainability is coming into that, meaning that if we take raw ingredients from certain parts of the world, how can we give back to those communities and support them?” she says. “It is not just about buying something, but about what you give back, and what is a longer-term goal. It is important to me what the fragrance houses that I work with give back to the next generation.” And Malone’s next goal has the potential to lift her on to a path that will garner her new respect, which she undoubtedly deserves. “One of the biggest things that I think about at the moment is the responsibility for the next generation, and I want to see entrepreneurialism taught to any child across our country, and then hopefully across the world,” Malone says. “I want that generation to believe that there is an army of entrepreneurs here to help them, that they are not on their own.”

NOT ALL ENTREPRENEURS ARE ACADEMICS. THEY THINK WITH A DIFFERENT HEAD, AND IF YOU ARE ENTREPRENEURIAL, SOMETIMES YOUR LACK OF EDUCATION PUSHES YOU INTO A DIFFERENT MINDSET.
n order to illustrate the impact of Lebanon’s notoriously slow internet speeds have had on its progress as a nation, Imad Kreidieh, Chairman of Ogero, the state-run operator of the country’s fixed telecom network, recalls how a leading multinational enterprise was once considering opening an office in the capital city of Beirut. The establishment of this office would have resulted in the creation of 5,000 jobs, and thus, undoubtedly boost the local economy; however, this plan didn’t come to fruition. Kreidieh remembers how the multinational ended up deciding to set up shop in another country in the MENA region, because Lebanon did not, at that point in time, have the requisite internet infrastructure for that company to operate effectively.

It’s impossible to miss the wistful note in Kreidieh’s voice as he relays this anecdote today; the regret he feels about Lebanon and its people missing out on an opportunity for growth and progress is easily apparent. But tales like these highlight the importance of the work that he and his team at Ogero are currently doing to revamp the country’s underlying telecom infrastructure.

Ogero – referred to as the “engine” for the country’s Ministry of Telecommunications – has been tasked with upgrading the nation’s existing (and outdated) copper wire infrastructure with fiber optic cables, which is expected to have a massive (and long-awaited) positive impact on internet connectivity and speeds.
Kreidieh, who was appointed to his current role by Lebanon Prime Minister Saad Hariri in 2017, admits that leading this facelift of the infrastructure has hardly been an easy task. However, he also says that he has taken on the challenges head-on, in order to achieve the goals that have been set for Ogero, and by extension, Lebanon itself. “I took over Ogero two years ago, with a very clear mandate to upgrade the infrastructure, which will put Lebanon back on the digital map of the Middle East,” Kreidieh says. “So, one of my KPIs is to be in the top five in the region, providing connectivity, state-of-the-art technology, and quality of service, which the Lebanese people have been lacking for the past 15 years.”

And the results of Ogero’s efforts are already starting to show. In 2017, Kreidieh had declared that by the end of 2018, 85% of internet users in Lebanon would enjoy connectivity speeds of up to 50 Mbps. Now, this goal wasn’t achieved owing to delays in the implementation of the infrastructure upgrade, but one cannot deny that there’s been signs of progress as well. As an example, Kreidieh points out that areas in the country that were having only 4-5 Mbps of internet speeds, but now, thanks to the work being done by him and his team, people in those same localities are enjoying speeds of 25-27 Mbps when accessing the web.

Kreidieh promises that several more (and better) improvements like these are in the offing, but he admits that there have been challenges, mostly of a technical nature, that have been slowing down the roll-out of Ogero’s FTTX (fiber to the x) network. “The main challenge that we face for the FTTX is that we do not have accurate base maps in order to design the network,” Kreidieh explains. “We have 300 exchanges to be completely swapped to fiber. And so, for each and every exchange, we needed to go and do a physical survey, because the base maps did not reflect the reality. So, every time, we needed to go to do the survey, to position the buildings or the houses that were not existing on the base maps. So, this is the most challenging process, because designing a network takes time.”

It’s pertinent to note here that Kreidieh has chosen a technical issue as his main hurdle in what he’s set out to accomplish, and not the much-maligned inefficiency of Lebanon’s bureaucracy. While Kreidieh does admit that he’s had to tackle with his fair share of those kind of problems, he also says that it’s never been too much for him to handle. “I did not face any unsurmountable challenges internally,” he notes. “Because what we’re doing has been acknowledged by the political establishment, it has been accepted by the private sector, and welcomed by the youth generation.”
As such, Kreidieh says that while there may be situations where, for instance, certain municipalities with small populations may question the benefits of Ogero’s work for their communities, these are few and far between, and, at the same time, fairly easy to get past as well.

Of course, Kreidieh is aided in what he does, thanks to his experience of working in the private sector for more than 25 years. Having been in top roles at leading banking and telecom establishments around the Middle East, Ogero is Kreidieh’s first experience working in Lebanon’s public sector, and while he has chosen to (and been allowed to) run it like a private enterprise, he has had to face blowback on that as well—sometimes, people there are simply not ready to operate like in the private sector, he notes. “I have to be honest with you— I thought it would be much easier,” he laughs, as he talks about moving from working in the private sector, to being a part of the public sector. “It’s quite an interesting shift, but it was not easy at all. You know, some days, when I come back home, I’d say to myself, what the hell am I doing here. But the day after, you wake up with the energy to keep going, because you believe that you have a serious responsibility that will cater for the needs of the people. I’m not working for the politicians, or for a political party, but I have a firm commitment towards my kids and probably my grandchildren— I’m doing something for them, not for anybody else. So, you know, when you wake up with such a mindset, things become easier.”

Kreidieh’s answer makes it obvious that he’s being fueled to do what he does by a deep-set desire to give back to his native Lebanon—he had to once leave his country to pursue growth and opportunities, but now, Kreidieh wants to help in building and securing the future of the nation. “Listen, I left Lebanon back in 1974, when Lebanon was on the brink of a civil war. And I came back to Lebanon in 2015. I felt somewhere that I owe my country and my countrymen and women, to share some of the experience that I got. And the call, from the Prime Minister, to do something was the most beautiful gift I have ever gotten, and what motivated me was, again, doing something for my people. This is what is really motivating me, because, financially, it’s not even close to the private sector,” he laughs. “Let me be clear on that; this is my main motivation.”

And Kreidieh is incredibly optimistic about what the future holds for Lebanon—he has only words of praise for the youth in the country, and he believes they are the ones who hold the key to the nation’s growth. “To be honest with you, you know it for a fact that we are exporting the most valuable asset any country can have— its brains,” he says. “I feel that Lebanon is a very dynamic country, and if you have never visited Lebanon, I advise you to do so—you will be flabbergasted with the energy that is there. It is so concentrated; it needs only to blossom in the right way. And the youth [we have] are moving to the Google’s and Facebook’s and LinkedIn’s—we have talent spread everywhere. The future of such a generation cannot be but a positive one.”
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The new Canon EOS RP is a small, lightweight, full frame, mirrorless camera for advanced amateurs-casual shutterbugs looking to up their game. The EOS R System features the world’s fastest autofocus, and Canon’s smallest, lightest full frame digital interchangeable lens to date. The EOS RP’s 26.2-megapixel, full frame, dual pixel CMOS sensor with autofocus, coupled with Canon’s latest DIGIC 8 processor, renders optimal balance of detail, control over depth of field, and incredible low light shooting performance. EOS RP isn’t just for still photos though— it also records movies in up to 4K resolution at 25 fps, and full HD at 60 fps. With features including 4K time-lapse, interval timer, Movie Servo AF, and HDR movies, you can capture both fast action and slow-motion sequences. Dual Pixel CMOS AF enables accurate focusing and face detection, while Movie Digital IS provides five-axis movie stabilization to counteract shakes when footage is captured handheld. The microphone and headphone jacks help to capture and monitor audio in real time, while the Video Snapshot function is a simple way to create a video summary by combining four, six, or eight-second clips. And you don’t have to wait to share your snaps— thanks to smart Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connectivity, the EOS RP can connect to smart devices, which allows the transfer of photos and videos. You can also control the camera from a smart device using the Canon Connect App, giving full control over camera settings, a live view, and even the option to wake up the camera remotely over Bluetooth. Canon Connect is available for both iOS and Android devices.
LET’S PLAY
LG ULTRAGEAR GAMING MONITOR

The LG UltraGear Gaming Monitor combines superior picture quality and speed to give you the best possible gaming experience. With support for NVIDIA G-SYNC, 2ms response time, and a refresh rate of 144Hz, your game can be faster and more fluid than ever before. The UltraGear’s 3840 x 1600 monitor comes with 98% coverage of the DCI-P3 color gamut for stunning visuals. It boasts a nearly borderless design with a curved screen and a 21:9 aspect ratio. Providing a greater sense of immersion and improved ambience, the UltraGear also has a special lighting system. LG’s Sphere Lighting technology offers up to six different color settings that you can customize for every experience, and LG asserts that the design isn’t purely aesthetic— it helps to reduce eye strain as well.

GAME ON
LOGITECH G935 HEADSET

Logitech isn’t playing around with its new range of headsets for gaming. The G935 7.1 LIGHTSYNC Wireless Gaming Headset delivers superior audio and striking RGB lighting. It’s the first in a family of headsets to feature Logitech G’s exclusive Pro-G 50mm Audio driver, which is crafted from hybrid mesh material that delivers deep bass and a round sound profile for highly cinematic audio. In addition, this new headset features Logitech G’s LIGHTSYNC technology, which allows you to customize illumination by syncing to any content, including games, videos, and music. This technology allows you to customize every color to match your setup across keyboards, mice and headsets. The new headset also features DTS Headphone: X 2.0 surround sound, which simulates the 3D environment of the audio’s original mixing stage. Logitech rounds things out with 12 hours of battery life, enhanced 6mm microphone technology, and increased wireless performance. With premium leatherette earpads, an upgraded microphone and on-ear volume controls, G935 is the ideal choice to complete your battle station.

#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 theglobalgazette.com and talk to her on Twitter @TamaraClarke.
‘TREP TRIMMINGS
THE EXECUTIVE SELECTION

From better goods to better wardrobe bests, every issue we choose a few items that make the approved executive selection list. In this issue, we present our picks from Givenchy's FW19 line, a timepiece to add to your luxury collection, and more.

SUITSON MARK

Givenchy’s latest Fall/Winter 2019 collection is out, and it’s undeniably one that deserves a place in your wardrobe. British designer Clare Waight Keller’s first standalone collection for the French label brings in couture and Parisian influences in the ready-to-wear line. Taking in long and sharp silhouettes with a definite touch of refinement, it’s exemplified in the single and double-breasted suits, as well as embellished pieces in embroidered leather in bold hues of violet, fuchsia, and blue, along with prime shades of black, navy, and beige, plus textures including crinkled leather, bonded fabric, and subtle hand-beading.

givenchy.com
A quick glance at my (and your) agenda over the past few weeks shows us that this year’s event season is already in full swing—although in Dubai there is hardly ever a period with no occasion worth noting. Since the demanding work hours, in addition to the harmful city dust, will soon take their toll on my skin, I headed to Willow Stream Spa at Fairmont The Palm in Dubai for a Déesse Pro LED mask facial treatment.

It is an hour-long facial developed by Dr. Rita Rakus, a London-based doctor who lists celebrities like Madonna, Chrissy Teigen, and Kate Hudson, among her clients. I soon discover that the treatment is not just about the face, but about taking the whole of me to the state of balance. After being welcomed by the spa’s friendly staff, I’m taken to a clean, dimly lit and extremely relaxing treatment room, where a beautician starts by removing makeup and dust from my face, telling me more about the patented HydraFacial technology—dubbed a confidence booster—whose spiral design helps cleanse, exfoliate, and extract impurities and dead skin cells, while infusing vital nutrients such as antioxidants, peptides, and hyaluronic acid into the skin. This phase lasts for half an hour, and over the next 20 minutes, she puts a Deesse Pro LED mask on my face, a device that uses low light therapy by way of medical-grade light emitting diodes to expose the skin to clinically proven wavelengths of light, delivered in safe, therapeutic doses—all of this is to say that this is, essentially, a pain-free way to achieve naturally vibrant and clearer skin. fairmont.com/palm-dubai/willow-stream/rita-rakus

STEPPING UP
BERLUTI

If you’re looking for versatile pairs of shoes for any occasion, look no further than Berluti’s leather loafers from the brand’s Spring/Summer 2019 capsule collection. Wear it with a relaxed linen suit for your back-to-back meetings, or with jeans and a button-down for a casual night out. Form and function, check! berluti.com

POWER THROUGH
BAUME & MERCIER

Founded in 1830, Baume & Mercier has a track record for crafting timepieces that exude craftsmanship and luxury. And with the Swiss watchmaker’s Clifton Baumatic, there’s a lot to look forward to in this nifty piece. Powered by the in-house movement with a high-performance of a 120-hour power reserve (that’s five days with a full wind), it features a sapphire crystal on its front and back, a large clear date at three o’clock, and water resistance of up to 50 meters. Available in a black alligator strap and pin buckle, this timepiece takes into account both your style and your comfort. baume-et-mercier.com
AT overthrow TO DETAIL

ROBERTO COIN

The founder of the Roberto Coin line of jewelry explains how to build a winning luxury brand

by TAMARA PUPIC

Roberto Coin’s boutique in the Fashion Avenue extension of the Dubai Mall, which was opened in February in partnership with Damas Jewellery, comes across as a visual reference of two elements that are fundamental to the brand: nature and ethics. A vertical garden that covers part of the wall is the live backdrop that Roberto Coin chose to display Animalier, one of his most beloved collections, while the shelves are lined with his 18 karat gold jewelry pieces, all carrying a Roberto Coin signature ruby on the inside of each piece. Roberto Coin uses only synthetic rubies to guarantee no stone comes from a region in turmoil, which brings us to the founder’s innate and unwavering commitment to ethics in his business. “People who know me understand that we have always been an extremely ethical company—not just now, when it is fashionable to be ethical,” Roberto Coin says at the launch of his new boutique, noting that he has been one of the founding board members of the World Diamond Council since its inception. “We’ve worked with many international organizations to make the diamond industry respectable. I am a big fighter against synthetic diamonds, if they cannot be identified by the consumer, as well as by a lot of retailers. I am not against the selling of them; they can sell them as long as you, as a consumer, and the person who sells them, can identify them. If he or she cannot identify them, and does not declare that they actually are synthetic diamonds, I don’t like it. I believe in that kind of world.” In Coin’s case, all polished diamonds used in his collections are purchased from legitimate sources and from conflict-free areas, for which the brand subscribes to the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) and the System of Warranties. Coin has also been distinctively active within the philanthropic community, with his brand repeatedly winning accolades for its corporate social responsibility initiatives, about which he says, “I believe in charity, which taught me to steal money from the rich, and give it to the poor. And in this case as well, you need to be ethical. People give you money, because they believe that it will be used for what it was given. That is the world that I represent.” The Roberto Coin brand was born in 1996, and today lists notable personalities like Isabelle Adjani, Christy Turlington Burns, Hilary Clinton, Sofia Vergara, and Oprah Winfrey among its loyal clients. But to really understand how Coin got to where he is today, we have to go back to his first entrepre-


neurial success in Guernsey in the UK’s Channel Islands. Having lost his parents at a young age, Coin finished boarding school in Switzerland, and, when he was 18, he moved to the UK to learn English. Only a year later, however, the entrepreneurial Coin bought a café, then a restaurant at 22, and lastly, two years after, took out a bank loan to buy a hotel that was frequently visited by the likes of the Duke of Richmond, HRH Prince Charles, Tony Bennett, and many others. “Becoming a successful hotelier is in our understanding of how to look after our clients, and how to service them well,” he says. “We know if you are with your husband, we understand if you are with your lover, we probably understand if the two of you are just friends. So, we understand the service, meaning what kind of things you like. If you call us to come to your table, we know what is missing even before reaching the table, because we know how to observe people and things. Our observance is based on the desire to serve you better. Being a hotelier was a great school for starting any other business later on.”

This attention to detail proved to be a great asset when Coin decided to enter the jewelry sector. At 32, he returned to Italy, and used the proceeds from the sale of his hotel to make a career shift, becoming a newcomer among more than 5,000 jewelry manufacturers in Italy at the time. “I did not know that I could create jewelry,” he recalls. “But I loved it, and when you have that kind of an attentive mind, and when you are Italian, by which I mean that every Italian loves fashion, we are born with it, it is part of our world, you want to try. And I wanted to try, but I did not know whether I could do it.”

However, building the Robert Coin brand to what it is today took years of toil, starting from when he ventured into this sector in 1978. “I had to learn how the jewelry industry worked by visiting factories, meeting people, and learning, and that phase lasted for six years, much longer than anticipated,” he says. “A lot of people start up a business by employing people to do for them what they want to achieve. However, I wanted to gain knowledge, because only with it could I then present my work to the consumer, and to the public. If I had had zero knowledge, then I would have become a speculator, just a financier, and I do not represent money. Money has never been the most important thing in my life. So, I wanted to establish credibility for what I was doing. But it is important to say that I entered this sector as a businessman who fell in love with creativity, and not as a creator trying to become a businessman. That is a huge difference. In that way, you become more credible faster, because you are a businessman who is selling jewelry.”

Over the years, Coin perfected his craft by manufacturing jewelry for other local and international brands. “They were fascinated with my design and quality, because when you are not from the industry, and then...”
“GOOD TASTE DOES NOT BELONG ONLY TO THE RICH, AND IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT IF SOMETHING IS EXPENSIVE, IT IS ALSO BEAUTIFUL. INEXPENSIVE JEWELRY CAN BE MORE ELEGANT THAN THE EXPENSIVE ONE.”

Roberto Coin

you start working in it, you appear as a breath of fresh air, something new in the market,” he says. “Also, I liked making difficult things, although you can’t make much money out of them. You make money on easy things, but at that time, I did not mind difficulty. So, I became another very important voice in the industry.” However, almost two decades later, Coin says, he reached the point of deciding whether to sell the business, and focus on some new business opportunity, or to launch a new jewelry brand under his name. “I spoke to my clients who said that I was one of the very few who could become a brand,” he says. “They gave me the courage that I could do it. They knew me well enough.” Since 1996, the Roberto Coin brand has released five new collections annually, which translates into approximately 600 new models every year. Coin explains that the number of pieces per collection varies, and depends on the type of jewelry— a Prêt-à-Porter collection usually contains 30 pieces but, if it is a limited-edition collection, one or two chosen models are produced in only 10 units worldwide. “I also make inexpensive jewelry, because I need that kind of clientele as well,” Coin adds. “Good taste does not belong only to the rich, and it does not mean that if something is expensive, it is also beautiful. Inexpensive jewelry can be more elegant than the expensive one. So, I don’t make jewelry only for kings and queens. I make jewelry for everyone.”

As for the reason behind manufacturing 600 new models every year, it’s in the brand’s main promise: to dress every woman differently. “Brands tend to make everyone the same and equal, but for me, that was boring,” Coin declares. “I have always said that women are not like that anyway. They are very different. And they are intelligent, because the first thing they ask when they go shopping is, ‘What is new?’” Coin’s creations are available in 60 countries and at 1,000 points of sale which are based on different business models, ranging from franchises, like in Baku, Kuala Lumpur, Panama, Marbella, or Kuwait, or partnerships like the one with Damas Jewellery in Dubai, as well as direct mono-brand boutiques, such as those in Rome, Venice, Prague, and Miami, and so on. “We sell online in Europe and the US, but I would not define it as a successful business, because buying jewelry online is still something difficult,” Coin adds. “Anyway, it is important to say that e-commerce improves the product knowledge for the customer, implying an increase the physical sales in the retailer distribution.”

In recent years, the jewelry sector has faced a shift in customer preferences. Millennials value experience very highly, and do not base their happiness on possessions or career status, according to an Eventbrite’s nationwide research conducted by the Harris Group in 2017. Coin confirms that the jewelry sector sentiments indeed have changed. “Younger generations are not that interested in jewelry, or they want to buy it more often and for a cheaper price,” he says. “Younger generations don’t even think about having a piece of jewelry forever as we used to. Probably, they will, later on, but not for now. There is overproduction of everything, not only jewelry, there is too much choice in everything. So, we are going through a continuous evolution. But, for as long as we are concerned, we have only one problem— we want to be better than our competitors.” This dedication to quality definitely seems to be serving the brand well- and, as such, Coin’s entrepreneurial peers can well follow his lead.

“WE SELL ONLINE IN EUROPE AND THE US, BUT I WOULD NOT DEFINE IT AS A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS, BECAUSE BUYING JEWELRY ONLINE IS STILL SOMETHING DIFFICULT.”
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Keeping it real
How to be authentic (and own your own space)
by MARK SEPHTON

Life is full of competition, but that doesn’t mean we’re innately comfortable with it as human beings. As a mentor to entrepreneurs, I’ve noticed there are now more coaches and mentors than ever before.

In some parts of the world (like America), there seems to be a coach for absolutely anything and everything. But despite the volume of coaches and mentors in the world, I must confess I rarely look at what they’re doing. Perhaps, this is one of the keys to being authentic, and taking a different approach to my work. When you are expressing to the world your own challenges and perspective, it helps if you create material which resonates with your audience.

I love to create content, and often do so in written form (like this article), or through my television show, One More Round, or my YouTube channel. I’m always thinking with the consumer in mind. In other words, I am audience-obsessed. It’s really important we give people what they want within the business world, and then educate them about what they need. Giving people what they want invokes likability and trust. Once you have those things, your ability to educate your audience in what they need becomes easier and, ultimately, results in more sales.

When we constantly compare ourselves with others and follow the herd, we become not only predictable, but utterly nondescript.

The majority of the content I create is based on my personal and professional experience—thoughts and revelations I’ve witnessed in the world of entrepreneurship. While still based on my experience as a coach and mentor, this article attacks a slightly different issue for entrepreneurs. This article is dedicated to those who are fed up with the same old sales techniques, marketing ploys, speaking styles, and social media speak that has become the new normal in the coaching world.

Raimonda Jan is the founder and CEO of CrowdVelocity, and the founder of Women in Business. Raimonda suggested that I take on the topic of authenticity to help liberate other business owners and entrepreneurs from the status quo, and inspire them to take a different approach. It’s always best to be who we really are, rather than following the herd. To that end, here are my top tips for living an authentic life:
1. STOP LOOKING AT EVERYONE ELSE, AND LOOK IN THE MIRROR
As I previously mentioned, I pay little attention to other coaches and mentors. Of course, I can see why people pay attention to the competition. However, when you know who you are, and what you bring to the table, you become so focused on delivering results, that you don’t have time or energy to focus on what someone else is doing. Looking at other people constantly is exhausting, and it usually invites two related problems. First, you’ll look at someone else and be frustrated you’re not at their level. Second, you’ll look at them and think you’re way better and become complacent. In either case, comparing ourselves with others stifles growth, and doesn’t help us put our best foot forward.

Additionally, when we constantly compare ourselves with others and follow the herd, we become not only predictable, but utterly non-descript. A desire to retain my individuality is one of the reasons I’ve never worked with a public speaking trainer, although I know some very good ones who are worth their weight in gold. I also recognize there are times when we should invest in building confidence or improving delivery, but we have to choose those priorities in our lives. I have been speaking for about five years on numerous stages, from entrepreneurial summits to hosting innovation of small business conferences, and improving my delivery has not been a priority for me. Could my ability to deliver a talk be better? Yes, it could. Then why wouldn’t I invest in a trainer? Because I would rather be me—imperfect and unpolished, but real, relatable, and authentic. The reason the world may feel flat and look so cookie-cutter is because people are comfortable with being merely an echo, and not a voice. We repeat what everyone else is saying, because we have no convictions of our own, or are afraid to be judged for them. We would rather ride the wave of someone else’s experience than risk sharing personal revelations and insights of our own. If we really want to be authentic, we must stop copying how others sell themselves and find our own voice. Nowhere is this most easily found than in our existing behaviors, values, and opinions.

If you spend all your time studying the competition, I recommend you take a month off to look inside yourself, and start really thinking about your own brand. When you begin to think in this way, you’ll be able to focus on what you’ve achieved in life and business, and then clearly convey that message to your customers. The best way to do this is through personal reflection, and owning who we are. The best time to start is now.

2. BACK YOUR STRENGTHS, AND STAY IN YOUR OWN LANE
I’ve never been a fan of the notion “fake it till you make it,” but I know lots of people are. If that works for you, great. We don’t have to agree, and having the courage to publicly say operating from that place is not a good life choice for me means I’m embracing my true self. I know who I am, and I know who I’m not. Most importantly, I’m perfectly okay with the outcome of reluctance to that sentiment.

The most wonderful thing on earth is to know who you are, and realize what you were put here to do. If you don’t know the answer to that question, I encourage you to keep experimenting and trying new things until you find yourself cruising along in your lane (I recommend buying Tim Rathe’s book, Strength Finders, to help you on your path). Your ability to stay in your lane will determine the strength of the authority you build in your niche. Know and find out what you are good at, what is natural to you, what people naturally come to you about, and then own that space.

When you embrace who you are, and have the consistency to prove to those around you that you know what you’re on about, you build trust.

It does me no good to tell people I know how to fly to the moon out of enthusiasm for the trip, when the honest truth is that I wouldn’t even know how to get to the space shuttle launch site. When we don’t come from a place of wisdom, truth, or honesty, we not only put undue stress on ourselves, but we also allow someone else to put their faith in us, while knowing we have no understanding of how to deliver.

Instead of making empty promises, take the approach of embracing only what you’re good at, and committing to the “sweet spot” of activities in which you excel. In this way, people can begin to trust you, and you can focus on the things you love, instead of saying “yes” simply because you’re afraid of losing a piece of business or an opportunity. Remember, it’s bad form to say you can do something when you never have. Sure, it may work out on occasion, but it’s a surefire path to eventual disaster, and it undermines your authenticity and ability to embrace the gifts you’ve been given.

3. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF
None of us need to play God in every area of our lives. My dear grandmother often wished I was good with a hammer and nail, or had the ability to lay bricks. I never had that do-it-yourself (DIY) desire, and so, never developed the talent or ability to do those things. >>
IF YOU WANT TO BE AUTHENTIC AND SEPARATE YOURSELF FROM THOSE AROUND YOU, YOU’VE GOT TO STOP DRESSING, SOUNDOING, AND ACTING JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. WHEN YOU HAVE A CLEAR AND HONEST VIEW OF YOURSELF, YOU’LL BEGIN TO SEE THE NEEDS AND DESIRES OF OTHERS MORE EFFECTIVELY.

However, I can speak on stage to thousands of people, and interview thousands of entrepreneurs on radio and television. I am comfortable with the fact that I suck at DIY. Get familiar with yourself, and then get comfortable accepting the things you’re not good at, as well as those things at which you rock.

One of the things I created after three years of working with entrepreneurs and reflecting on the pain points and opportunities we often discussed is a GPS system, which I explain as an internal MRI. The system is based on 10 fundamentals, which ranges from the lifestyle you live, to your ability to be self-aware of who you are and what is around you, and examines your behaviors, beliefs, and actions toward yourself, others, and your business. The GPS system reveals personal and professional blind spots, efficiencies, and deficiencies we then use to develop a mentoring strategy. I get so excited about helping people find who they are and exploring the right environments in which they should be working and living. It’s the most rewarding part of being a mentor. Having the ability, encouragement, and opportunity to take a hard look at yourself can be uncomfortable, but it also is very liberating, as we’re all works in progress on journeys of self-improvement.

If you want to be authentic and separate yourself from those around you, you’ve got to stop dressing, sounding, and acting just like everyone else. When you have a clear and honest view of yourself, you’ll begin to see the needs and desires of others more effectively. The fact that people like Raimonda are fed up with everyone doing the same thing, sounding the same, and looking the same is a great opportunity for the “You Movement” to take shape. The “You Movement” is where you fully embrace the skills you’ve been given, and your ability to express them in your very own style without the need to copy, conform, or pretend. If you want to connect with the world, you must first connect with yourself, own your space, and love who you are—even the parts you would love to change.

Also, learn to admit your mistakes. Isn’t it always refreshing when someone puts up their hands and admits to getting it wrong? Very few people in power are willing to admit their mistakes. When was the last time you heard US President Donald Trump apologize for what comes out of his mouth? Being authentic and blazing your own trail is about being human, being real, being humble, and being honest. Own who you are. Own your actions. Own your thoughts. I can’t blame anyone else for the choices I make, and neither can you. I know sometimes we do put the blame elsewhere, but it leaves us powerless to the situation, and we miss the chance to grow. It can affect people’s trust of others, and also saturates our influence. I don’t know about you, but the people I want to follow in life are those who have fouled up, admitted it, took the learnings, and kept right on going. Not one of us hasn’t fallen short at some point or another. This is why I happily share my mistakes and times I’ve gotten it wrong with my clients. When we are honest with others, they become honest with us. We don’t need to try and buy respect or influence, because, in the long run, it doesn’t work anyway. Increasing your influence and ability to guide others in a positive direction comes by being human, being real, and being authentic. Find your own voice, and stop being an echo.

In summary, the world needs you to find out who you are, and what you were put on earth to do in order to have the greatest impact on those whom inhabit it. There is a need for you and me to not follow the masses, not to dress the same, and sound the same. We can’t all follow the same formula; we must create and express our own unique flair, because people are tired of the predictable and familiar expectation associated with your field and niche.

After you’ve read this article, reflect on who you are, in your gifts, your personality, what you have to offer, and be faithful in what you’ve been given to contribute to the lives of others around you. In doing so, people will start to see the real you. In my case, the reality is, there are thousands of mentors and coaches in my field, but people will choose to work with me, because of who I am, my experience, my failings, and my ability to own my own experiences and teach people about them in a charismatic and empathetic way. It’s the same for you too.

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Rethink your relationship with your phone

Here’s how you can win the battle against over-connectedness

by ROB MCGOVERN

Look around you for a moment: chances are, if you are in a public setting at least, that most people near you will be staring into a smartphone screen. Heads bowed. Protecting their device for dear life. Hypnotized by whatever happens to be on the screen at the time. It’s a defining characteristic of modern life— a visitor from the past would be forgiven for thinking that the earth had become inhabited by a population of zombies controlled by a 6x3-inch slab of glass.

Most of us will admit to being guilty of spending too much time with our heads buried in our smartphones. With access to a seemingly infinite amount of content, and social validation on tap, our smartphones are a constant pull, calling out to us, demanding our attention. The never-ending notifications keep us coming back for more, and social feeds that are constantly being updated give us a fear of missing out on something important. Sometimes, it can all get a bit overwhelming.

Our phones are not just a time-suck, but can affect us in ways that might not necessarily be clear to us at the time. Our reliance on our devices, and the feeling of round-the-clock connectedness, can impair our ability to concentrate, think creatively, interact in a social setting, and can even take a toll on our mental health. But how can we limit this gravitational pull on our attention and pursue a more minimalist relationship with our devices? We can start by looking at the different ways that constant connectedness can impact us.

GETTING HOOKED

Our smartphones have a hold over us, even when we are not directly giving them our attention. A recent study by a team at the University of Chicago found that merely having your smartphone on the table in front of you can lead to a small but statistically significant impairment of cognitive capacity, similar to the effects of lacking sleep. The closer the device is, the more noticeable the decrease in brain power. The more heavily the user relies on their phone in their everyday lives, the greater the impact on cognitive capacity they suffer with it nearby.

Even when our device is out of sight, knowing that a potential call or notification could arrive at any time can cause our minds to wander, and can negatively impact our performance on tasks that require sustained attention. When a device does beep or buzz during a challenging task, it causes our focus to waver, and our work gets sloppier. If we are not in a position to respond to the device immediately, our blood pressure spikes, our pulse quickens, and our problem-solving skills decline.

Even just suppressing the desire to check our phone can hinder our thinking, and we do this routinely and subconsciously throughout the day. Our brains are constantly subconsciously listening out for a notification, and sometimes they even fabricate them. If you’ve ever felt a “phantom buzz,” you have experienced this first hand.

Whether we’re by ourselves and just plain bored, in the middle of a challenging task at work, or with our friends or family, our smartphones have a hold on us that is increasingly unhealthy. All this is not just by chance, but a product of tech companies’ careful efforts to maximize the amount of time users spend on their platforms.

In today’s attention economy, most digital platforms prosper based on how much time we spend using them, which means that they are strongly incentivized to keep us hooked. They do this by taking advantage of our natural impulses and psychological dependencies to feel connected and make sense of our environment.
Many digital platforms use the same methods as the gambling industry to foster this dependence, and ingrain their products in our everyday lives. Some of these techniques can even cause similar reactions in the brain as cocaine, drawing users into repeated cycles of uncertainty, anticipation, and rewards. With features like Instagram’s bottomless feed, Snapchat streaks, and YouTube auto-playing the next video, users face an uphill battle to limit the amount of time they spend on these platforms.

DIGITAL WELLNESS
I spoke with Nir Eyal, author of Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products, who breaks down how tech companies foster a self-perpetuating cycle of engagement. Firstly, an external trigger, such as a notification, draws the user into an interaction with the platform, such as commenting on a post or uploading a photo. The chance of a variable reward (“Will anybody reply to my comment or like my photo?”) motivates the user to stay active and engaged. The more the user participates in this process, the more invested they are in that particular platform. This process is repeated until the user no longer requires an external trigger such as a notification to draw them back to the platform, but begins revisiting due to an internal compulsion.

The variable reward is the key to creating this cycle. It’s the uncertainty of whether we have received a new message, or whether there is any new content on a social channel that keeps us coming back for more. It plays on our constant need to feel connected and in control. “Our brains evolved through the millennia into incredible prediction machines, designed to help us make sense of our environment,” Eyal explains. “And nothing holds our attention better than the unknown. The things that captivate, engross, and entertain us, all have an element of surprise. Our brains can’t get enough of trying to predict what’s next.”

The infinite scrolling and pull-to-refresh mechanism on our news feeds are eerily similar to a slot machine. You never know what you’re going to get when you pull that lever, if anything at all. But that’s precisely what keeps us enthralled. More often than not we don’t find anything interesting or gratifying, but we can’t help ourselves. “It’s like opening a can of digital Pringles,” says Eyal. But users are beginning to push back, in search of a healthier relationship with digital media.

Somewhat surprisingly, the big tech companies are starting to react to this trend of digital wellness, introducing a host of features to help users monitor and limit the amount of time they spend on their platforms and devices. Facebook has recently launched a tool that will track the time you spend each day on the platform, along with your average for the week. It lets users set their own time limits and reminds you when you are reaching or surpassing your threshold. You can even snooze Facebook or Instagram notifications for up to eight hours if you need to focus. Similarly, both Apple and Google have introduced features in the latest mobile OS updates that let you see how much time you’ve spent on each app, broken down by app category, as well as how many notifications you’ve received and how many times you’ve unlocked your phone. Even YouTube has introduced “Take a Break” reminders, as well as a dashboard that provides summaries of your behavior while on the platform.

“Whenever a product causes people harm, what they will typically do is either use the product less, or they will modify it in some way,” notes Eyal, referring to the explosion of free apps and browser extensions that have come onto the market of late to help us moderate our tech use. At some point, users will have had enough. “So, now, we see tech companies like Apple and Google incorporate these features to help people moderate their use, because it makes the product better. It’s no more than a market imperative.” These are welcome updates for sure. But like all self-imposed restrictions, they will be simple to ignore, and their effectiveness will depend on whether users have enough self-control to stick to their limits.
These apps also introduce a deliberate behavioral change, and might even inspire you into becoming more mindful of your technology use. Seeing this broken-down minute-by-minute for the day. Raising awareness of your smartphone usage is the first step towards decreasing the impact technology has on our devices and sucked down a rabbit hole - the most effective of external triggers.

**1. Monitor your usage**

Raising awareness of your own smartphone usage is the first step towards decreasing it. In addition to the big tech firms introducing their own usage-tracking options, there are a bunch of independent apps such as Moment, Space, and Mute that you can use to track the amount of time you spend on your device each day. Seeing this broken-down minute-by-minute for the first time can come as quite a shock, and might even inspire you into becoming more deliberate in your behavior. These apps also introduce a gamification element, challenging you to minimize your usage so you can beat the previous day’s time. It’s surprisingly effective.

**2. Reduce the amount of notifications you receive**

App notifications are the most common way that we get dragged back into our devices and sucked down a rabbit hole - the most effective of external triggers. “About two thirds of people change their notification settings,” notes Eyal. “And guess what - there’s nothing Mark Zuckerberg can do to turn those notifications back on.” You can manage your notifications in your phone settings, and limit these to only the most important ones, for example, just messages from real people, and not from random apps. Turning off social media notifications can be hugely effective in particular. You’ll see these notifications the next time you open the app again anyway. On messaging apps, try muting the notifications from groups, and just set it so that you’re notified when an individual messages you.

**3. Delete or hide distracting apps**

Are there certain apps in particular that you find sucking up too much of your time? Just delete them. You can still log into Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. on your mobile’s browser, but this added friction will mean that you’re less likely to do so. If you don’t want to delete these apps completely, then place them in a folder instead. Out of sight, out of mind. By simply removing these apps from your home screen, you’re less likely to dive in when you’re aimlessly swiping through your apps looking for something to do.

**4. Reduce usage just before and after sleep**

Using your smartphone just before bed can inhibit your ability to get to sleep, and generally impair the quality of sleep you get when you do nod off. One of the most impactful measures you can take is to not sleep with it next to your bed. Buy a simple bedside clock for setting alarms and checking the time, so you can charge your device overnight in another room. This will neutralize that impulse to have one last rotation through your most-used apps before going to sleep, and will mean that you can wake up without getting dragged back in before even getting out of bed. Charging your phone in another room throughout the day is generally a good habit to develop too.

**5. Use the grayscale setting**

It might sound surprising, but simply removing your screen’s color by activating the grayscale setting can reduce your impulse to use it. Colorful icons and graphics stimulate our brains and keep us engaged. That’s why notifications appear in red, because red is a trigger color that draws our attention. A grayscale screen looks less appealing and we aren’t as likely to mindlessly swipe through our device when this setting is activated.

Over-connectedness is not a new problem, explains Eyal. “Humans have been struggling with distraction forever,” he says. “Socrates and Plato talked about it 2,500 years ago. What has changed is that these technologies are constantly evolving and new habits have developed too.” But all is not lost. We are still masters of our own domain. “There is so much more that you can do as an individual than these tech companies can do to supposedly hook you”. Ultimately, it’s on each of us individually to wrestle back control, and limit the hold tech has over us. If we really want to, that is.

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The Contradiction

Will there be global cooling without global conservation?
With great power comes great responsibility

The need to humanize technology (in its true sense)

by AMOL R. KADAM

Just browse any industry magazine, and count how many times you come across these words: blockchain, augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, social media, internet of things, etc. That should make it clear that technology and humans are becoming entangled like never before, and our reliance on it seems to be only on the rise. We use it to work, stay in touch, get the news, shop for groceries, travel, automate, impress our bosses, manage our finances... the list goes on. And on.

A friend recently asked me to advise him on his career growth. “What is the technology that I should learn to be relevant in the next few years?” he asked. My answer to him was: if you want to be relevant, forget about technology, and learn about humans. Learn about human needs, emotions, and behavior. Technology is just a means to enable the needs of human beings. Technologies will come and go; the topic of human needs will be constant.

The ironic part is that technology changes faster than the human needs it is supposed to serve. Interestingly, it is not that we want less from it. On the contrary, the human appetite for better, faster, cheaper technology—software and hardware—is voracious, and insatiable. More is more.

But these mechanical, automatic, arithmetical, and increasingly invasive technologies are leaving us feeling cold, controlled, confused, and, ironically, what was supposed to keep us connected is making us more disconnected. For decades, we have been building technology to make humans more effective, eliminating the need for our involvement in tasks ranging from remembering birthdays, to washing the dishes, to assembling cars. Sadly, we have reached a point where efficiency and automation are no longer enough. It has all become dehumanized.

By “inventing” technology, we have come to think of ourselves as these superhe-
heroes who can make anything automatic and technically advanced by using AI, chatbots, machine learning, blockchain, cloud, and everything else that come with it. We have been immersed so deep in technology that we don’t even realize how much it is affecting our daily lives, and how much it is changing our brains for worse by overtaking many of its functions. Just try forgetting your mobile phone somewhere for few hours, and you will understand what I am saying.

The availability of all this technology makes us more impatient, and crave convenience beyond our conventional needs. Whenever we interact on digital channels, consume information online, browse for products online to purchase or try new technology, we demand it to be more natural, or faster, else we move on. As a result, our attention span has gone lower than a goldfish—our brains are adapting and changing in the presence of technology.

**TECHNOLOGY IS GROWING FASTER THAN HUMAN NEEDS AND COGNITION**

With this great power of technology that we have, we also need to understand the responsibility it puts on us.

There is a clear need for making technology and digital interactions more human to help us do things faster and smarter. Our recent inventions have always been too fast for human needs, in terms of both their cognitive ability, and their ability to adapt.

As human beings, we have adapted to technology we created to help us. For instance, we have learned how to type—the keyboard and mouse are the most visible ways of how human beings interact with technology. At the same time, the interaction between humans and machine has reached a certain maturity, where humans now have to learn to communicate prompted by nature. Natural user interfaces are an example of how technology supports the human way of interaction nowadays. Technology has evolved enormously, but it seems to have lost the human aspect.

A few months back, I came across this news article where a Taiwanese dancer and choreographer, Huang Yi, was shown dancing a duet with a robot. As I watched that video, featuring the machine’s subtle, flowing movements, and the emotional connection Yi was trying to portray, I wondered if this was a depiction of an intimate love story, or just some freaky techno-art. Why are we striving so hard to enhance this symbiotic relationship between humans and technology?

There are many examples of how badly we want technology to behave like humans, to comprehend like humans, to make decisions like humans, to sound like humans, and if you look around the robotics industry, we want robots to even look like humans. Why do you think we still strive to have more and more technological innovations, but at the same time, we strive for it to be more human?

The answer is simple. We, as human beings, still strive for human experiences, connections, and that empathetic emotional touch. We always will. And that has made many in the industry to increasingly use the term “humanize” to describe this change from designing more personable chatbots, to ensuring AI tech doesn’t enslave the human race, and to even using sustainable means for electricity that powers these machines.

With all the power that we as evangelists of technology have, it is our responsibility that we do not outcast the human in this race to make everything technically advanced. Our topmost responsibility should be only about designing technology to be better for humans, and better at interacting with humans. It should be technology that works for humans— it shouldn’t be humans to work on themselves to use it.

Here are three primary reasons why today’s technology needs to become more human:

**To live up to the promise of being “convenient”**

We have forgotten the real meaning of this word. Businesses often put the comfort of a few as the driver for using technology. Most of the times, it is for the convenience of the operations, systems, integration, and a handful of the consumers labeled as “the average user.” They tend to overlook the broader base of consumers that are affected by information and cognitive overload.

**OUR RECENT INVENTIONS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOO FAST FOR HUMAN NEEDS, IN TERMS OF BOTH THEIR COGNITIVE ABILITY, AND THEIR ABILITY TO ADAPT.**

These mechanical, automatic, arithmetical, and increasingly invasive technologies are leaving us feeling cold, controlled, confused, and, ironically, what was supposed to keep us connected is making us more disconnected.
They all want personalized, quick, and easy results that are relevant to them.

**To be truly “simple”**
Technology was always meant to be (and should be) focusing on reducing the complexity of our daily lives. But instead what we see is technology causing more complications in our lives. Advancing technology needs to become more human-oriented to help us to simplify, assess, and filter.

**To advocate real “inclusion”**
The speed at which technology is changing bears the risk of excluding less tech-savvy human beings from its usage. For example, people who don’t know how to operate search engines effectively, people with an inability to use so-called virtual assistants, people who don’t consider their phones as smarter than them, people with difficulty using complicated apps, etc. will always feel excluded. These new ways of operating are becoming more and more exclusive.

Companies like Google, Facebook, Apple are supposed to be known for their focus on useful and human-friendly technologies. The focus should be making it more inclusive, rather than making technology that is useful only for a handful of us. The concept of ethical design, ethical business practices, and ethical businesses are becoming more and more relevant today. Technology superheroes amongst us must do a better job of anticipating challenges before making decisions, by asking critical human-centered questions before introducing any product or service to humans. For instance, these can be:

- Will this technology result in overall good for all humans, and not just a handful of them?
- What could be some unintended consequences of this technology, positive and negative?
- What are the social, cultural, environmental, and ethical impacts of the technology?
- Will this technology augment human intellect, support it, disrupt it, or substitute for it?
- Can this technology be used negatively against users?

**THE NEED FOR A CHIEF HUMAN OFFICER**
In the early 2000s, once organizations understood that technology had a more significant role to play, and that information/data is critical to success, they started expanding the profile of the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) by adding the Chief Innovation Officer (CIO) title. In fact, the CDO became one of the most sought-after positions in the market.

But as we see how technology is now becoming overwhelming and overpowering for humans, and as we try to make it more and more human, technologists alone won’t be able to answer all these questions by themselves.

So, what leadership structures do we need to have in place to guide the future evolution of the technology, while controlling it for unintended impact on the human? Is there a need for a new superhero in the team? Will we see a new savior, a new superhero profile in a company?

Maybe it will be a Chief Human Officer: a superhero, whose sole role will be to keep a check on how the organization is advancing in adopting technology—and if it is human enough.

In recent years, as both technology and information emerged as digital drivers, and transformations became the need of the hour, we started seeing the rise of the Chief Digital Officer (CDO) role. In fact, the CDO became one of the most sought-after positions in the market.

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REPUTATION RECOVERY

Why businesses should have a strategy in place when a crisis hits

by BROOKE BOYSCHAU & SOPHIE SIMPSON

While all businesses wish for smooth sailing, waves of trouble are likely to roll through at some point along the journey. Once upon a time, in an “offline” era, sticky issues could be tightly managed and quietly dealt with. Yet in the digital age, people—and businesses—don’t often screw up in silence. In fact, once the pot boils over, we are no longer just worrying about cleaning up the mess within the immediate area— we are looking to cyber-space with panicked visions of how to tackle a communications crisis of exponential proportions.

Day after day, we read internet headlines of executives losing their jobs due to workplace misconduct, or product and services failures. Be it Hollywood, Wall Street, or Walmart, no industry is safe from the power of the digisphere. When word travels, it trails the speed of light. What’s more, social media magnifies the mishaps or misdeeds of companies or individuals, creating a digital footprint that can alert the masses to incidents that may have happened even years in the past.

Companies (and people) can spend a lifetime building their reputations and, while we think they’re made of brick and mortar, reputations are more like a house of cards—vulnerable to a puff of wind (or the click of a button). We’ve all heard the expression that you’re only as good as your last mistake, and when it hits, what companies can be left trying to preserve, or rebuild, is their brand equity—the intangibles such as customer loyalty, prestige, and positive brand recognition. Mistakes aside, businesses globally can be defamed, or misframed easily, finding themselves on the defensive in often the most improbable moments.

The fall-out from one innocently misguided or ill-thought out decision—even a mere tweet—can leave an organization at the mercy of the figurative, or literal jury for the remainder of its lifespan. On a more serious level, companies can (rightly) be called out for unethical or questionable conduct that dodged greater public knowledge in the past. And sometimes, we can actually do everything right— but one unfounded accusation, or false truth, can go on to define us thanks to the power of the internet. For large corporations, their brand equity is the company’s most valuable asset, and clawing back a damaged corporate reputation can be a long, painful and expensive business.

Preventing a crippling blow to your reputation means you need a tactical crisis plan, which caters to the specific situation. However, all crisis plans have some factors in common: they must be swift. They must be aggressive. And if you are indeed in the wrong, you must first and foremost acknowledge the situation with clients, followers, and, in some cases, the general public, and with that, demonstrate intention and commitment to set things right. Companies should not sit in a state of denial. Those who have tried to sweep it under the carpet have typically paid a much higher price in terms of loss of consumer trust.

This means that you should be calling your PR team, before your lawyers. From a PR perspective, it is very important for companies to have a recognizable spokesperson—a reassuring CEO, or Managing Director, who is leading the public communication and steering the ship through the murmurs, or mayhem.

Take the great fraud of Fyre Festival as a poignant example. When the disastrous “real life” site images began to leak on social media, it presented the now convicted fraudster Billy McFarland with the chance to address the public honestly about the festival’s strained progress, and manage expectations for customers and investors. Rather, he chose to ignore the digital firestorm, reportedly dismissed the better judgement of his consultants, and led over 10,000 unassuming international guests into the figurative fire.

PREVENTING A CRIPPLING BLOW TO YOUR REPUTATION MEANS YOU NEED A TACTICAL CRISIS PLAN, WHICH CATERS TO THE SPECIFIC SITUATION. HOWEVER, ALL CRISIS PLANS HAVE SOME FACTORS IN COMMON: THEY MUST BE SWIFT.

Would a swift and honest management of those initial social media photos have prevented the PR fall-out that was to follow? Probably not. Though it may have preserved some skerrick of McFarland’s integrity in the public eye. While the eye-watering mismanagement of Fyre Festival and fraudulent conduct reached an unfathomable scale beyond the organization’s social media narrative,
THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Integrating technology and data into your customer service model
by SARAH JONES

It’s no surprise that consumer shopping habits are continually changing and evolving, especially in the e-commerce world. People are always on the move and want access to quick, affordable and easy shopping, which fits into their daily lives. More than 80% of shoppers are accessing my e-commerce enterprise, Sprii, via their mobile or tablet, which is why we have invested significantly in our app; a smarter, more accessible way of shopping, which fits into their fundamental change in direction you or your company has undergone is a necessary step in encouraging people to offer forgiveness, and do business with you again. You have to be truly sorry, and have you to say so in your words and subsequent deeds. If you go wrong again, you may never get another chance.

While much of reputation protection and defense seems reactive, it really isn’t. True, you might not be able to anticipate a specific crisis when it comes, but that doesn’t mean you can’t plan for one. At the bare minimum, you should have an internal team in place whose responsibility is to coordinate a strategy for when a reputational crisis hits, in addition to working with your outside communications team to devise an action plan. That plan must take into account everyone who might be affected by the crisis: employees, customers, partners, friends, and family. The plan must also account for every communications platform available to you, with specific plans for Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and your website. You also should also consider how to leverage video channels such as YouTube, as well as traditional media outlets like broadcast television, newspapers, and online news outlets. Not every reputational crisis can be handled as easily. Yet, any work that takes back control of your own message is worth the time and effort.

Social media did indeed play a pivotal role in stoking the flames of Pyre’s public deception, and when presented the opportunity to speak directly, control the message, and partially soften the inevitable blow that was to come, McFarland buried his head in the sand. That brings us to the issue of “remorse.” Being authentically sorry and going on to display conduct that is a witness to the fundamental change in direction you or your company has undergone is a necessary step in encouraging people to offer forgiveness, and do business with you again. You have to be truly sorry, and you have to say so in your words and subsequent deeds. If you go wrong again, you may never get another chance.

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Now, this of course goes hand-in-hand with having a customer service team on the ground who will go the extra mile without even being asked, who are genuinely committed to helping your customers have the best experience possible. It’s an approach that makes all of the difference when a customer is, for example, desperately trying to track down the perfect gift for their child’s birthday, and have it delivered the same day. They may start on the app, but then need that real human interaction, and that’s where our customer service team will move mountains to make sure our consumers are satisfied.

So, how do you integrate technology and data into your customer service model? Put simply, data allows you to be more personal- it allows you to understand your customers shopping habits, it allows you to know what time they shop, and how they shop, and what products they browse. It helps to personalize your service and offering, and make real business decisions- changes to the app, or investment in a new way to reach out to customers; however, this has to be combined with real customer feedback too.

We think of Sprii as a business “driven by us, and powered by mums”- it is their site as much as it is ours, and with this in mind, feedback in whatever capacity is essential to helping us create their ideal online world. Bricks and mortar aside, we don’t discount the value of meeting our customers face-to-face and getting feedback firsthand.

Even if your company is 100% online, you still need to have an omnichannel approach with your customer service function to lend credibility to what you are offering. That’s why we’ve partnered with British Mums Dubai for the last 12 months to run, for instance, mummy mornings and consumer events, which gives us direct access to the ultimate decision makers- so, husbands beware! One of the insights to come out over a coffee morning with mums was a point on price that data alone couldn’t have revealed. While we have always been competitive in our offers, we expanded this by recently introducing a price-match guarantee on all our products. It’s a pretty strong differentiator, giving our consumer the assurance to find everything they want, for the best price possible and checkout all in one place. Throw into the mix our free shipping and easy returns policy, and it makes for an unbeatable offering, or so we have been told! These kinds of strategic partnerships will only become more important in the face of increased competition, with authenticity now leading the charge for most mums’ checklists.

My advice is to cover all corners, invest in a strong multi-channel approach, which is combined with an excellent customer service team, who will be the direct landline to the most important person in your business- your customer.

Sarah Jones founded Sprii at the start of 2014. Previously, she had a successful career in finance, spending four years at Deloitte in Mergers & Acquisitions advisory, first in London, and then in Dubai. After two years in the Gulf, Jones left the finance world, recognizing the potential of the early-stage e-commerce market and the Sprii business model. Mini Exchange is today the online destination for everything mums and kids in the Middle East, with over 800 brands and 40,000 products, all available at the click of a button. sprii.com

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A n organization is only as good as its people, and therefore, effective human resource management is vital for the success of a business. This is the reason why millions upon millions of dollars are poured into HR efforts each and every year. Everyone wants the best piece of the talent cake.

However, nothing comes without a struggle, and with the changing job market, alongside a widening skills gap, employers are starting to call for better and more effective ways to attract, acquire, and retain top talent. Artificial intelligence (commonly dubbed as AI) is here to answer that calling.

Technology is developing at rapid rates, and AI, data science, and the like are constantly making strides in the corporate world. Unless you’re really good at ignoring the news, it’s hard to avoid the headlines of how AI is penetrating all industries, and revolutionizing economies.

Change is the only constant, and as the world continues to change in the wake of digital disruption, human resource management is beginning to follow track and keep pace, especially in the past few years. Employers and recruiters are beginning to leave the traditional ways of talent management, and starting to utilize the power of AI in their HR functions, such as using digitalized screening methods.

It is no secret that online is the main outlet for all talent management processed. The majority of respondents to the Bayt.com Middle East and North Africa Hiring Practices Survey affirm that and they believe that online recruitment has facilitated hiring process greatly.

In fact, the reality confirms the research. Bayt.com, one of the Middle East’s largest job site and CV database, reported that CV searches undertaken by employers in the MENA region approached the three million mark in 2018 alone. This high job activity goes hand-in-hand with the number of CVs that were contacted: 1.5 million job seeker contacts revealed on the site in 2018, which is a significant increase when compared to previous years. At the same time, Bayt.com witnessed a 104% growth in job announcements.

The concept of AI and how it may impact jobs can certainly be a debatable issue, where many argue that AI might cost them their jobs. While others state that it will be tasks that would get automated, not jobs. Now, regardless of what side one may be on, there is one thing that is for sure and that everyone agrees to, which is: AI is making many possibilities a reality, especially in the HR sphere.

How exactly will AI impact the world of human resource management? Here are some AI-powered developments that will change how employers and recruiters operate.

1. THE PULL EFFECT
AI TO HELP ATTRACT TOP TALENT
According to the Bayt.com poll, Employer Branding in the Middle East and North Africa, 93% of MENA jobseekers research a company online before applying for a job. This study can emphasize the extent to which employer branding can make an impact on attracting the right kind of candidates when hiring.
It’s no secret that prior to applying for a job, job seekers research the company in question, and make their decision on whether to apply or not based on their perception of the company. Employers can now utilize automated branding platforms to tweak their employer brand to compel certain kinds of job seekers that they are interested in and classify as “fit.”

Not to mention that online branding platforms can give employers exclusive access to real-time data and analytics, where, with the aid of AI-powered tools, they can instantly dive into their follower breakdown and demographics, which can help them in discovering, measuring, and recording their followership as well as brand strength. With this kind of data, employers can launch campaigns that promote their company profiles to their target audience of job seekers.

2. THE PUSH EFFECT
AI TO HELP SOURCE AND FIND TOP TALENT
According to the Bayt.com Middle East and North Africa Hiring Practices Survey, 80% of employers claim that the hiring process can last up to two months at their company, which sometimes can be considered way too long. However, by utilizing AI-powered tools, employers are now able to take talent acquisition to the expedited level and leave the costly and time-consuming traditional methods behind.

More precise candidate selection
More often times than not, the process of searching for, finding, and selecting candidates for a job opening can be time-consuming and costly. Where employers need to search high, low, and everywhere in between to find the right candidate that’s fit for the job. Hiring can cost a pretty penny; hiring mistakes can cost even more, making this a key part of the recruitment process that employers shouldn’t rush through.

Now, one might think that the ability to thoroughly understand a CV, not only as words on a piece of paper, but as a potential candidate, would be a skill that only humans can hold. Well, not anymore, as AI-powered tools such as Bayt.com’s CV Search tool are able to sift through millions of CVs and select those that are most applicable to the employer’s preset requirements.

Among the most exciting AI features accompanying this technology is meaning ontology. This new logic can now make meaning-based search suggestions that are far more accurate than text-based suggestions. For example, if an employer is looking to hire an “account manager,” the CV Search bot will suggest titles of similar meanings like “sales manager,” or “business relationship manager.”

Another highly useful tool that employers will depend on is the auto-stamped feature. When a company is looking for an employee using a university name, company name, job title, or such, they are likely to face the issue of name variations: there are usually different spellings, acronyms, and pseudo-names that may limit their search results. With the AI supported version of CV Search, the system will automatically gather all CVs that are related to the employer’s search query, including all the variations that should fall under that name being searched for.
One more impressive feature is the ability to reverse search. Employers who already have a CV of their ideal hire can simply upload the document, and allow the CV Search technology to find exact matches to their sought after employee.

**Smarter applicant screening and tracking**

The recruitment and interviewing process can prove to be challenging at times, especially with limited resources and time, which can lead employers to make subpar decisions, and ultimately leaving them with a bad hire.

Old conventional screening methods tend to be based on what’s written on a candidate’s CV, which can certainly give an incomplete picture of their capabilities. But thankfully, with further strides in the world of AI and automation, comprehensive online recruitment tools such as Bayt.com’s video assessment platform Evalufy can help employers understand the full potential of each candidate and thus make more informed decisions while hiring.

Evalufy dispatches assessments to a large number of candidates, auto-tracked, and graded by multiple evaluators. Upon completing the assigned assessment, candidates’ report cards are automatically plotted on a benchmark, based on the desired hiring criteria. These score cards are then used by employers to identify and understand the true potential of candidates.

Similar to screening, each and every stage of the recruitment process produces large amounts of data that are eventually not recorded nor measured. So, every time an employer goes through the hiring process, it’s like they have to start all over again, wasting time and very valuable information. However, automated applicant tracking systems, which provide employers with insights and analytics on their recruitment activities, is solving this complexity. Beyond organizing and managing the entire recruitment process, these platforms offer auto-trackers and data-plotters to assess the company’s own hiring efficiency, and potentially identify key areas of importance such as hiring velocity and time to hire.

**3. Maintaining Momentum**

**AI to engage and keep talent aboard**

Paving the way for new hires to adjust to their new jobs, and then integrating them with your organization’s work environment can be a difficult task, especially with the high demands of today’s workforce. However, onboarding is considered as one of the most important steps in improving employee performance and retention, and thus making it vital for a hire to be considered successful. As in today’s competitive job market, hiring the right candidate is truly only the beginning.

The beginning of candidate engagement and talent management is known as onboarding. The onboarding process requires employers to go through a wide range of steps, ranging from paperwork to goal setting and KPIs, which can certainly be a huge hassle and cost them time and money that they don’t necessarily have to spare.

However, with the emergence of new AI-powered tools such as Bayt.com’s online onboarding platform AfterHire, a tedious process is becoming that much easier. AfterHire allows employers to design their own onboarding process using a Workflow Editor, as well as keep their new hires engaged by assigning them onboarding tasks with the ability to give them clarifications on a task through the comments feed. Most importantly, AfterHire helps automate paperwork, it quickly assigns tasks to appropriate personnel to streamline mundane activities like equipment provisioning and financial formalities. Moreover, employees can be assigned learning and training tasks to build up their job knowledge.

With automated onboarding, HR gets a high-level overview of each employee’s onboarding process, monitor performance and progress through detailed insights and analytics, while also cutting down time and cost of the onboarding process.

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Suhail 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 31,900,000 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.
N-Genius, the payment platform inspired by you.

We’re inspired by business owners who make it happen every day across the UAE. That’s why we created N-Genius, our intuitive payment technology platform that opens a world of innovation for your business.

Now you can accept payments on-the-go, create powerful business strategies, integrate payments in retail and hospitality environments, take your business online, or simply make your customers’ lives easier. N-Genius. We make it happen.

To make N-Genius happen for your business, visit www.network.ae or call 8004448.
When taking over the business a few years ago, INSEAD-educated Houzé was reportedly tasked with the group’s digital transformation, which he still describes as his biggest challenge, yet adds, “But we are on the right path, even though it’s difficult, capital-intensive, and takes time.” The group’s other two strategic goals at the moment are international expansion and modernization of its store network. The 126-year-old Galeries Lafayette currently has 55 stores across France, of which it directly operates 28, while the remaining 27, all located in small and medium-sized French cities, were turned into franchises last year in a bid to cut costs. Roughly 60% of the retailer’s France-bound business comes from international customers, and the rest are local, and of that the group’s flagship store on Boulevard Hausmann brings “almost half of the business that we are doing in France,” Houzé says, adding, “Last year was quite a challenging year, because of the political situation in France, but overall, we achieved almost the same figures that we had in 2017. There are big cities, like Bordo, Nice, Lion, where it is okay, but the rest of France is quite challenging.” While Houzé acknowledges that the group’s expansion opportunities within the country have been limited – it already occupies some of the best retail locations in the country – he has high hopes for its new shop on the Champs-Élysées, which opened on March 28. Dubbed “the department store of the 21st century,” the new store is the largest on the famous Parisian avenue (spanning 6,500 square meters), but much smaller than other Galeries Lafayette stores. “It is a department store, because it is Galeries Lafayette, but it will be significantly different from what we are used to,” Houzé says. “For example, in our store on Boulevard Hausmann, we have a lot of what we call ‘free wall boutiques,’ which are managed by the brands themselves. That won’t be the case anymore on the Champs-Élysées.”

“THE REAL ASSET OF E-COMMERCE IS THE TECHNOLOGY THAT YOU UTILIZE FOR YOUR SERVICES AND THE OVERALL CUSTOMER JOURNEY. SO, IT’S A TECHNOLOGICAL BUSINESS, AND NOT A BUYING AND SELLING BUSINESS.”

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There will be only sales people from Galeries Lafayette, who will be able to answer all the questions about different brands.

Until troubles at home are put behind them, Houzé will be increasingly looking outwards to grow Galeries Lafayette. The Paris-headquartered retail group has stores in London, Berlin, Milan, Istanbul, Dubai, Jakarta, and Beijing, while in the near future, this list will also include Luxembourg, Doha, Kuwait, and Shanghai. “China is really important for us,” Houzé says. “We already have one store in Beijing, and we will open a new store in Shanghai by the end of March. We are looking at five to ten stores, and also the digital part, in China because we think that Galeries Lafayette has a great opportunity to develop there.” Slightly less than 10% of the group’s total revenues are generated internationally, and Houzé aims to double this figure by 2025 by opening new stores. “We have three models for our international expansion,” he says. “In Europe, we operate the stores directly, and that’s the case also in Berlin, and it will be the case in Luxembourg by the end of this year. In China, it’s a joint venture model with a local partner, and we have a team over there dedicated to operating the store. And for the rest of the world, meaning at the moment the Middle East but also Turkey and Indonesia, it’s a franchise model. We partner with people we know quite well, because we want to have our retailers close to us, and not be just like a financial institution that is not supposed to operate.”

In mid 90’s, three members of the Lebanese-American Abchee family – brothers Michel, Pascal, and Gabriel – were part of the Lebanese diaspora returning to the country after decades of turmoil, including a 15-year civil war, and bringing with them cravings for their expatriate life. In the case of the Abchee brothers, it was a nostalgia for Parisian lifestyle. In 1996, the eldest brother Michel started up ADMIC (Abchee Development, Management, and Investment Corporation), a multi-format retail operator, to take on a string of franchise partnerships – Galeries Lafayette, Le BHV Marais (Bazar De L’hôtel De Ville), and MONOPRIX Supermarkets. “We were considering going back to Lebanon, and the three of us talked about what we could do to go back there,” says Pascal Abchee, General Manager for Galeries Lafayette Dubai and Lebanon. “At the time, we didn’t have means to go into real estate development, because capital expenditure was very high, so we figured if we could not build buildings, why not furnish them.”

Before long, the plans for a Galeries Lafayette branch in Beirut were put on hold due to the economic slowdown brought on by the ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria. However, in the early 2000s, the Abchee brothers started eyeing Dubai. “Dubai gave us evidence that we should be here,” says Pascal Abchee. “Since the beginning, the Dubai Mall has been great, and another struck of luck, if I may say, was that in 2009, when we opened, there were tough economic times across the world as well as in Dubai, but Dubai did a tremendous job to get itself out of the crisis quickly, and so we achieved not only to move out of the crisis but to develop the brand quite well.” Covering a total area of 215,000 square feet in the Dubai Mall, Galeries Lafayette offers a 180-degree shopping experience which includes women’s wear, abayas, eveningwear, menswear, jewelry, kids wear, lingerie, luxury accessories and footwear, beauty, home ware, and Le Gourmet, an international food hall and dining.

“How well you can adapt a product from France here was my biggest challenge,” says Michel Abchee, founder, Chairman and CEO of Beirut-based ADMIC, and Chairman and CEO of Dubai-based French Department Stores (FDS) and Middle East Department Stores (MEDS), as he talks about setting up Galeries Lafayette in Dubai.
"DUBAI DID A TREMENDOUS JOB TO GET ITSELF OUT OF THE CRISIS QUICKLY, AND SO WE ACHIEVED NOT ONLY TO MOVE OUT OF THE CRISIS BUT TO DEVELOP THE BRAND QUITE WELL."

“It was not only about me understanding it properly, but also about getting the Galeries Lafayette team to accept that the concept had to be adapted, and then about whether the local market would accept the way I adapted it. So, for me, the challenge will always be how well I continue to adapt. Take for example, if we look into perfumes, when we came to this market, there was no local scent. It was just the beginning of the Arabic scent, but then, all of a sudden, there were many Arabic scents that we helped launched, which were very well received by the market.”

Lastly, the group’s third goal – digital transformation and boosting its online business– is aimed at helping it compete with the likes of Amazon and other online retail giants. At present, the retailer achieves roughly between 4% and 5% of its total global turnover online. “It’s a long journey, and quite a challenge, because I would say that it’s a different business,” Houzé says. “In fact, talking about e-commerce, the term commerce is not the same as the one we have in stores. As merchants and retailers, we come from a business in which two main pillars are buying and selling. You need to have the right product at the right location, and to have the right people to welcome the customer and present the product. That’s what we’ve been doing for 125 years. In e-commerce, of course, the product is important, but you can find it everywhere, and you don’t have to search for it or go somewhere to find it, so the real difference is, of course, the price, but in my opinion, the real asset of e-commerce is the technology that you utilize for your services and the overall customer journey. So, it’s a technological business, and not a buying and selling business.”

One of Houzé’s first tasks was to revamp the Galeries Lafayette website, which is expected to become a multilingual e-commerce venture by 2020. However, Houzé opines that e-commerce is just the top of the pyramid, while the group’s digital transformation is a much wider process that includes all the customer journey touchpoints in Galeries Lafayette stores. The group has made three investments in startups: acquiring Instant-Luxe, an apparel reseller, and BazarChic, a private sale website, as well as buying a majority stake of La Redoute, an online and catalogue retailer. In 2016, the group launched the Lafayette Plug And Play startup accelerator to attract the best fashion and retail-oriented startups from around the world. “Digital and brick-and-mortar are always looked at being opposite, and we don’t believe in that,” adds Pascal Abchee. “We are both convinced that they are very much complimentary, and it is a challenge today how to recreate the experience that you have in stores digitally. It is very important that we focus on that quickly, but we have to find our tone of voice within that story. Here, in Dubai, we haven’t launched online sale yet, since we’re currently building the infrastructure for it. We are a small family group, and we believe that if you rush into something when you’re not ready, it might end up costing you a lot. And, if you walk into our store, you’d be surprised how many clients are walking around looking at their phones. What are they doing? They’re already doing their research. So, we also need to respond to them digitally. That’s also why digital transformation is a very wide scene, there’s much more to it, but the market is ripe for it.” And if its first decade in the UAE is any indication, then the 126-year-old Galeries Lafayette is here to stay."
Ideas take flight

How Project You, a project by university students in the UAE, with support from Expo 2020 Dubai, turned into a fully-fledged startup

by ABY SAM THOMAS

“INNOVATION CAN COME from anywhere, to everyone.” That’s the slogan emblazoned on the official website for Expo Live, the innovation and partnership program run by Expo 2020 Dubai, with an allocation of US$100 million to back social innovators from around the world, and that sentence alone is enough to understand the rationale for the creation of the Expo Live University Innovation Program (UIP). According to Fatma Ibrahim, Assistant Manager – Expo Live, Expo 2020 Dubai, UIP was launched in 2017 in response to the market demand for the same, which she got to witness first-hand with her team. “In 2016, Expo Live had just one initiative under its umbrella, the Innovation Impact Grant Program (IIGP), which targets small and medium-sized enterprises, innovators, government entities, and so on—people whose projects are at a relatively advanced level of maturity,” Ibrahim recalls. “They may already be part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, or have a prototype, for example. [However,] the percentage of IIGP applications that we received from university students was significant; certainly high enough for us to take notice. Rather than rejecting these applications because the innovations were not sufficiently advanced, we decided to go out into the market to determine whether or not a gap existed. We talked to a number of universities in the UAE. We did not limit our discussions to public rather than private universities, or local rather than international institutions. We spoke with educators from across the spectrum to better understand the programs that were already in the market, as well as what was missing. We built the UIP based on this exercise, so we don’t see it as our product. Instead, we view this program as the result of a team effort that was conducted in response to market demand.”

Since its launch in September 2017, Expo Live UIP has supported 47 teams of students with their innovative undertakings, with them receiving AED50,000 each in funds to grow their enterprises, one of which was Project You, led by Emirates Aviation University students Hend Mahmoud Al Rais and Abdulmatheen Yousef. Project You has been described as “a platform that uses mentorship and guidance to help develop emotional intelligence and soft skills among high school students in the UAE,” and what’s particularly noteworthy about this endeavor is that while it may have started out as an idea of Al Rais and Yousef, its passage through the Expo Live UIP has enabled it to become a fully-fledged business now. Project You recently received its trade license, and it is an officially registered company in Dubai today. As for what makes Project You so appealing as an enterprise, it can be drawn down to the founders’ thought process when building it up in the first place. “Abdulmatheen and I are young people who were educated here in the UAE,” Al Rais says. “We both realized that there were certain gaps that could be filled in terms of improving young people’s self-awareness and developing their soft skills. So, we asked ourselves how we could build a holistic and agile solution for this. Instead of just coming up with questions, why not try to solve the challenge? Why not share our collective experience with school students? That’s what Project You is all about.” Yousef explains that Project You is conducted for students over the course of four weeks,
Ahmed Wadi, founder and CEO, Moneyfellows

“WE HAVE JOINED FORCES WITH THE SHARJAH ENTREPRENEURSHIP CENTER (SHERAA) TO PROVIDE A BESPOKE PROGRAM THAT EMPOWERS YOUNG INNOVATORS WITH THE TOOLS NECESSARY FOR THE NEXT STAGES OF THEIR ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEYS.”

with a different theme for each of them. “The focus of the first week is ‘You vs. You,’ encouraging self-awareness. The second week focuses on ‘You vs. Others,’ exploring communication, team building, empathy and tolerance. In the third week, we discuss ‘You vs. the Future,’ inviting participants to think about building agile, broad-minded career paths. Week four’s theme is ‘You vs. the Universe,’ which encourages students to consider gratitude, perception and acceptance.” These sessions have a few different components for them: besides the lecture part of it (Yousuf points out that this takes less than 10 minutes), there are also group activities that have been designed with the assistance of psychologists, neuroscientists, and educators, as well as individual learning activities. “We conclude by asking the students to reflect on and link back to everything they have learnt,” he explains. “We call this a ‘superpower,’ because it’s based on a paradigm shift. By the end of each session, the students are able to do something that they weren’t able to do at the beginning.” To understand what makes Project You’s offering stand out, one needs to understand how its entire curriculum came into be in the first place. “During our market research phase, we came across approximately 65 different companies that are offering weekend courses, team-building services, and after-school programs,” Yousuf notes. “However, these mainly comprise extracurricular activities outside of school time.” Al Rais adds, “Also, these programs mainly target students working in the upper or lower 10% of their classes. They are not typically designed to serve students in the middle 80%. Project You is positioned in such a way that our sessions happen within schools, which means we can cater to the full spectrum of students.” Thanks to the funding and support afforded by their participation in Expo Live UIP, the Project You team were also able to validate their idea with a four-week pilot project at a UAE school, at the end of which almost 98% of the 350 students surveyed as part of this exercise noting an increase in their levels of self-confidence, and 90% feeling more comfortable to talk openly with their mentors. This feedback enabled Project You to develop its current program, which has been designed such that it can be run alongside a normal school curriculum.

“Project You’s holistic nature is one critical aspect [of what makes its offering unique], but it’s also about the content we deliver,” Yusuf explains. “More than 70% of the students we’ve worked with said that the content they experienced while working with Project You was unique—this is the first time they have encountered these types of sessions. I think that makes Project You even more engaging. Also, we’re all young—under the age of 25. The fact that the average age gap between our facilitators and the school students we work with is approximately five years—allowing for better interaction and engagement. I think this has helped to increase retention, and improve our success rate.” The founders’ personal experiences have also informed how Project You works as a program. “When I was at school, you could say I was one of the ‘average’ students—the middle 80%,” Al Rais says. “It was therefore difficult to find help and guidance that related to self-awareness and soft skills. Because of this, I went through some tough times. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it made me think: why not find out whether today’s school students are facing similar challenges, and try to help? That’s what gave me the drive and motivation to get involved in Project You.”

A presentation during Expo Live UIP

Hend Mahmoud  Al Rais

A presentation during Expo Live UIP

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Hend Mahmoud  Al Rais

“A presentation during Expo Live UIP

Hend Mahmoud  Al Rais

A presentation during Expo Live UIP

Hend Mahmoud Al Rais
As striking as Project You’s growth has been to date, one cannot overstate the influence the Expo Live UIP has had on its development to what it is today—and no, it wasn’t just about the funds, notes Expo 2020 Dubai’s Ibrahim. “If there’s one thing we’ve realized since launching the UIP, it’s that while the financial support offered by Expo Live is undoubtedly important, the guidance and mentorship we provide is equally if not more valuable to student innovators,” he explains. “In many cases, these young people have not yet had an opportunity to gain real-life business experience, so having access to support and expertise along their journey is vital. For this reason, we have joined forces with the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center (Sheraa) to provide a bespoke program that empowers young innovators with the tools necessary for the next stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. Specifically designed to support UIP grantees, this program will see innovators mentored by Sheraa’s in-house team of experts, helping them to develop skills and strategies that can be applied across all stages of their future growth. Our collaboration with Sheraa is a beautiful example of the fundamental values that underpin Expo Live and Expo 2020 Dubai. We aim to offer support that will help to create a meaningful long-term impact.”

As for Project You’s future, both Al Rais and Yousuf are keen on seeing it evolve and become a sustainable business venture. “We are currently considering a number of business models as part of our long-term strategy,” Yousuf says. “In addition to human capital and youth development services, we have come to realize that Project You is uniquely positioned to offer insights that can be used by educational institutions. Wherever we have worked, the insights we’ve received from students have been eye-opening—not only for us, but also for school management teams, program development professionals, and curriculum creators. Our monetization phase will therefore probably be aligned with the insights we receive from students, and how they can be used to help schools optimize their resources, learning plans, structures and strategies. Right now, we believe Project You is the only organization in the market that can offer these types of insights to schools.” Al Rais adds, “You could also say that we’ve built a model that is both agile and flexible in terms of the content it delivers. This means that future skills—those that will be needed in 2025 or 2030, for example—can easily be added to our model. At the same time, Project You’s adaptable structure means that it is possible to eliminate skills that are no longer relevant.

We are building an enterprise that can incorporate any future changes.”

As for Expo Live, Ibrahim hopes that Project You will inspire other young innovators to follow the young innovators’ lead in turning their projects into functioning businesses. “We will be extremely happy if other UIP grantees follow this path, but the rate of progress depends on a variety of factors,” Ibrahim says. “How old are the students? What is the level of maturity of their innovation? Are they still at prototype stage? Do they require further expertise from a technological perspective? All of these factors need to be considered. However, in the long term, if the students are passionate about advancing their innovations and pursuing their goals, nothing can stop them—especially if they have the right tools and support. So, hopefully, we’ll see more grantees follow in Project You’s footsteps in the future.”

When asked if she had any advice for young innovators in the UAE, who may have ideas that perhaps could turn into viable businesses, but are unsure of what to do next, Ibrahim pointed again to Al Rais and Yousuf. “To answer this question, I’d like to use Project You as an example,” she says. “When the team applied to Expo Live, all they had was an idea on a piece of paper. They’ve since told us that they weren’t confident their project would move to the next stage of the evaluation program, because Expo 2020 Dubai is such a big name. As we know, Project You secured Expo Live’s support and they are now a registered startup in the UAE. The moral of Project You’s story is that if you’re dedicated and passionate, you maximize your chances of finding the right people to back you. It just goes to show that there’s no such thing as a small idea.”
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Building bridges
Dubai Chamber’s Chamberthon in Rwanda pairs startups from the UAE and Africa to design a cross-border mentorship program by ABY SAM THOMAS

There was obviously a lot happening at this year’s Africa Tech Summit in Kigali, Rwanda, which ran from February 14-15, 2019 at the Kigali Convention Centre, but one of its most interesting sessions (in my opinion at least, and yes, I may be biased) happened a day before the event officially kicked off. This was the Chamberthon, put together by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with its name being a nod to the organizer, as well as its deadline-driven day-long timespan, much like a hackathon. Now, while there was no coding involved in the Chamberthon, the 20 entrepreneurs selected for this exercise had to work together in teams to come up with proposals for a three-month-long cross-border mentorship program for startups that Dubai Chamber wants to initiate between the UAE and the African continent.

In order to understand the reasoning for this new initiative by Dubai Chamber, one needs to start by looking at the two departments within the non-profit entity that devised this concept in the first place. One of these was Dubai Chamber’s entrepreneurship support arm, Dubai Startup Hub, which has been offering “clarity and direction” for the startup community in Dubai, and the other was its International Relations team, perhaps known best for the Global Business Forum (GBF) series of events that they organize, which aim at positioning Dubai as “the gateway to the world,” and look into developing trade and exploring investment opportunities in emerging markets around the globe. Launched in 2013, the GBF series started off with a flag-
entrepreneurs in Dubai could take part in the GBF Mentorship Program to find people who’d be able to advise them on how they could do business in, say, Kigali, and this would work vice-versa as well- Dubai Chamber is thus putting together a platform that’d help startups in either location to expand their respective enterprises. Dubai Chamber plans to run the first iteration of the GBF Mentorship Program as a three-month-long exercise for entrepreneurs located in Africa and the UAE in August, with the aim being to showcase the initiative’s results at this year’s instalment of GBF Africa in November. According to Layla Derraz, Senior Manager, International Relations, Dubai Chamber, the objective of the GBF Mentorship Program is to showcase tangible outcomes resulting from the GBF platform’s efforts to build bilateral trade relationships between Dubai and the rest of the world. “I think the GBF Mentorship program is unique, because I don’t think we have found a mentorship program globally, which is cross-border,” Derraz notes. “We hope that with its success, we’ll be able to roll out across our other offices and our overall global expansion plans.” Africa was chosen as the trial ground for this innovative program, given Dubai Chamber’s work so far in enabling mutually beneficial relationships between the UAE and the continent. “There’s always that perception that when people think of doing business with Africa, it is [often] in a hand-out, or in an aid perspective- and that isn’t what we’re about,” Derraz says. “That is not what we want. We truly believe that in order to really grow trade, to really solidify that relationship, it must be done on an equal playing field.” The initiative’s focus on entrepreneurs and startups was quite deliberate as well-- Dubai Startup Hub’s Natalia Sycheva, Manager – Entrepreneurship, Dubai Chamber, points out that with the global business arena today being driven by innovative startups and entrepreneurs, it was only natural for the GBF Mentorship Program be catered toward this segment of the economy. But what should such a program look like? That’s where Dubai Chamber decided to think out of the box. “The natural way would be, probably, to develop a mentorship program using our own knowledge- but there is always a smarter way,” Sycheva says. “And the smarter way in this case is to actually ask startups themselves how would the ideal mentorship program look like, that would enable them to scale across markets.” And that explains why the Chamberthon played out as it did: 20 entrepreneurs, hailing from 13 different countries, each with startups based either in the UAE or in the African continent, collaborating to formulate a mentorship program that’d allow for businesses like theirs to grow beyond their respective borders. The entrepreneurs came from different sectors -the startups they represented included social enterprises, online marketplaces, insurtech ventures, and more- and they worked together in teams to come up with holistic frameworks for the GBF Mentorship Program. At the end of the Chamberthon, five teams presented their proposals for the program, with Dubai Chamber’s personnel noting that ten of the entrepreneurs at the event would eventually be selected as the first beneficiaries for the inaugural GBF Mentorship Program.
Assia Riccio, founder of the Dubai-based social enterprise Evolvin’ Women, was one of the UAE-based entrepreneurs that participated in the Chamberthon, who noted the experience of working with her peers in Africa as being especially informative and insightful. “It was really helpful to listen to entrepreneurs from outside of Dubai,” she says. “Because they face different challenges from what we do, and so it was nice to listen to them, and design a mentorship program that would benefit them, as well as us.” Riccio’s feeling was echoed by Yvette Mbabazi, founder of a head wrap brand in Rwanda called Icyeza, who said that the very fact that she got selected to be a part of the Chamberthon exercise was gratifying by itself, as it allowed her to learn from her peers in the entrepreneurial realm. With Icyeza being her first foray into the startup world, “I was really needing knowledge that would help me grow my business,” Mbabazi says. “And so, when you meet someone from the same industry, I think it helps you to learn and give yourself that impetus to keep going with your own venture.”

The African contingent of entrepreneurs also included Abhinav Gautam, co-founder of FreshBox Rwanda, who applied to be a part of the Chamberthon in a bid to learn more about doing business in Dubai and the wider Middle East. “From what I’ve seen and read and even having been there, Dubai is, in our lifetime, is a very critical place as a central hub to do a lot of operations for the Middle East and Africa, and even Asia as well,” Gautam says. “Physically, its geographic location serves as a perfect place to run things out of,” which is especially pertinent for his enterprise, given that it focuses on building cold chain logistics solutions, a sector that’s an integral part of Dubai’s economy. Much like Gautam, Ketaki Sharma, founder of the UAE-based consulting firm Algorithm Research, noted that with Africa already on her startup’s radar as a potential market to expand into, the Chamberthon was a good opportunity to learn from those who are already working in the continent, thereby reinforcing the value that an initiative like the GBF Mentorship Program could potentially bring to entrepreneurs like her. “Entrepreneurship can be a very lonely journey,” she says. “And so many times, [when encountering issues], we often have this impression that ‘this is happening only to us,’ whereas it is often an experience this is universal. A lot of startups have encountered the same problems, and it is so much easier to just go and seek out solutions, rather than reinventing the wheel.”

It’s safe here to say that these are the kinds of ideas that Dubai Chamber wants to spark in the minds of entrepreneurs with its GBF Mentorship Program, and as such, the Chamberthon proved to be a great testing ground for the premise that when it comes to entrepreneurship, there are no boundaries. The ideas and concepts presented at the Chamberthon will now be used by Dubai Chamber to build and structure the GBF Mentorship Program, whose beneficiaries will definitely take comfort in the fact that they are partaking in a program that was designed by entrepreneurs, for entrepreneurs. As for the benefits the GBF Mentorship Program will bring to the UAE business ecosystem, we’ll probably have to wait a little bit to see them happen— but if the Chamberthon was any indication, then the future does look promising.

“The smarter way in this case is to actually ask startups themselves how would the ideal mentorship program look like, that would enable them to scale across markets.”
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Inspired pursuits

Spheerz founder Ahmed Tahnoon couldn’t find an establishment serving Japanese takoyaki to his liking in the UAE - so he created his own

by ABY SAM THOMAS

Ahmed Tahnoon exudes excitement as he remembers the first time he got to taste takoyaki, a popular Japanese snack made out of a batter from a special kind of wheat flour, which is cooked as balls with fillings containing octopus, green onion, and pickled red ginger, and then finally topped off with mayonnaise, takoyaki sauce, and bonito flakes. It was March 2014, and Tahnoon was in Japan’s culinary capital of Osaka when he was treated to a serving of takoyaki, blissfully unaware that this was the moment that would transform his life as he knew it to be then. Tahnoon remembers: “After taking the first bite of the takoyaki, I had only one thought on my mind: ‘How come I’ve never tried this before?’”

This was the question that Tahnoon, an Emirati electronics engineer working with the government, tried to answer on his return to the UAE, as he attempted to find places in the country that served this dish that he was so taken up by. But his quest for takoyaki didn’t yield any satisfactory results, and this story would have ended here, had it not been for Tahnoon donning his entrepreneurial cap. Tahnoon decided that if there was no place in the UAE serving takoyaki to his liking, then he’d create one of his own – and this endeavor began with him importing a takoyaki stove, along with some of the ingredients, from Japan. Experimentation with takoyaki recipes soon followed, with his friends and family becoming the test audience for the same, who reacted in the same manner as he did: “How come we never tried this before?” And it was this reception that cemented Tahnoon’s belief that starting up an F&B enterprise serving takoyaki would do well in the UAE. “I had confidence in the product, and I was absolutely sure that I had no competition yet,” Tahnoon says. “And then, I started the first takoyaki kiosk in UAE at the Global Village, Dubai, in 2016.”

Tahnoon decided to name his enterprise Spheerz, a nod to the round shape that is characteristic of the takoyaki, and it was only a matter of time before his kiosk at the Global Village began to garner a fan following. In fact, the overwhelmingly positive feedback was what led Tahnoon to grow Spheerz further – September 2018 marked the launch of the Spheerz restaurant, armed with a full-fledged Japanese street food menu (which includes, besides its signature takoyaki, okonomiyaki and taiyaki as well), at Marina Cubes, a new leisure development located in the Port Rashid neighborhood of Dubai. In addition, Spheerz now also has a takoyaki cart that makes its presence felt at various pop-up events in the country, as well as a sub-brand called Yaki Box by Spheerz, which Tahnoon declares to be “the first Japanese BBQ box available through delivery” in the UAE.
“AFTER TAKING THE FIRST BITE OF THE TAKOYAKI, I HAD ONLY ONE THought ON MY MIND: ‘HOW COME I’VE NEVER TRIED THIS BEFORE?’”

It isn’t hard to see that Tahnoon is elated with (and proud of) what he and his team have built so far with the Spheerz brand, but he is quick to credit the feedback they have received from their patrons as being a key driver in making the business what it is today. “I would love to say that Spheerz is a traditional Japanese restaurant, but, in fact, intentionally, Spheerz is not,” Tahnoon says. “To be honest, the most unique selling proposition of Spheerz is the fact that it’s in the perfect spot between adaptability and tradition. It keeps the authenticity of the Japanese dishes, but also caters for the general taste in the region. An example is the takoyaki that we serve. While our octopus takoyaki is as traditional and authentic as takoyaki can get, we also cater to the general taste in UAE, by providing original flavors like shrimp, chicken, and mushroom. This also leads me to my personal mantra about running the business, which is always listen to people’s opinions and feedback, and be able to take responsive actions, while staying true to the business model that Spheerz was built around.”

From a financial perspective, Tahnoon admits that the Spheerz restaurant wouldn’t have come into being had it not been for the support he received to set up and run his business. The first person he mentions in this regard is his friend Adnan Al-Raeesi, who came on board Spheerz as an investor in the restaurant after being impressed by its success at Global Village for two years, and by Tahnoon’s business plan and feasibility study for the venture. The business also found support from UAE entrepreneurial support initiatives like the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, with the entity providing Spheerz with a 0% interest fund, as well as from Dubai SME, which provided Tahnoon with exclusive offers and fee exceptions that helped boost his business’ development and growth.

The set-up phase wasn’t all hunky-dory though—though Tahnoon thought he was ready for the task at hand by reading books and online publications on entrepreneurship, he soon found that not of all what he read applied to doing business in the UAE. “For a person who is entering this field for the first time, you get overwhelmed with trying to understand which entity is responsible for what,” Tahnoon says. “What is the difference between Trakhees and the Department of Economic Development (DED), for example? Another confusion is about the roles of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (from a business owner point of view), compared to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (which is more confusingly referred to in the field as simply ‘labor’ and ‘immigration’). One more confusion came from the services provided by Tasheel, compared to Amer, etc.”

In order to get these questions answered and perform the requisite processes for his business, Tahnoon was advised to get a public relations officer (PRO) for Spheerz, and he did make use of one’s services for a short while. But Tahnoon soon realized that if he wanted to learn about the business set-up process, then he’d have to go and get himself

‘TREP TALK
SPHEERZ FOUNDER AHMED TAHNOON’S TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

1. Passion matters
“When you decide to start your own business, make sure that you are passionate about it. Don’t do it, because it’s a trend these days. Starting a business can be challenging and stressful, and unless you have the passion for it, you will struggle to push through those challenges.”

2. Stand out (to get noticed)
“When you start a business, look for a unique selling proposition. Do something different. Stand out from your competitors, and last but not the least, think outside the box.”

3. Determine your brand values
“When creating your business brand, make sure you have an identity. Not only that, but also be specific about the identity of your brand, and make sure that you stay true to it throughout your venture.”

4. Preparation is key
“Don’t try to skip anything in the process. Start with the planning, make a business plan, do the market research, understand your competition, create your business model, and build your feasibility study. Only then, start with the execution.”

5. Feedback is important
“Always, always, and always, listen to your customers. Take their feedback and criticism, and use it to improve yourself and your business.”

6. Keep up with the times
“Keep your business dynamic. The business world is a very competitive world. Unless you renew and adjust and enhance your services and products, you will be overthrown by your competitors.”
hands dirty—as he put it, “I needed to get out there, and do things myself. Which, in the end, helped me get rid of the confusion that I had.” But despite hurdles like these along the way of his entrepreneurial journey, Tahnoon acknowledges that he’s had it better than most when it comes to setting up a business in the UAE. “Being an Emirati going through this journey, I absolutely and thankfully think that I am privileged. When setting up a business, I came to realize that I get to equally choose to set up in the Dubai mainland or a free zone, and still have sole ownership of my company (which, for a non-Emirati, is limited to a free zone or having a local partner). The other privilege is having access to the support entities and funds like Dubai SME and Khalifa Fund,” he notes.

From a personal perspective, Tahnoon believes his lack of know-how when it comes to managing finances for a business was a definite weak point—he didn’t have any clear financial statements in the first year of Spheerz, he claims. “But, realizing this problem and learning from my mistakes, I managed to improve my financial skills in my second year, and more so in the third year,” Tahnoon adds. “Up to now, I still do my best to improve myself in that department. I do believe that while it would have been ideal if I didn’t have this problem, but in realizing the problem, I managed to get over it, and it did make me a better entrepreneur.” This has, in turn, allowed Tahnoon to have a grand vision for the future of Spheerz as a business. In the short-term, Tahnoon wants to better shape and strengthen the Spheerz brand and its foundational pillars, and thus allow it to grow, with its branches all over the UAE. “In the not-so-far future, after building those bases and pillars, I want to create a franchise for Spheerz, and be able to cover the GCC,” Tahnoon adds. “Making Spheerz an international company is also one of my future goals and objectives.”

When Tahnoon speaks about his entrepreneurial endeavor, one may be inclined to think that this is a full-time exercise for him—and so, it may come as a surprise that besides running Spheerz, he continues to have a day job. “Spheerz is indeed my first entrepreneurial outing, but, for sure, it is not the last,” Tahnoon says. “I am an electronics engineer, and I have a day job as such in Abu Dhabi. I really love electronics and I plan to continue to pursue my passion for it, but since starting Spheerz, I have become fond of the F&B sector, and about being an entrepreneur. The juggling between my day job and the business have not been easy, and have proved to be challenging at times, but my passion for the F&B business have overcome those challenges. It made me be able to give almost all of my free time beyond my day job to the business. I really love and enjoy it. Ultimately, in the future, I want to be a full-time entrepreneur, working in both the F&B and electronics sectors.”

Salmon teriyaki sushi at Spheerz
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Identity matters

Trust Stamp offers AI-powered facial biometric solutions to keep internet fraudsters at bay by PAMELLA DE LEON

Though there have been efforts to prevent identity fraud, data hacks, email phishing, account takeovers, and more, fraudulent identity crimes continue to rise, with Javelin Strategy & Research’s 2018 Identity Fraud Study showing how fraudsters have successfully adapted to net 1.3 million victims in 2017, with the amount stolen rising to US$16.8 billion. Two tech entrepreneurs are now seeking to counteract this problem- Trust Stamp founder and CEO Andrew Gowasack, whose background is in financial services, sales, and marketing, and who had his share of stints in a number of US-based accelerator programs, and co-founder Gareth Genner, whose background is in corporate law, and who has successfully launched and exited multiple businesses. The entrepreneurial duo came up with the idea for Trust Stamp, an AI-powered facial biometric identity authentication solution, with the startup aiming to ensure identity and trust as part of its services by answering two questions: “Who are you?” and “Do I trust you?”

Trust Stamp has developed proprietary AI solutions and biometric “hashing” technology, which makes use of multiple “proof of life” evaluations to create a tokenized identity, transforming biometric data into a 512-byte hash using a deep neural network. Gowasack explains that this hash is then added to an “Identity Lake,” which can be hosted on a server or a blockchain, and then compared to existing hashes using proprietary AI to predict the probability that the two hashes came from the same face. With experienced fraudsters having multiple fake or stolen identities, Gowasack asserts that what makes Trust Stamp solve issues better compared to other players in the space is their use of the combination of proof of life and the Identity Lake, making it quicker to identify synthetic and stolen identities. Plus, to ensure clients’ privacy, the company themselves don’t receive any data as it is processed on their client’s servers. “Where we do receive data,” Gowasack explains, “it is kept to a minimum, and encrypted at rest and in transit.”

‘TREP TALK
ANDREW GOWASACK
FOUNDER AND CEO. TRUST STAMP OFFERS HIS THREE TOP TIPS FOR HIS FELLOW ENTREPRENEURS

1. Get to know your customer “Start your customer discovery early, and ensure that you do not have avoidable inbuilt biases. Before starting Trust Stamp, we ran multiple iterations of multiple surveys and collected thousands of responses. These proved invaluable when approaching incubators and investors.”

2. Get support (and use them wisely) “Find the right incubator/accelerators for your company, and put in 110% effort. Most of our milestones were achieved thanks to support from incubators/accelerators.”

3. Be nice “Actively look for ways to show everyone that you interact with more kindness than they generally expect. This applies to everyone from your most prominent clients and top performing team members, to the crew who cleans your co-working space. Any one of them may provide you with a helping hand when you need it most, and even if that does not arise, you have made your and their lives a little better along the way.”

WE CAN EASILY AND COST-EFFECTIVELY OFFER VARIATIONS BY LEVERAGING OUR MICRO SERVICE ARCHITECTURE, WHICH BREAKS SOFTWARE INTO INDEPENDENT MODULES EACH RESPONSIBLE FOR DISCRETE TASKS AND COMMUNICATING VIA UNIVERSAL APIS.

Image courtesy Trust Stamp
The motivation for the startup ignited after the duo noticed security trends in internet transactions. Initially, Genner introduced Gowasack to the intellectual property he was developing at the time to verify the identity and evaluate the trustworthiness of an online counterparty. Their goal then was to use data to predict the probability that an individual is who they claim to be, as well as to analyze evidence of trustworthiness—thus, making peer-to-peer transactions the ideal market opportunity to test their proposed solution. They started testing it on Craigslist, a classifieds website popular in the United States, wherein online-to-offline exchanges also encounter countless crimes. The two soon realized there was an opportunity to give both buyers and sellers guarantee by authenticating both parties before transactions occur. To validate this idea, they started collecting thousands of survey responses from Craigslist users, and found that over 45% of respondents would be willing to pay to identify a user before meeting or transacting business.

They took a similar approach with online dating and ridesharing platforms in US, and found out that almost 50% of users would pay for the services they were offering. The co-founders figured that tackling identity through a B2C route would be costly without a huge budget to drive mass adoption of their solution, so they started by focusing on a B2B model to validate their technology, while funding the operations. Officially launching in January 2016 in Atlanta, Georgia in the US, they decided that starting off with the financial services sector was ideal, after discussions with a local VC. In March 2016, they joined QC FinTech Incubator program, wherein Gowasack divulges that within 24 hours of the incubator kicking off, the startup already had a number of banks expressing interest in their offering.

In the span of a few years, the startup has had its work cut out for them. In 2016, Trust Stamp raised for their seed funding round, delivered a Proof of concept (POC), and gained a S&P 500 bank as a client. The following year also proved to be bustling with a list of wins such as a POC for another client bank, an authentication launch for a bank, and the acquisition of Warsaw-based Sunflower AI Technologies to improve the company’s offerings. As an alumnus of the National Association of Realtors (NAR) REach Accelerator, NAR was also signed on as a strategic partner to reduce assaults on real estate agents. The startup developed a customized product for real estate agents to validate potential prospects before a realtor shows a property. The result? A freemium safety tool that is now being used by 1.3 million of its members.

In 2018, besides graduating from the MasterCard Start Path Program, winning during demo days at both Plug and Play Fintech Expo in Atlanta and the accelerator program at Plug and Play Abu Dhabi General Market (ADGM), Trust Stamp also signed on two strategic partners. First, with the National Association of Estate Agents Propertymark, for which Trust Stamp provides an automated KYC/AML (Know Your Customer and Anti-Money Laundering) solution to meet new EU and UK laws and regulations for property transactions, by offering an automated process to speed up.
the process for both institutions and customers—which, according to Gowasack, now has over 600 enrolled organizations, Trust Stamp’s offering will also soon be piloted by the Attorneys General of New Mexico and Guanajuato, Mexico, with the goal of helping human trafficking victims and resolving human trafficking cases faster—a problem that Gowasack admits they didn’t imagine their solution would be selected for, calling it a privilege to be asked by the Attorneys General for assistance in this regard.

The company has had its fair share of hurdles too. First, sales, especially as selling to financial institutions tend to be long and complex— but the team has found an effective solution for it: join highly regarded accelerator programs to directly connect with decision makers and determine sales opportunities. Next was building their tech team—to get past this hurdle, being an AI company outside Silicon Valley, instead of competing from the same talent pool as other tech companies, the founders looked abroad. And of course, there was also fundraising, which was a time-consuming and difficult process. The founders credit their accelerator partners as extremely helpful in making introductions to VCs and strategic investors in their networks. Today, Trust Stamp has offices in and team members in US, Warsaw, London, and now Abu Dhabi. Since its launch, according to Gowasack, the startup has raised $7,222,300 from investors that include FSH Capital LLC, Second Century Ventures, 630 Cyber Security Accelerator, Perceptive LLC, Reach Ventures LLC and Emergent Technology Holdings. As for its business model, Gowasack says that Trust Stamp’s tech can be implemented either on premises, via API or as a managed solution. “Most partners elect to be charged on a per-verification basis (with costs dropping with volume) and minimum monthly usage. Others elect a flat fee based on increments of time (e.g., monthly, quarterly, annual).” Their tech can also be leveraged to various industries such as banking, fintech, biometrically secured email, KYC/AML compliance, law enforcement, P2P transactions, and real estate, with Gowasack noting the tech’s adaptability: “While our core offering remains consistent, we can easily and cost-effectively offer variations by leveraging our micro service architecture, which breaks software into independent modules each responsible for discrete tasks and communicating via universal APIs.”

As a company that originated in the US, Gowasack believes that one of the greatest advantages of being a part of Plug and Play ADGM’s program is the ability to work on the ground in a new market. Given how European and US companies often try to do business remotely, and end up having no interest or experience in the local community, he was keen on doing it differently: “If you want to succeed in the region, you should commit to investing and operating locally.” As a result, Trust Stamp is doing just that—with the startup already securing a POC, and two others in the negotiation stage, the enterprise’s footing in the region has strengthened. In his pitch at Plug and Play ADGM’s demo day, Gowasack says that the startup is looking towards setting up its regional headquarters at ADGM, and then continue to expand its presence in the UAE. Ahmed Alireza, Head of Ventures, Plug and Play Middle East, noted: “While all the technology companies in the program displayed tremendous success in building commercial opportunities with our corporate network, a focus on security has been a strong area of interest in the GCC. It has become more of a business risk rather than just an IT problem. Trust Stamp’s comprehensive AI-powered facial biometric solution proved to be the most in-demand for the market currently. We’re incredibly excited and proud to continue supporting Trust Stamp with their growth in the MENA region, as our policy in PNP for our alumni network globally is, ‘once you’re a Plug and Play startup, you’re always a Plug and Play startup.’” And for Trust Stamp, such support is important as the startup works toward its long-term objective: “Our goal is that the hash becomes a preeminent part of the biometric authentication ecosystem,” Gowasack declares. •
The Design Forum 2019 is an exciting platform to trigger design conversations, interact with industry leaders and network amongst peers. The forum will feature interactive panel discussions and presentations. Tapping into the region’s current trends, the forum will include industry experts with their opinions on the topics which matter today:

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- Are we aiming for human-centric designs?
- How healthcare design is more than just aesthetics?
- Striking a perfect balance between lighting and architecture

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Medicus AI, a Dubai-born healthcare tech startup founded by Dr. Baher Al Hakim, raises EUR2.75 million in its ongoing Series A round by TAMARA PUPIC

Medicus AI GmbH, a Dubai-born healthcare technology innovator, announced in February the completion of the first tranche of its Series A funding round at EUR2.75 million, with it expecting to close the second tranche of over EUR2.25 million over the coming months.

Founded in Dubai in 2015, Medicus is an AI-based platform used by diagnostic labs and health insurance companies to provide patient-friendly health reports and foster continuous and personalized wellbeing coaching. Today, the company is based in Vienna, with offices in Berlin, Paris and Beirut, and is already revenue-generating, with EUR800,000 booked in its first year of commercialization, and with another EUR2.3 million worth of deals in the closing stage. Amongst its regional clients is Al Borg Medical Laboratories in Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing Series A round is led by Germany-based DieBrückenköpfe, with contributions from Atieh Capital, Biopart and others, and once completed, will be used to further fuel the company’s global expansion, as well as the development of the Medicus diagnostic lab and insurance products, across core markets and in new languages. To date, Medicus supports Arabic, German, French and English, with Italian, Chinese, Portuguese and Spanish in the pipeline for 2019. In addition to product development, Medicus will be focused on its distribution strategy in core markets. In late 2018, the company signed a market access cooperation with Roche Diagnostics, which is expected to amplify its global reach with a few potential projects that are currently being explored in Asia and Mexico.

Dr. Baher Al Hakim, founder and CEO, Medicus, explains that the diagnostic lab space, which makes up Medicus’ current core client base, generates approximately 20 billion reports worldwide annually, but that the labs operate in highly consolidated markets and struggle to differentiate themselves, cut costs, and introduce future-proof business models. “We empower labs to deliver defensible value-add services that augment their existing services,” Dr. Al Hakim adds. “We believe that lab directors only have a few years to decide how to react to the impending waves of innovation incrementally disrupting their industry, as the industry is under severe pressure because of rising healthcare costs, and diagnostic spend is one of the easiest to squeeze. The market is really struggling under this pressure, and regulations are becoming tighter and tighter. This is where Medicus comes in: through innovation, we help labs build an attractive and integral service offering.”

When it comes to insurance providers, Medicus’ solution is aimed at cutting costs by targeting high-risk customers, then using the company’s proprietary method to give a detailed and granular view of a customer’s individual health situation, and finally working with them to transform their health awareness, and coach them step by step towards better health, while also providing the insurance provider with anonymous and aggregate reporting of the customer’s health status improvements.

Dr. Al Hakim bootstrapped Medicus from its inception until August 2016 when he closed the company’s first pre-seed round from Dubai-based Audalion Ventures and SpeedInvest, Atieh Capital, and Vlady Varnier, all three of which are from Europe. In September 2016, Medicus was officially incorporated in Vienna, offering the team a

"WE EMPOWER LABS TO DELIVER DEFENSIBLE VALUE-ADD SERVICES THAT AUGMENT THEIR EXISTING SERVICES. THROUGH INNOVATION, WE HELP LABS BUILD AN ATTRACTIVE AND INTEGRAL SERVICE OFFERING."
strategic location to expand it geographically across Europe. “I knew then that to make it successful, Medicus would have to be in those markets, and learn from the market itself,” Dr. Al Hakim says. “I spent much of 2016 traveling, with a trip to Europe every month that allowed me the opportunity to learn what other markets were lacking and what opportunities we could harness as we looked to market Medicus to more people in more languages.” However, Medicus is not the first company he started up in the UAE. Having moved to Dubai in 2005, Dr. Al Hakim founded CloudAppers in 2008, he says, adding that a few more followed, including an attempt to build a global company out of Dubai, the personal finance app Wally. “Being in Dubai and working here has contributed a great deal in my ability to think more globally,” he says. “You interact and work with entrepreneurs and ambitious builders from all over the world and everyone brings different perspectives, experiences and stories, so even without necessarily leaving the city, you absorb a wealth of global learnings just from being here.” When asked to compare the startup scenes in the UAE and Austria, he explains that the UAE’s advantage is in being a hub that allows businesses to achieve scalable operations. “Austria, on the other hand, is not a hub, so geographic scalability is limited, and requires local presence in nearby countries to have a real impact,” he adds. “The most advantageous marked distinction we’ve observed in Europe is how scientifically impressive and IP-heavy the startup ecosystem is. Patents are common, and every startup we’ve come across in Vienna, across different verticals, has a few patents under their belts. There’s widespread public support for deep tech and scientific depth– we managed to leverage this to win three grants, and are applying for a couple more. There is a focus on generating IP, and startups are really focused on building defensibility in this way.” Dr. Al Hakim opines that the MENA region will remain an exciting startup ecosystem, especially if more early-stage –pre-seed– capital becomes available to regional entrepreneurs. “While the investor ecosystem is becoming more sophisticated, the capital available to startups in their very early stages is still limited compared to the entrepreneurial activity,” he notes. “In Europe, what you see are entrepreneurs with great ideas, great IP, and a great team, but no funding, yet they are able to tap into public money to fund and launch their startups in its very early stages. It’s not uncommon to hear of up to EUR1 million being available to a three- or four-person team to launch their product, and I’ve seen startups go from these very early seed stages, to fast-growing companies valued at EUR20 million today. This kind of access to public funds at early stages, whether from grants or universities, can make a huge difference to the MENA startup ecosystem. In addition to that, there’s room for the encouragement of more deep-tech startups and IP creation to create intellectual wealth, which is where real lasting value is created for an ecosystem.”

**THE MOST ADVANTAGEOUS MARKED DISTINCTION WE’VE OBSERVED IN EUROPE IS HOW SCIENTIFICALLY IMPRESSIVE AND IP-HEAVY THE STARTUP ECOSYSTEM IS.**

1. **Be on the move (and look beyond your borders)** “Just because you’re in Dubai doesn’t mean your business or investors have to come only from Dubai. Be continuously on the move, travel a lot, go to events and conferences-connect with others. You can’t build a global business by staying in one place.”

2. **Look for the spark in people’s eyes** "Whether it’s your investors or team, some people look great on paper, but don’t really have a passion for what you do. The investors that we noticed immediately being impressed with the business we’re building ended up being the ones that were most supportive. The investors looking at this as a commercial opportunity only ended up being the disappointing ones.”

3. **Invest in IP** “Investing in our intellectual property is something that really helped us in establishing the right partnerships, such as that with Roche Diagnostics, and helped us really stand out in our industry. Filing patents, developing defensible tech, and building something truly unique from a technology perspective is key.”

4. **Run experiments and assess them** “Look at all of the company’s activities and investments like scientific experiments. Look at how much you’re investing, consider the returns, assess the evidence and then decide what to do next based on that- whether to invest further, iterate or kill the idea.”
From startup to scaleup
Takeaways from the Souqalmal growth journey
by AMBAREEN MUSA

Scaleup is a fairly new concept that’s been doing the rounds in tech business circles, and for good reason. Given the high failure rate of startups the world over, coining the term “scaleup” has helped differentiate scalable and sustainable businesses from the rest of the pack. To simplify further, you could think of scaleups as “established” startups.

So, when does a startup become a scaleup? The transition doesn’t happen overnight. A company qualifies as a scaleup after it moves past early-stage barriers, demonstrates a track record of high growth, and shows potential for long-term success. The scaleup stage is where it’s trying to unlock new growth opportunities, access new markets, expand its team, and build upon its core strengths.

Unlike most new startups, scaleups do things a bit differently. Case in point: Souqalmal.com. We’ve successfully completed seven years of running the UAE’s most trusted personal finance and insurance aggregator. Taking a page from our own book, we define how a business can prepare to scale up, and execute its vision successfully.

IS YOUR BUSINESS VIABLE FOR SCALING?
Here’s the harsh truth: for every remarkable success story, there are countless others that crash and burn. Unfortunately, many startups simply fizzle out before they’ve had a chance to make a ripple in the market. Reasons range from running out of cash, product-market misalignment, an inefficient team, and many more.

Before you think about scaling your business, you have to make sure your business is sitting on a solid foundation and is ready to be scaled up. Ask yourself the following questions: what is your ultimate goal for the business? Do you understand your core product/service strengths? Which marketing channels get you the highest ROI? Do you have a great team to help execute your ideas? How are you going to access the cash you need to scale up? As an entrepreneur, you have to fully understand the economics of your business, before you decide to scale up. Your focus has to shift from simply selling, to optimizing as well.

And just as important it is to understand whether your business can be scaled, it is equally important to get the timing right. Premature scaling can kill your startup. You have to ensure that your scaling efforts are in sync with the rest of the operation. Consider all aspects—the product, the customer, the team, and the funding—to establish that you’re not diving in too early.

Since launching Souqalmal.com as a personal finance aggregator in 2012, we’ve always been on the lookout to expand our services and tap into new markets. We took a big leap when we launched our insurance aggregator business in June 2016. And in hindsight, this was the best decision for our business. We’ve grown our insurance business by 800% in the last one year alone. And our focus remains on building efficiencies as we grow. By optimizing our service delivery and marketing efforts, we’ve managed to slash our customer acquisition cost by 80%.

SECURING THE FUNDING TO ACTUALLY SCALE UP
Startup funding looks quite different from scaleup funding. Early-stage funding constitutes of the seed and Series A rounds. At the seed funding stage, investors are essentially backing an idea, a proof of concept, and the founders. Next comes the Series A round where you’ll have to prove that you have a working business model that can be scaled.

After that comes the Series B round, which is all about scaling. With an established customer base, revenue stream, and management team, you’re now looking to scale up—expand to a new market, launch new verticals, and grow your team.

Souqalmal.com closed its Series B round just over a year back, and raised US$10 million from a great team of not just investors, but strategic investment partners. With Saudi Arabia-based TAQNI Fund (RTF) being our lead investor, we’re all set to expand our online presence in the Kingdom. Our international strategic partner, GoCompare, allows us to tap into the tech know-how and best practices in the financial aggregator business.

All in all, we’ve been busy expanding the scope of our business, launching new business lines, improving our user experience, and making inroads into new markets. We’ve launched three new insurance verticals over the last year—travel, yacht and bike insurance, and are already working on adding more comparison services to this growing list.

We’re on track to building a successful business, one that’s built to last. Whether it’s a new service, a new geographic expansion, or a new project that’s set to shake things up in the industry—there’s always something exciting brewing at Souqalmal.

Ambareen Musa is the founder and CEO of Souqalmal.com. Before founding Souqalmal.com in 2012, Musa set up the consulting arm of MasterCard Middle East and Africa. Previously, Musa held various roles including marketing, financial literacy, customer advocacy, and e-commerce for GE’s financial arm, GE Money. She led the first online financial literacy initiative in the UK, Moneybasics.co.uk, later relocating to the Middle East in 2008 where she consulted for Bain & Company Middle East, focusing on financial services projects such as growth strategies for banks in the region. souqalmal.com
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