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by TAMARA PUPIC

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Editor’s Note

The Daily Grind Has Its Moments
You are often reminded of your impact when you need it most

HAVE YOU EVER FOUND YOURSELF feeling like you're busy all through the day, yet there's nothing really of value to showcase once you come to the end of it? Now, take that one day from your memory, and imagine it happening repeatedly over the course of a week or more. That's the scenario I found myself in recently after a particularly hectic period at work, during which I was tackling one task after the other on what seemed to be an infinite to-do list, and yet, I somehow still felt like I wasn’t accomplishing anything particularly worthwhile.

That is, until I came across a candid video of Ketish founder Emaan Abbass, who we had featured in the August 2021 issue of Entrepreneur Middle East, coming across that publication, and the story that I had written in it about her and her business, for the very first time.

Let me try to describe what I saw in this recording that was shared on Instagram Stories by one of Abbass’ friends. Her reaction starts with absolute shock- Abbass gasps as she sees herself in print, before bursting into tears, and then tumbling into the throes of pure exhilaration.

Abbass' joy is resplendent in this video, and it was positively heartening to see her react to the work that I and my team do in such a positive, wholesome manner. In fact, it was just the thing I needed to remind myself of what really drives me to do what I do at Entrepreneur Middle East, despite it seeming like a never-ending pile of work at times- and that is to enable entrepreneurs like Abbass, give them the support and validation that they need and deserve, and be a part of their growth journeys into the future.

As entrepreneurs, I am sure that there are times when you, like me in the aforementioned scenario, start to question the value of what you do, especially when things aren’t going the way they are supposed to. During such moments, make it a point to seek out or reflect on the positive impact of what you do on those around you. Your work matters.

Aby Sam Thomas
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ACHIEVING WOMEN
THE MENA REGION’S SUCCESS, MOTIVATION, AND EXCEPTIONAL ENTERPRISE CONDUCT STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN IN BUSINESS

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VILMA JURKUTE
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PANCHALI MAHENDRA
GRACE NAJJAR
NARISS AND NIDAA RYWECK
SHERYL SANDBERG
H.E. Hend Al Otaiba
UAE Ambassador to France

H.E. Hend Al Otaiba was appointed as the UAE’s Ambassador to France in July this year, and while it has only been a few months since the start of her tenure, the significance of the role she currently essays is something that she holds very dear to her heart: “I am a mother of two beautiful boys, Khalid and Mana,” she reveals. “Waking up every morning and seeing them reminds me of the duty and role that our leadership has entrusted me with; they are constant reminders of what I am striving for, and that is the future of our country, embodied in the generations to come.”

It’s this principle that Al Otaiba seems to have used to govern her career so far, which has been centered around the field of communications, for the most part. “I was always interested in telling the UAE story to the world, and building bridges between cultures,” she says, as she recalls how she started off her career overseeing cultural programs for Abu Dhabi’s Tourism Development and Investment Company, including that of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Al Otaiba then went on to work for Abu Dhabi Media as a Director of Strategic Communications, following which she became an advisor for the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. She was then tasked with building and heading the Ministry’s Strategic Communications Department, which oversaw all of the communications of the UAE’s foreign policy agenda, and that was her last role before becoming the UAE’s Ambassador to France.

Looking back, Al Otaiba freely admits that she couldn’t have realized the success she saw in her career, had it not been for the support she received through its course. “I believe I am where I am today, because of the faith the leadership has placed in the dedication and commitment I provide my career with,” she says. “I believe it is important to be passionate about what you do, in order to serve well. In my case, serving my country has been the key driver, and coupled with the support I received from the leadership, I have found a large space to thrive. With respect to the key lessons I have learned along the way, I see collaboration, and the building of allies based on mutual interest, as very important. It is also important to make adequate assessments to every scenario or issue faced.” When asked if she had any particular challenges to face at her work on account of her being a woman, Al Otaiba replied in the negative. “I am very proud of my country’s support of women’s empowerment, and I view the UAE as a leader in this field, not just regionally but globally,” she says. “I have not faced any issues in my career due to my gender; in fact, I was presented with much more opportunities and respect.”

“I have not faced any issues in my career due to my gender; in fact, I was presented with much more opportunities and respect.”
Al Otaiba has plenty of examples to support her assertion that Emirati women like herself find themselves with more advantages than disadvantages in the UAE. The country’s cabinet, for instance, currently has nine female ministers, while women’s representation in its parliamentary body, the Federal National Council, has been set at 50%. Al Otaiba also notes that 66% of government employees in the UAE are women, with 30% at a leadership level, and 30% in the diplomatic corps. “Emirati women have also attained positions throughout the professional field, established themselves as formidable entrepreneurs, forged individual creative paths, and shattered barriers by entering into typically male-dominated fields, such as race-car drivers, mountaineers, pilots, car mechanics, and internationally successful athletes,” she adds. “Emirati women have been part of all major national projects, including the Emirates Mars Mission (Hope Probe), representing 34% of the Hope Probe mission, and 80% of its science team.”

The announcement was greeted with much fanfare in the UAE and beyond, and Al Otaiba was seen putting her diplomatic chops to good use almost immediately in her new role. “Since my appointment as the UAE’s Ambassador to France, in the short amount of time that has passed, it is not an understatement to say that my experience has been fruitful,” Al Otaiba reveals. “I have had the pleasure to meet my counterparts, key French decision makers, as well as members of the cultural scene. My strategy is to continue to build on the solid relationship between the UAE and France, building bridges, and furthering cooperation. The people-to-people component is also an important area of focus for me, as we share many aspirations and values. It is important to note that shared ideals of coexistence, commerce, and culture are at the heart of the five decades of close and enduring UAE and France ties.”

Al Otaiba points out here that the UAE is celebrating its golden jubilee this year, and the country is already committing wholeheartedly to safeguarding its next 50 years. This has been clearly indicated by the recently announced “Projects of the 50,” which Al Otaiba describes as a series of “ambitious initiatives” aimed at boosting the development of the UAE. “Since its independence in 1971, and thanks to our leadership’s vision, our country achieved a series of unprecedented successes, building a modern and diversified economy, infrastructures, providing education, health, security, and stability for its citizens,” she explains. “Our ambition, the ambition of the ‘Projects of the 50’ initiative, is to continue this path.”

Al Otaiba adds here that “Projects of the 50” will see the UAE government injecting US$13.6 billion into the economy in 2022, and $150 billion by 2030, which, according to her, means that now is an extremely opportune time for anyone who wishes to start or invest in a business in the country. “If I have one message to send to entrepreneurs, it would be to come and see with their own eyes, as to what can be achieved in the UAE,” Al Otaiba concludes.
In her role as the Executive Director of Alserkal, a Dubai-based arts and culture enterprise that has Alserkal Avenue, Alserkal Advisory, and Alserkal Arts Foundation under its purview, Vilma Jurkute is easily one of the most recognizable faces on the UAE’s art scene today. While Alserkal Avenue has, since its inception in 2008 by founder Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, grown into becoming Dubai’s premier creative district featuring everything from contemporary art galleries to homegrown designer businesses, Alserkal Arts Foundation is a non-profit that was founded in 2019 to support practitioners and researchers working on themes relevant to the regional artistic community. Meanwhile, Alserkal Advisory came into being in 2020 as a guide for public and private sector entities wanting to develop their own cultural programming or spaces, and overseeing all three organizations is Jurkute, who is making sure that that each of these entities are leaving an indelible mark in shaping the creative sector of the UAE. “Our work is grounded in an ethic of care, shared authority, and collective learning, where open dialogue and long-term cooperation are foregrounded in our partnerships,” Jurkute says. “Both the epistemic process as much as the final product are part of our practice when delivering our public promise. Alserkal was never synonymous with the built environment; on the contrary, as a polyphonic, multidisciplinary community, we have always been a platform where diverse voices and stories are presented and represented. This now continues to evolve and grow through our global collaborations and projects. Supporting the new generation of thinkers to challenge the conventional—leading to new forms of knowledge— is what lies at the heart of our mandate.”

“At this point, there may be a contention made that Alserkal’s goals are lofty or perhaps even overtly ambitious, but Jurkute makes it clear that they are integral and important aspirations for the entity in a world that has been forever transformed by the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. “In the face of this current situation, we cannot act like nothing has happened; everything has changed,” she explains. “We will continue to change. Our cities will be different.”

“We still have a lot to achieve, but I am proud that the arts scene in the UAE is predominantly driven by fellow women leaders.”
And Alserkal will be different. It is imperative we have a space to comprehend the urgencies that concern us all and allow ourselves the time to reflect, as we begin to recalibrate and recast new patterns through experimentation, ultimately shaping our new discourse. This historic moment posits us with the opportunity to rethink our role as a community, and the new possibilities for generating value today, and in the future.” And Alserkal has wasted no time in ensuring that such discussions are taking place—indeed, Jurkute reveals that ideas like these form the basis of the programming it has built for its recently announced commission from Expo 2020 Dubai, aptly titled *Cultures in Conversation*. “With Alserkal’s extensive experience developing cultural content, we have taken a research-based approach to the development of programs for the ten theme weeks during Expo 2020,” Jurkute reveals. “The themes are Climate and Biodiversity, Space, Urban and Rural Development, Tolerance and Inclusivity, Knowledge and Learning, Travel and Connectivity, Global Goals, Health and Wellness, Food, Agriculture and Livelihoods, and Water.”

“*As a collective of creatives, cultural thinkers, and makers, we have always been driven by challenging the conventional, and seeing boundless possibilities through the work we do.*”

*Cultures in Conversation* will thus see Alserkal stage a series of multidisciplinary interventions and artistic commissions that will be showcased over the six months of the Expo. “Through partnering with Expo 2020 Dubai to conceptualize *Cultures in Conversation*, we have thoughtfully brought some of the world’s leading thinkers from multiple disciplines together to address and reimagine critical contemporary issues in a world of the Anthropocene,” Jurkute says. “*Cultures in Conversation* allows for a meta-narrative that offers reflection, awareness, and re-envisioned approaches, as a result engendering new forms of knowledge, activating social discourse, and shaping borderless communities on a collaborative Expo stage.” It’s worth noting here that Alserkal’s efforts with this initiative are in line with the ethos it showcased in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, during which it was seen doing everything from offering rent waivers to its tenants, to initiating the Alserkal Pay It Forward program that supported vulnerable communities around it. “The erosion of boundaries through shared compassion is something I will carry with me from this pandemic,” Jurkute adds. “Over the past year, the aspects of collectivity, togetherness, and giving back, which are an intrinsic part of our community, ensured that we never felt alone. As a collective of creatives, cultural thinkers, and makers, we have always been driven by challenging the conventional, and seeing boundless possibilities through the work we do.”

**It should be pretty apparent by now** that Alserkal has embraced a forward-thinking approach to building itself as an enterprise, and a large part of the credit for this needs to go to Jurkute, who joined the family-run business in 2012, and has been instrumental in its evolution since then. “It is never easy to be the ‘first’ or a pioneer, because there is no model or playbook you can follow,” Jurkute says. “I take comfort in the advice someone once gave me: ‘Don’t be afraid of uncertainty; it means you are innovating.’ To be honest, when we started, I feel like the West didn’t know what to do with us, because we didn’t fit any of their ‘boxes’, in terms of art paradigms. We began as an arts neighborhood in the Al Quoz industrial area, then through Alserkal Avenue’s expansion in 2015, we extended our platform to welcome a curated community of entrepreneurs across various industries, acting as building block for the creative economy locally. And through our commitment to artistic production, residency programs, scholarship, and research we evolved further as an institution, forming the Alserkal Arts Foundation. It created for a context-specific and organic model that responds to our city, our history, and our publics. Alserkal and its initiatives are everyone’s community commons: collaborative, open, experimental, and flexible by nature. Furthermore, tenacity, hard work, a solution-focused attitude, and long-term thinking are all part of the formula.”

**These principles aren’t descriptive** of only Alserkal though—these are traits that can be seen in Jurkute herself, who proudly claims to have dedicated her career to developing creative communities in New York, Chicago, London, and now in Dubai. When
asked if being a woman has had an impact on her career in any manner, Jurkute replies, “Equality and equity are still key challenges for many geographies today. We still have a lot to achieve, but I am proud that the arts scene in the UAE is predominantly driven by fellow women leaders.” And to make sure she stays at the top of her game, Jurkute has steadfastly refused to rest on her laurels. “I learned long ago that there are no shortcuts to success, and that education has an expiry date,” she says. “It is with that intent that despite my full-time career, I challenged myself to pursue my master’s degree at Oxford University in sustainable urban development. It allowed me to continue learning and take distance, in order to reevaluate and recalibrate our trajectory at Alserkal, while being better informed about today’s challenges, and how we can collectively begin tackle them.” This also offers a perspective into how Jurkute goes about being a leader, with her strategy centered on the ideas of collaboration and cooperation. “Humility, collective work, and authorship of ideas with people you work with is key,” she says. “Many leaders still cling onto old, hierarchical methods of management. I certainly hope this dated logic and approach to leadership is now dated!” After all, the times we live in call for a new breed of leaders, Jurkute says. “Failures, challenges, changing dynamics, and uncertainty are part of doing business today,” she explains. “What is demanded of leaders today is the ability to mitigate, adapt, deconstruct, and plan in the age of uncertainty, through resilience, and a humanized approach.”

—BY ABY SAM THOMAS

ALSERKAL AND ITS INITIATIVES ARE EVERYONE’S COMMUNITY COMMONS: COLLABORATIVE, OPEN, EXPERIMENTAL, AND FLEXIBLE BY NATURE. FURTHERMORE, TENACITY, HARD WORK, A SOLUTION-FOCUSED ATTITUDE, AND LONG-TERM THINKING ARE ALL PART OF THE FORMULA.”
In response to my first question revolving around women’s empowerment in the UAE, Al Shamsi replies that she prefers to talk about gender equality, rather than women’s empowerment per se. “The measure of our success will be to talk about challenges faced not just by women, but by all, so as to include our male counterparts in these conversations,” she says. “We seem to be grouped in a female narrative, but what is that? I believe that this isolation, when we talk only about women’s empowerment, can be a little bit detrimental in the sense that women are singled out rather than celebrated as a universal, human achievement.” As for the UAE, Al Shamsi points out that history has regarded the mother of the country’s founding father, the late H.H. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Sheikha Salama bint Butti Al-Qubaisi, as having been an accomplished woman in her own right, which only serves to prove her point that women here have not just been “empowered, but in power from the start.” At this point, I ask Al Shamsi what that actually means, and she replies, “When you have a government that supports you, the doors are obviously open, but you need to seize these opportunities. You are given something, but what you make of it is what renders you unique from another. Some people take these opportunities, and create something larger.”

Al Shamsi’s career indicates that she may well be one of these people that she’s talking about. From an educational perspective, she is the holder of a bachelor’s degree in photography from Griffith University in Australia, as well as a master of arts degree in the photographic image from Durham University in the United Kingdom. In 2005, she was declared to be the youngest photographer to participate in the Photographic Biennale in Italy, exhibiting alongside famous photographers and artists like Julia Margeret Cameron and Cindy Sherman. Today, her works are displayed everywhere from the UAE’s Rove Hotels, to a private collection at the UAE Embassy in Washington D.C.
“Personally, I will never forget that from the very first opportunity that I got, when I was supported for a photography exhibition, and I said, ‘I don’t know how to thank you.’ And my CEO at the time said, ‘Alia, pay it forward.’ So, I grew up with this very strong feeling that I need to pay it forward, and that is what empowerment means to me. Being empowered is not about me, but about how many other women I can empower, and how I can make that sustainable and long-term.”

**→ AL SHAMSI WAS DECLARED TO BE THE YOUNGEST PHOTOGRAPHER** to participate in the Photographic Biennale in Italy in 2005, exhibiting alongside famous photographers and artists like Julia Margaret Cameron and Cindy Sherman.

“And not long ago, she got an opportunity to do just that. In 2021, Al Shamsi took part in Vacheron Constantin’s six-month-long One of Not Many Mentorship Program, which invited six Emirati women to mentor six young female Emirati students from Zayed University. “With my mentee, I specifically focused on bringing in a different member of the art community to each of our sessions, because a lot of people don’t understand that going into arts doesn’t mean that you have to be an artist,” Al Shamsi explains. “It can also mean having a business, like an owner of a gallery, and so on.” Throughout this mentorship program, Al Shamsi focused on opening doors for her mentee, so that “in the future, she has access to the same network as I do.” Al Shamsi adds, “My strength is my network, and to be very honest, I think that we don’t talk enough about the importance of building a network. A lot of times, I was given opportunities, because I was socializing. At the Louvre Abu Dhabi, I’m always advocating that we go, visit, and work with other institutions. That is how the world works. If you work in a silo and wonder why no one is discovering you, it is because you don’t even make an effort to get to know the market and the people. I wanted my mentee to build her network, because it is very important for an artist.”

**→ Another example of how Al Shamsi is paying it forward** is by making use of her skills for philanthropic efforts. Teaming up with The Happy Box, a Dubai-based educational and social enterprise, for its Happy Hearts initiative, Al Shamsi took part in four separate charity trips to Kenya, India, Morocco, and Egypt, which aimed to provide necessary supplies to community-driven schools and centers for women and children. Al Shamsi also published a book titled *Mama Africa*, with proceeds from the sales going directly to regional charities. “I went into photo-journalism as a dreamer wanting to see, make, and contribute to change in the world, and I have always cherished a social documentary aspect of photography,” she says. “Whenever I would get an opportunity to work with children, I was like, ‘Don’t give me city children, but let’s go out of the cities.’ I did workshops with children across the UAE, and it was a completely different experience. You get to understand that the reason why certain remote areas are known for their art is due to the nature surrounding them, and the way people live there. Children there are so isolated, and a lot of them don’t get the opportunities that city children do. Therefore, I am a big advocate of going outside of cities, and of working with children in remote areas.”

**→ As an author,** Al Shamsi has been presented with the Edaad Scholarship in 2007, as well as the British Council Cultural Leadership International Award in 2010. As we start talking about her first book, a children’s book entitled *Alayah* (for which she received the first Dubai Culture Publishing Award), I ask how she ventured into writing in the first place. “There is an element of sensitivity and vulnerability in creativity that is a very big challenge,” Al Shamsi says. “I started narrating things visually, and then I went into writing. There, I started with children’s books, and it was as if I was hiding behind a child’s voice. In a sense, it was true, because it was about me becoming more confident with my own voice. *Alayah* is a nickname for Alia, and the book is almost a autobiography, because it explores this idea of rediscovering one’s identity, and despite me hiding behind a child’s voice, a lot of adults loved that book, simply because it touches on the changes of Dubai, and what it means to have roots and to have a home.”

“When you have a government that supports you, the doors are obviously open, but you need to seize these opportunities. When you have a government that supports you, the doors are obviously open, but you need to seize these opportunities. When you have a government that supports you, the doors are obviously open, but you need to seize these opportunities. When you have a government that supports you, the doors are obviously open, but you need to seize these opportunities.
Al Shamsi is also the creative talent behind Night and Day, one of the UAE’s first three silent books published in 2018, while her consequent release, You Are Made of Stars, is an exercise book designed to enhance creativity and self-expression in children that was released in 2020. “I was always interested in art therapy, and since I am also doing a master’s in applied psychology, researching creativity, art, and the human mind, when COVID-19 hit, I needed a way of expressing for my son that wasn’t verbal,” Al Shamsi says. “One of the things I tried to work on was to engage a child in a conversation through art. Then, I made it available for other parents, and I also created a special edition for The Happy Box. It picked up during COVID-19, because it was a moment for children and parents to do something together that was not academic, but allowed them to open a conversation about how they felt, what they thought, and so on.”

Her latest release, The Ocean Sees Through My Soul, is her first book dedicated to an adult audience, which takes readers on a poetic journey through moments of introspection. Al Shamsi describes it as the most courageous thing that she has ever done. “It is really exposing,” she says. “It’s exposing my vulnerability, uncensored, and very raw. I’ve always written poetry, but I have never really published it, because poetry is a sort of a therapy tool that I used throughout those 10 years when I was sort of finding and reinventing myself. You can see my progress in the chronology of poems in this book.” To other creatives, Al Shamsi has only one piece of advice: don’t be afraid. “In retrospect, if I look at some of the poems and articles I have written, or some of the photos I have taken at that early stage, I smile, because I can see my progress,” she says. “So, you need to take that first step. Unfortunately, a lot of people think that they are not good enough, but they have to start somewhere. Only once you start sharing and exhibiting can you become able to raise the benchmark. Taking the first leap is very difficult, but it is also about being good to yourself by accepting where you are at that moment, and accepting that you will progress from there. You perfect it along the way.”

Today, Al Shamsi’s role at the Louvre Abu Dhabi benefits from her varied interests and initiatives. “Before taking up the role of Acting Cultural Programming Manager, I basically opened up the unit for academic outreach at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, because I went there with my laptop and presentation, telling them what I was passionate about, and what I would like to do,” Al Shamsi says. “So, we started with that, and me building their communities with universities, people with determination, the elderly, and so on. When this new role opened, my manager invited me to take it and apply the same formula that I applied for building their community outreach unit.”

The timing was perfect, Al Shamsi adds, because due to the COVID-19 crisis, the museum was keen on including community-building within its cultural programming. “All of a sudden, it was all about collaborations, and COVID-19 gave this opportunity of togetherness within the art community,” Al Shamsi concludes. “I found myself at home at the museum because of the universality of it. We are one as humans. Our experiences are different; however, we are in cultural dialogues. There is always a meeting point. I find myself in this, because when I’m creating programs, it’s about dialogue, about coming together.”

—BY TAMARA PUPIC
Launched in 2020, The Branding Room started out as a beauty lounge, but it soon pivoted to an aesthetic clinic providing elevated skincare, slimming, laser, and dermatological services. Driven by its mission of “approachable luxury,” The Branding Room aims to provide luxurious treatments that is accessible and affordable for all. “At first, I was working on the premise of putting up something based on what I love doing,” Do-Thanh says. “But as we were going along the process, we also realized that we have this great opportunity to bring a concept that doesn’t yet exist in the community and neighboring areas of JVC.” As it is the “first” enterprise of its kind in the community, Do-Thanh believes that her business has quite an advantage as the premier specialized provider of face and body treatments in the area. Do-Thanh has also made it a point to hire relatively younger staff at her enterprise, which she believes adds on to the business’ ethos. “I believe that it makes us bring a fresh perspective into the field, which flows into my belief that, we as persons, and The Branding Room as a business, exist, so we may be able to help others be the best version of themselves.”

Being the best version one can be, despite what the naysayers may think, also seeps into how Do-Thanh takes on hurdles she faces as an entrepreneur in the UAE. “It is a lot of whammies in my case,” she says. “Not only am I a woman, but I am also an Asian woman, and specifically, a Filipino... I have been boxed into stereotypes associated with my profile multiple times. How many times have people expressed their surprise that I am the owner of The Branding Room? I’ve already lost count. As well as the number of times that others do not take me too seriously, because of my gender and my physical appearance. It somewhat seems to them that I am just this silly, tiny thing, who is trying to wiggle her way into a league that is not of her own.” According to Do-Thanh, this perception exists because though there are several Filipino and Filipina business owners in the UAE and in the wider MENA region, their contributions are often sidelined or ignored. “It’s still somewhat considered uncommon, just because we are still outnumbered by other nationalities in terms of being business owners,” she notes. “The majority of the population are categorizing us, generally, as being in the UAE as hired hands. Because of that, it does seem like we are out every day to prove that not only Filipinos are good employees, but we can be good business owners too.”

Do-Thanh is clearly fighting a lot of racial connotations as she goes about building her business in the UAE, but she also refuses to let it affect the vision she has for her enterprise- and it’s a paradigm that she recommends her fellow Filipino entrepreneurs in the UAE to follow as well. “If we do put up businesses here, rarely would they be elevated enough to be able to compete with other concepts. I stand together with other Filipino entrepreneurs and professionals, who

Mae Romero Do-Thanh
Owner and CEO/ The Branding Room

When Mae Romero Do-Thanh was venturing into entrepreneurship, she didn’t have to look too hard for inspiration- after all, her father is someone who built an enterprise from the ground up, and it remains a thriving business even after four decades. And as someone who’s been encouraged to pursue her passions and be enterprising in life from a very early age, it should therefore come as no surprise that Do-Thanh chose the beauty industry and the world of aesthetic treatments to start a business in. “I personally like getting treatments done,” she says. “But aside from that, I also like learning about the concepts and methods, and that made me do all sorts of experiments on myself, family, and friends.” Indeed, it’s this drive that has led her to today become the owner and CEO of The Branding Room, a Dubai-based aesthetic clinic located in the Emirate’s Jumeirah Village Circle (JVC) neighborhood.
are constantly proving that we, as well, can bring forth establishments that are refined.” And while it may seem like an uphill battle, Do-Thanh says that she has figured out a way to get through all of the assumptions that are thrown her way. “What I have learned to overcome is the feeling of frustration that is associated with those pre-conceived notions,” she says. “I do that by simply taking everything with a grain of salt. I try to look ahead, so I would not dwell on certain thoughts and events that I know I would just laugh about eventually.” At the end of the day, Do-Thanh always makes sure she stays true to herself—and that’s what keeps her going, no matter what. “One must adjust according to the situation, but that shouldn’t mean that you should lose who you are in the process,” she concludes. “Keep being honorable, even when you’re thrown in the den of thieves.”

- PAMELLA DE LEON

The Executive Summary

Mae Romero Do-Thanh’s tips for women in business

→ Be patient.

“I really had to learn that patience is key. I am sure that the topic of patience as a lesson learned has been said countless times, but it truly is something an entrepreneur who’s starting out must learn. In business, a lot of important and joyous milestones and experiences do not happen overnight. You just have to keep persevering with your best effort.”

→ Trust your gut.

“Trust has to be tempered with cautiousness. I, generally, am a trusting person, and I think the environment in the UAE, wherein the idea that it is a safe place, will heighten that confidence that one can have in other people. I did learn that others, even those who you can ‘trust,’ like consultants, landlords, partners in business, or employees, can take advantage of you. At the end of the day, everything is a business, and so, you must not forget to look out for yourself as well.”

→ Research the ins and outs.

“Always strive to be knowledgeable about policies and your rights in relation to your business and your job, so you may be able to speak up when the circumstances call for it. I had to learn to let go of my habit of suffering in silence. I have realized that often times, I am not doing myself and others a favor by not bringing up certain points, just because I want to avoid a discussion or a possible confrontation. I always remind myself that a way for certain changes or expectations to come is to talk about them.”

What started out as a luxe beauty lounge in Jumeirah Village Circle, THE BRANDING ROOM HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED to the only aesthetic clinic in the Dubai community.
In every tale of triumph about a woman, there is almost always one emotional aspect that shines through more splendidly than others: self-belief. Women who’ve firmly set out to achieve their dreams, no matter what the odds, by fully believing in themselves, have always been sources of motivation and inspiration for many. And it is this characteristic that has remained a constant in the career trajectory of Panchali Mahendra, Managing Director of boutique culinary firm, Atelier House Hospitality.

As a woman working in a male-dominated industry, Mahendra admits that she has often felt neglected or forgotten by her peers in the sector - however, she made sure that such challenges never deterred her from realizing her goals. “Women just need to make an endeavor to shine and push themselves to be heard and seen,” Mahendra says. “We can’t always blame the other gender. I have been able to break many glass ceilings, so, I am sure many can do it too!” It is this unfazed attitude that Mahendra has adopted throughout her career, which now sees her at the helm of the Dubai office of Atelier House Hospitality, a New York-based full-service hospitality advisory, development and operations management firm that aims to deliver expert knowledge on the many nuances that come with running a high-caliber F&B venue. “With decades of experience and a team of world-class talent, Atelier House empowers and emboldens small and large businesses alike, combining global perspective with local know-how,” Mahendra says. “In my role as Managing Director, I have been in charge of everything from conceptualizing, to building and expanding brands, and operating them to success.”

Mahendra joined Atelier House Hospitality in 2017, but her overall experience in the F&B sector has spanned for more than 17 years. In that time, she has overseen and conceptualized the launches and operations of over 45 restaurants. And it is this wealth of expertise and knowledge that she used in leading two recent projects that she says she is most proud of: the international expansion of UAE-based Indian restaurant Mohalla (a homegrown concept that Mahendra came up with), and the launch of only the second branch of New York-based Michelin star Italian restaurant Marea. “With Mohalla’s expansion, it was all about taking a homegrown brand international,” explains Mahendra. “We were able to launch it in Riyadh, and also franchised ten units of the restaurant to the royal family of Saudi Arabia.” Mahendra has also been pivotal in leading her team towards the launch of other F&B brands in the UAE such as The Host, Asma, Meshico, Morini Riyadh, 11 woodfire, RSVP, and SOMA.
But amid successes are the inevitable lessons that come through failed endeavors and unprecedented stumbling blocks. Mahendra’s business lens appears to be untainted by unrealistic expectations, and that is perhaps most evident in how she analyzes what the many challenges of the COVID-19 crisis have taught her. “Expect the unexpected!” she declares. “I think my leadership style has remained unchanged through the pandemic, but the overall emotional quotient paradigm has definitely shifted. Crises bring humans together, and this was no different. I think camaraderie, empathy, and patience have evolved a lot more through the last one year.” The underlying traces of realism in Mahendra’s leadership, a style she describes as “pragmatic and personal,” become even more prominent when she recounts the best piece of business advice she has ever received. “The best thing I learnt is to take nothing for granted, to stay humble at all times, especially through success, and to let the results speak for itself,” she says. “Dirty hands are a sign of clean money, so you need to be a part of the system to know the system.”

But even the most hardworking of people can at times feel let down, unmotivated, or even face issues that stem from their own insecurities. So, how does Mahendra deal with such moments? “There will always be certain amounts of insecurities and competition, but I know one thing for sure: hard work goes far, and in due course, is recognized,” she says. “But I also have my loving and protecting family, a super supportive boss, and a great team to keep me going. I have always kept my head high with work ethics and dignity, and know that no one can take that away from you.” But Mahendra also urges everyone to make it a point to find out how they can boost themselves—indeed, she has already devised a formula that works for her. “Personally, I find that working out and spending time with my dog are the biggest stressbusters,” she concludes. “And a bit of a nightcap never hurt anyone!”

- BY AALIA MEHREEN AHMED

THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Panchali Mahendra’s tips for women in business

› Be the hero of your own story.
“Never play the underdog!”

› Patience is the biggest virtue.
“Know that it might take time, but it will happen.”

› Invest in yourself.
“Keep reading and studying, as self-awareness and being worldly wise is very significant.”

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They say blood is thicker than water, and in the story of Narjis and Nidaa Ryweck, sisters who ended up becoming co-founders of a business, that statement has been indeed proven to be true. Having started their journey at global e-commerce-based direct selling company QNET, the duo soon realized the potential in assisting and enabling direct selling for those wishing to run their own businesses. The fruition of that idea was Championaires, a UAE-based business coaching and leadership development company (classified as an independent enterprise under QNET), led by both the Ryweck sisters, along with their brother Ibrahim. “We loved the idea of having a business that wasn’t just about earning money, but also helping other aspiring entrepreneurs achieve success,” Narjis explains. “That’s how the idea of creating a business dedicated to helping others like us realize their potential was born, and along with our brother Ibrahim, we established Championaires. Today, we have one of the largest teams in the GCC region with thousands of young men and women who are building their own businesses using the QNET direct selling opportunities.”

In their roles as business leaders at Championaires, the trio of siblings take on the responsibility to guide, coach, support, and mentor aspiring entrepreneurs in the region who wish to build their own sales or e-commerce businesses via QNET’s platform. But before delving into the Ryweck sisters’ present and future goals, it is important to understand how both women reached this particular stage in their entrepreneurial journeys. Early on in their careers, there were plenty of hurdles they had to maneuver their way through; from working multiple jobs at a time to make ends meet, to finding ways to escape the shackles of corporate rigidity. But a quick rewind of their life experiences displays how one of the biggest obstacles they had to overcome stemmed primarily from their immediate social surroundings, and the many prejudices that come with such territory. “We started our business in Saudi Arabia, and then moved to the UAE, and our business is largely in the Middle East, so, you can imagine the different types of challenges we have faced over the years,” says Narjis. “We’ve been harassed and judged by others, and many times men wouldn’t want to join our business, only because they didn’t want to deal with a woman. People would point out and say, ‘What are you doing? You are a woman, and you are dealing with so many men, and meeting with them?’ As you know, this is frowned upon in certain cultures in the Middle East. However, we have learnt not to take it personally, and we don’t allow it to affect our morale.”

But this is where the Ryweck siblings bring in an interesting tangent to the gender equality discourse. According to them, it was an existing lack of bias, gender or otherwise, in the world of direct selling that attracted them towards the sector in the first place.

“One of the best things about doing the QNET business is that it is completely online, thus making it easily accessible to everyone,” explains Nidaa. “Therefore, in direct selling, there is no discrimination based on gender, age, education, culture, work experience, or social background. It is a level playing field. This means our gender plays no role in our ability to succeed. Only our hard work, talent, and skills matter! It’s never a problem being a woman in this business.” Narjis also highlights another aspect that enticed her entrepreneurial instincts: the opportunity to work on self-development. “I was 22 years old when I decided to become an entrepreneur, and started this business,” Narjis says. “Today, I am a completely different person, and I don’t just mean that from a financial perspective. I have also grown significantly as a person. My level of confidence, how I carry myself, the way I speak—everything has transformed for the better. I have faith and belief in myself, which is very different from the tentative 22-year-old who started out. I don’t know of many industries out there that focus so much on the self-development aspects of a person. That’s one of the reasons I love direct selling!”

From both ladies’ accounts, it is apparent that they experience an almost symbiotic relationship with the direct selling world. When asked how each of them would describe the kind of leaders they perceive themselves to be, Narjis says she focuses on “integrity, ethics, and team work,” while Nidaa firmly replies that she is “assertive and straightforward, not one to beat around the bush.
and extremely goal-oriented.” And when you look a little deeper into the values that both sisters have carried with them from the start of their journey, it becomes evident that their leadership styles have always been laced with honesty and integrity. “My dream has always been to be my own boss, and for me to have not only financial freedom, but time freedom,” recalls Narjis. “I remember the first year I started this business, I was reluctant to give up my day job, so I was doing this on the side. It took about a year before I felt confident to quit my job, and focus on building my business full-time. However, the best part of this journey is that we get to help people who are serious about taking charge of their life. And when we see them achieve their goals, which are sometimes very simple like being able to give their children better education opportunities, or give their family a bigger home, that is so satisfying!”

When an entrepreneur’s goals go seemingly beyond just monetary success, it is also interesting to understand how they deal with failures and setbacks. And the Ryweck siblings are no strangers to facing challenges, having overcome financial difficulties, social and familial prejudices, as well as the many common hurdles that come with the decision to become an entrepreneur. “The way I deal with challenges is to work through them, rather than run away from them,” says Nidaa. “I take an hour every day to meditate, and that has helped me overcome so many inner obstacles. I have realized that for most challenges we face, the solution usually lies within, not outside. If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at will change.” Narjis also echoes her sister’s sentiments on seeking strength from within. “Ups and downs are a way of life; we all go through them,” she says. “What’s important is how we get over the period of slump. I’ve learnt that when I am feeling down, I shouldn’t rely on external factors to pull me out of it; I just need to develop the inner strength to motivate myself. I believe that’s what defines a real leader and a real entrepreneur.”

Now, as the sisters look forward to a future after the COVID-19 crisis, there is one particular post-pandemic shift in the direct selling ecosystem that they believe will continue to work in their favor: digitization. “For entrepreneurs like us whose business is 100% e-commerce, the shift to moving many of our offline activities to the virtual world has been almost seamless,” says Narjis. “It has also presented us with the opportunity to get creative!” With many of Championaires’ training, mentoring, and networking events now being conducted online as well, it has opened up the startup’s doors to beyond the Middle East. “We are no longer restricted by any geographical limits,” adds Nidaa. “We have been able to reach people in other countries who either lost their jobs due to COVID-19, or are looking for supplemental income opportunities to secure their future. As the saying goes, in every challenge, there is an opportunity, and our opportunity has allowed us to expand internationally. The world is our oyster now!”

THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Narjis and Nidaa Ryweck share their tips for women in business

- **Surround yourself with the right people.**
  “It has been proven time and again that we are the products of our surroundings. The most valuable tip would be to surround yourself with people who are aligned with your vision and goals, and reflect the person you want to be.”

- **Stop thinking about gender as something that defines you.**
  “If anything, being a woman gives you an advantage in building a business. Most women are naturally nurturing and patient, which is a great quality when building a team. I find that women are also much more adaptable and resilient, which are important traits in entrepreneurship.”

- **Believe in yourself.**
  “In the beginning of the journey, most likely you won’t find many people believing in your potential, vision and mission, goals and dreams. That is why believing in yourself is key. Believing that the thing that you want or the thing that you are seeking is not just a coincidence. It is something that is meant for you to achieve.”

- **Have your cake (and eat it too).**
  “Women are born with the innate ability to multitask, so if anyone ever told you that you can’t have it all, they didn’t ever work with a woman.”

- **Learn to trust your intuition.**
  “We all have that voice inside of us, but fear holds us back. Listen to yourself more, and follow your instinct, and, most importantly, trust your intuition: you will thrive.”
The unparalleled transformation of the MENA region over the past few decades, with complex mega projects becoming a reality at an unprecedented rate, has rendered the project management profession more relevant here than in other parts of the world. Grace Najjar, Managing Director for the MENA Chapter at Project Management Institute (PMI), one of the world's largest professional project management associations with members in 208 countries, and founder of Align Management Solutions, explains that delivering excellence at speed has been the only acceptable standard for helping MENA countries become oil-independent and digitally transformed.

Najjar has dedicated 26 years of her career to advancing the project management profession, educating the region's talent in business and engineering, and actively contributing to the UAE's vision of becoming one of the most advanced countries in the world. Today, Najjar is focused on the UAE's 2021 vision for fast upskilling and reskilling talent, and by being PMI's Energy Lead, she also runs educational initiatives in the construction management field, advising clients such as Saudi Aramco, Saudi Telecom Company, Emaar, and Dubai's Road and Transport Authority. Her outreach also includes the Department of Innovation and Strategy at UAE's Prime Minister's Office, the UAE's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and Future, as well as the Federal Authority for Government Human Resources, to name but a few.

According to Najjar, there's a skills gap between the demand for project management skills and the availability of talent, not only in the MENA region, but globally. "The global economy needs 25 million new project professionals by 2030, and to close this talent gap, 2.3 million people will need to enter project management-oriented employment per year just to keep up with the demand," she says. "By being the go-to source for innovation in upskilling and reskilling, and building the power skills and skills of tomorrow, PMI is helping to close this talent gap." To further explain her focus on educating the next generation, Najjar mentions that, in the MENA region alone, the annual demand for project managers is estimated to reach 2.6 million by 2030. "Talent is considered the fuel of tomorrow, and it's the main asset in the MENA region, which has a ravenous appetite for learning with strong K-12 levels," she says. "As the modern business landscape continues to evolve, growing ever more complex and presenting us with new and unprecedented challenges, innovation in educational reform is needed to keep pace."
Najjar advises replacing traditional, lecture-based approaches with more interactive, interdisciplinary methods based on collaboration, experience, and a combination of courses. “It is crucial that we train tomorrow’s talent adequately, and prepare them for life in the real world, a world that is becoming more and more uncertain,” she explains. “The interdisciplinary, reskilling programs, especially for business leaders, are key to unlocking full potential.” When it comes to the top skills of the future, Najjar lists critical thinking and decision making, leadership and management, and advanced data analysis, while also noting that project management is among the top 10 skills listed in McKinsey’s 2020 survey on talent gaps. “When we at PMI talk about the power skills, we mean acquiring an innovative mindset to give one the ability to create and embrace new ideas and ways of working,” she says. “It means collaborative leadership to gain the ability to lead through inspiration and persuasion, rather than simply issuing orders. Also, it means having empathy for the voice of the customer in order to be capable to truly listen and better address their pain points.” Responding to market needs has never been more important than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Najjar led PMI’s rapid shift to providing education online. “Speed is the new benchmark, and organizations that are too slow will be left behind,” she says. “Our goal has been to prepare organizations and individuals at every stage of their career journeys so they can deliver fast results and drive success in a rapidly changing world.”

PMI’s Organizational Transformation e-learning course is an example of the organization’s thought leadership in the field, Najjar adds. Another offering is PMI’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative, which maintains a global culture that recognizes the contributions and interests of all PMI’s employees. When asked about the major partnerships that PMI has inked with leading players in the region’s business arena, Najjar explains that such ties cannot be forged without trust and a thorough understanding the pain points and needs of one’s partners.

“It is important to be the enabler of success and excellence, rather than to focus on a sales approach,” Najjar explains. “At PMI, our community is at the heart, and we put them first and foremost. We understand the culture, and ensure that we work toward the goals and visions of our partners. And lastly, PMI has become a trusted thought leader in the region, because of its one-team spirit, where we stay committed to our supportive role, under any circumstances.”

From a personal perspective, Najjar says that she has built her career with courage as a cornerstone. “I have taken leaps of faith knowing that I will find my way eventually,” Najjar says. “You do not need to know everything to make things happen. Courage, a doer attitude, and entrepreneurial spirit are essential. We only lose if we don’t try. This is what confidence means to me.”

“The interdisciplinary, reskilling programs, especially for business leaders, are key to unlocking full potential.”

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**THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Grace Najjar’s tips for women in business**

**Keep your eyes on the prize.**

“Stay focused on your path, stay determined, avoid any disruptions, and remain pragmatic and committed to your life goals. Be outcome-driven. You will see that in the long term, these will help you reap satisfactory results.”

**Keep learning.**

“The best investment is in self-learning. Stay humble and modest with all the knowledge you have. And be flexible in adapting to new methods and mindsets to ensure you are best-placed to navigate future challenges.”

**Embrace your innate qualities.**

“For example, many women excel at emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, and strength. Build upon your inner peace, honesty, and transparency. These are strong qualities that will help make you more successful in business.”

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“Keep learning.”

“We are in a perpetual state of learning.”

― **TAMARA PUPIC**
LESSON 1 / PROTECTION VERSUS ENCOURAGEMENT
Yes, everyone is familiar with the savior complex, but it gets so much worse in the world of business. I want to say this gets better as you get older, but I have seen it happen to my colleagues with 20 and 30 years of experience as well. The assumption that we, as women in business, are naïve, standing like deer-in-the-headlights, is a real stereotype that we find ourselves fighting against more often than not. Getting advice from those more experienced than you can be useful; however, it is essential that you question the intention of that advice. Is the intention one of protection, fear of your inability to succeed, or for your safety? Here is what I am going to say: you know your work better than anyone. Trust your own instincts and critical analysis. For instance, when we at Mirai Partners were entering Lagos as a new location for our business, most people gave us incredibly discouraging advice. We thought differently, and here we are, three years later, with state-level contracts and further expansion planned over the next three years.

LESSON 2 / BREAKING INTO THE BOYS CLUB
Do I feel entirely comfortable going for a meeting or networking at events after work hours or outside a conference? The real answer is no, but I have done it many times, because when you own your own business, you have to. A 2019 survey revealed that out of 600 female entrepreneurs, nearly 56% had experienced some form of discrimination or harassment in their capacity as business owners. As such, the reason many women do not feel comfortable with gatherings associated with work is that we fear that men in those spaces will behave in a way that we don’t expect or want. However, as someone who’s had her own share of such odd experiences, I do have a set of ground rules to prevent such occurrences in the future, which might help you as well:
- If you are not meeting someone in their office, try and pick a neutral and public place.
- If they make you feel uncomfortable, no business opportunity is worth it.
- Personal questions about your relationship status shouldn’t be asked, so don’t be afraid to not answer.

LESSON 3 / CHOOSE YOUR LABELS: #GIRLBOSS, OR JUST #BOSS?
Change takes time, and even if we haven’t broken the glass ceiling as we would like to, it’s essential that we celebrate the small wins. I am going to be honest here- I am not the biggest fan of the #girlboss movement, but I can agree that it has had a paramount effect on the rise in women owning their power in the workplace. But here’s the thing though: why can’t we just be seen as a #boss? I always come across female-focused small business sessions or female empowerment initiatives by human resources teams, and my response to them is always that the issues women face at work is not a women’s issue, it’s a gender issue. As such, for us to push the dial, it’s important that women in breaking the glass ceiling includes men, seeing as it involves them. It can be likened to if all the animals at the zoo broke loose, but the main gate keys were still with the keeper. In the same manner, no matter how many
ceremonial awards we may receive, we aren’t getting out of those gates. As an entrepreneur, I want to be known for the work I do- not that somehow being a woman makes it more special. I love supporting or advocating for people starting businesses, not specifically men or women. The gender of the founder does not and should not have an impact on how you see the quality or value of the business.

**LESSON 4/ BE THE ROLE MODELS YOU SEEK**

I feel like this is a big ask, because the representation of women in business is already skewed. This isn’t about celebrating leaders because they are women; this is about showcasing more women in halls of fame, business case studies, and lists alongside men- and not separately. In addition to having representation, I think it is also important to ensure we are able to look up to a diverse set of representation. So, not just in terms of race and ethnicity, but in terms of personality, industry, and impact. For instance, I wish we saw more women doing incredible work in the public sector, education, healthcare, engineering, agriculture, and so on. It isn’t all about tech, finance, and retail. It is also important to portray women as they are- as leaders. Not every female boss is a tyrant who lacks empathy, as we also have fearless and compassionate female leaders, shy and intelligent female leaders, and charismatic and artistic female leaders. You can also have leaders that are women that have had multiple failures before they succeeded, but because we are so afraid to make a mistake, we don’t want to be that women in business who failed.

**LESSON 5/ BE YOUR OWN CHEERLEADER**

You are going to have moments of loneliness or highly stressful moments. These are going to be very trying and testing times, and this is why you need to invest in yourself. In order to build a business that is resilient, you must foster that within yourself. I say that from personal experience and not as a self-help guide. In the moments when I did not listen to what my mind and body needed, my business always landed up suffering. Whether it be chronic pain, strained eyes, or deteriorating mental health, you can only avoid it for so long. As a woman, you are already up against a million barriers, especially the silent ones you’ve been addressing for years that have created your insecurities. This is why we need to pay attention to the underlying causes of our emotional and physical state of being- it’s not only your business that needs to be stable, you deserve a better quality of life too. I recommend therapy for everyone, but if it’s too expensive, please check out the online portal, BetterHelp. If you just don’t think it’s for you, then try a business coach- at least they will help you manage difficult situations, conversations, or even just time management.

**LESSON 6/ TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

Cultivating healthy habits will in turn help you deal with the deadlines and other pressures that come with being an entrepreneur. From paying attention to your physical, emotional, and psychological health, all of which are interconnect-
Turning the Tide
How going digital is enabling the success of female entrepreneurs in the UAE (and beyond) by SHERYL SANDBERG

After having her first baby, Sarah Seklani was looking for a way to keep working while looking after her daughter. Inspiration struck at a friend’s baby shower. Sarah ordered a candy cart from England—and the other guests loved it. So, she started her own business—Laila’s Candy Cart, named after her daughter—catering events in Dubai with tailored candy boxes.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, all her events were cancelled, and orders dried up. Overnight, Sarah had to completely rethink her business. With stockpiles of candy in her home, she focused all her attention online to try and sell it. She sold gift hampers, activity boxes, and other products through her website, and used personalized ads on Instagram to reach potential customers. What started out as a necessity soon became a huge success. Her web traffic surged, and sales soared. As a result, she’s gone from working alone in her home, to opening her first office and hiring five employees.

Sarah’s creativity and resilience helped her triumph in the face of adversity, but not every business has survived the pandemic. The last year and a half has been hard on small businesses across the Middle East and beyond. When Facebook surveyed businesses in the United Arab Emirates towards the end of last year, nearly one in five was closed, and more than half of those still open said sales were down.

Our latest global State of Small Business survey, carried out in July and August across 30 countries and territories, painted a very similar picture. 18% of small businesses said they were currently closed, an improvement on 24% in February. However, of those still operating, more reported reduced employment this time round, rising from 30% in February to 36% in July.

And the COVID-19 crisis has been especially hard for businesses run by women. Our surveys have consistently found that female-owned businesses are more likely to have closed than male-owned ones, more likely to have seen sales drop, and significantly more likely to be concentrated in the sectors most affected by restrictions on business.

But there are signs of hope. For Sarah, shifting her business online started out as a necessity, but turned it into a big success. Even before the pandemic, more and more people were spending their time and money online, and businesses were increasingly going digital to reach them. What had been a gradual trend accelerated dramatically last year when having a digital storefront, taking online orders, and reaching customers remotely became essential for businesses everywhere.

The good news is all these things are much easier than they were just a few years ago—and that’s especially good for women and communities who have historically had fewer opportunities to succeed. Here are three things every business can do to achieve success online:

1/ Establish your digital presence For many, this is the biggest leap. Yes, setting up a website can be complicated and expensive. But, in just a few clicks, anyone can set up a Facebook Page or an Instagram Business Profile for free. There are even free tools available to make it easy to take orders and sell online.

2/ Learn the basics of digital advertising Some small business owners think advertising is something only big companies can afford—and that used to be true. But with personalized ads, you can reach people you think will be interested in your products for just a few dollars. Learning the basics is easy—you can quickly learn how to create effective ads, identify audiences to show them to, and measure your results.

3/ Know where to get help There is support out there if you need it. Businesses can find user-friendly resources and trainings at Facebook’s Middle East and North Africa Small And Medium Business Training Hub, and there’s more support available at our Business Resource Hub.

After a period filled with hardship and heartbreak for so many, I believe there are many reasons to be optimistic. The ongoing digital transformation can be good for businesses in the United Arab Emirates and beyond, especially for women and others that have often had barriers placed in their way.

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IN PACE WITH PROGRESS

YOUSSEF AL-BAHAR
The Executive Director of Al-Bahar Advocates and Legal Consultants is following the Dubai model of success as he charts his enterprise’s growth.

by TAMARA PUPIC

PHOTOGRAPHY FAROOQ SALIK
HAVING GRADUATED FROM DUBAI POLICE ACADEMY IN 2002, Youssef Al-Bahar left his successful stint as an officer in Dubai Police Headquarters and followed the path of his father Mohamed Al-Bahar in the field of law, joining Al Bahar & Associates in 2008.
Youssef Al-Bahar, Emirati lawyer, international arbitrator, and Executive Director of Al-Bahar Advocates and Legal Consultants, sets the tone for this story right away at the beginning of the interview, with a declaration that his UAE-based law firm has always been ambitious, and that its vision has been inspired by its location in the dynamic Emirate of Dubai. “We derive from Dubai our speed to keep pace with all legal transactions and procedures that facilitate people’s lives,” Al-Bahar says. “I don’t think that there are law firms in the world that can complete most of their clients’ procedures, as smartly and easily as we can in Dubai. So, we are always keen to apply the latest smart technologies for communicating with our clients, and we are always passionate about supporting them in managing their businesses, because their success is our success as well.”
EXPO 2020 Dubai serves as the latest example of how inspirational Dubai can be, Al-Bahar continues, with the event serving as a new economic breakthrough for the UAE, putting it on a progressive path towards the next 50 years for the UAE Centennial 2071. “The UAE has also become the focus of the world’s attention in the economic field, having announced a set of important economic initiatives to push the post-COVID-19 growth and development process,” Al-Bahar says. “This is in addition to taking important steps and making major amendments in offering new types of residence permits that support investors and enable family stability.”

Zooming into his particular area of work, Al-Bahar adds that the UAE’s flexible laws greatly contribute to making it one of the most advanced countries in this domain. Here, he puts forward the example of Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) Courts, an entity that has helped make Dubai a global destination for commercial litigation through the use of arbitration.

It is more than evident that Al-Bahar is equally passionate about both his country and his profession, and I now inquire where the latter is coming from. He obtained a bachelor’s law degree from the Dubai Police Academy, which he describes as “a prestigious national institution that is truly producing men of honor, as it teaches them commitment and discipline, in addition to providing the best scientific curricula that qualify them for serving the Emirati nation.” Then, he joined the law office of his father, Mohamed Al-Bahar, who taught him how to embed wisdom, humanity, and passion into his work in the legal field. And for that reason, Al-Bahar claims to have never found the demands of the legal profession burdensome. “The legal profession does not have a daily routine, but it’s rather a matter of daily work that brings a new challenge every day,” Al-Bahar says. “Every case is a mental challenge and a source of lot of ideas, and dealing with it is in itself a great passion and responsibility for us. We are keen to perform with wisdom, humanity, and dedication for the sake of our clients, as well as for the sake of justice, because the legal profession is an important partner for achieving justice within the judicial system.”

With Al-Bahar Advocates and Legal Consultants being one of the first law firms in Dubai, its team of expert jurists and lawyers has built a significant track record in the profession; however, Al-Bahar makes sure they never rest on their laurels either. “We also work for the future, and keep abreast of all developments in the legal, judicial and justice fields,” he says. “We have clients of all nationalities and from all countries around the world, managing their legal work, and representing them before the judiciary.” One of the firm’s recent developments is its opening of a private notary department, following a new law that granted licenses to UAE lawyers to act as private notaries. “We have educated and qualified our employees in this area in order to make it much easier for our clients to complete their transactions and power of attorney services (POAs), and thus save their time and effort.”

All the firm’s offerings stem from Al-Bahar’s commitment to speed and efficacy, which has him making sure that the interest of his clients are always catered to, first and foremost. This attitude to his work, Al-Bahar notes, is a result of following in the footsteps of the UAE’s leadership. “We have learned leadership, creativity, and creating opportunities from them, and the magic recipe for everything related to leadership for me is in just one sentence of H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, and Ruler of the Emirate of Dubai: ‘The word impossible is not in the leader’s dictionary—no matter how big the challenges, strong faith, determination, and resolve will overcome them,’” Al-Bahar declares. Using the example of the COVID-19 crisis, Al-Bahar notes how it was a challenge for both the public and private sector, but Dubai has, once again, managed to not only get past hurdles, but also create new opportunities for, and ensure the continuity of, its businesses.

For that reason, Al-Bahar also believes that the current legal scene in the UAE is a reflection of the UAE’s rapid development and growth in all fields. “Real estate development has reflected positively on real estate laws, and the development of businesses has also reflected positively on all laws that relate to establishing companies, including labor laws, and so on,” he explains. In Al-Bahar’s opinion, the UAE’s main differentiator from other countries in the world is its ability to keep pace with the changes in laws and legislation that serve the community and protect its interests. “For example, with the emergence of social networking sites and cyber crime, the UAE was one of the first countries to develop a specialized law to combat this type of crime (UAE Law No. 5 of 2012 on combating information technology crimes), which contributed to protecting society, people’s financial rights, and preventing infringement.”

AL-BAHAR ADVOCATES AND LEGAL CONSULTANTS is a prestigious UAE-based corporate law firm with offices in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The firm offers tailored and integrated legal services across a wide range of practice areas to both UAE and International clients, which includes debt collection services and paralegal services.
Another feature of the UAE’s legal system that Al-Bahar prefers to highlight is its flexibility, which is always aimed at achieving the greater good and prosperity in society as a whole. “The laws here are not rigid and do not require many years to be amended, as it happens in some countries, but rather keep pace with the changes,” he says. “The world is in a continuous and rapid development in various fields, and therefore laws must be advanced; otherwise, the failure to keep abreast of changes will contribute to stopping the developmental processes in societies that do not wait for the hesitant or the late to keep up.” In this manner, Dubai has become a global destination in the field of litigation, Al-Bahar repeats, stating that the DIFC Courts play an important role in “arbitration between major international companies.” He explains, “Here, we must make it clear that arbitration has become the preferred method for litigation among large companies, which prefer it over traditional courts, due to the speed of issuing judgments and reaching decisions in a way that does not affect the production wheel. Investors and major international companies want to ensure the continuity of their business, and that is what Dubai provides them through the DIFC Courts.”

Dubai’s favorable conditions for investments, most recent among them being a new system for long-term residence visas (the golden visa scheme) and allowing foreigners 100% ownership of their business on the UAE’s mainland, are other initiatives that have attracted the world’s attention, Al-Bahar says. “In addition to the ‘United Global Emirates’ global media campaign that highlights the benefits and incentives of the UAE for entrepreneurs, other initiatives, such as ‘Tech Drive,’ a AED5 billion program to support advanced technology adoption in the industrial sector, are encouraging for entrepreneurs wishing to establish their businesses in the country,” he adds. Al-Bahar points out that the UAE’s standing on the global landscape can also be seen in its quick recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, evident through the decrease in the number of infected people, as well as the speed at which it got citizens and residents vaccinated through the course of the pandemic.

“These good results give indications that the future is better, especially since we have recently witnessed the return to normal life in many sectors,” Al-Bahar says. “Therefore, the future is promising and favorable, under the directives of our leadership and government plans that have been announced for the next 50 years.” This ties into his advice for entrepreneurs, with Al-Bahar highlighting the ease of opening and doing business in the UAE. “The UAE legal system is an attractive environment for labor and commercial activities, and, on my part, I encourage companies to choose Dubai for their business, especially due to the forward-looking vision of the UAE towards the centenary of the union,” he concludes.
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IRFAN TANSEL’S PASSION FOR AUTOMOBILES began at the age of 15 when he apprenticed as an auto mechanic. Now an entrepreneurial and visionary leader, Irfan is credited for his unique approach to innovation, employee engagement, and more recently, succeeding in a challenging market.
Judging by the numbers his business is professing, Irfan Tansel, CEO of Al Masaood Automobiles, the exclusive distributor of Nissan in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and the Western region of the UAE, must have been unfazed by the COVID-19 pandemic. His company reports achieving a market share growth of 30% in 2020, outselling all competition in the region of Abu Dhabi by the number of units sold, as well as marking a retail growth of 34%. How? “The formula is simple and straightforward,” Tansel replies. “Ambition and hard work, as well as sincerity and empathy in dealing with people.”

But that’s not all— the company’s other milestones include it becoming the first automotive dealership in the GCC region to receive Bureau Veritas’ Safeguard Label for its sales and aftersales operations, as well as it being able to unveil Nissan’s first interactive e-commerce platform in the Middle East, Africa, India, and Turkey. Tansel also points out that Al Masaood Automobiles has also launched an online auto retail financing scheme that allows customers to obtain the necessary funds, without the need to physically visit a showroom or bank. Having been implemented in partnership with top UAE banks, the auto retail solution gives customers total peace of mind by offering them a complete online journey that meets their needs and requirements.
The new service is part of Al Masaood Automobiles’ continuing efforts to ensure the health, well-being, and safety of the community in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The company was also one of the first dealers to launch an interactive virtual sales initiative called CLIX (Connected Live Interactive Xperience), which allowed customers to enjoy the convenience of a full interactive live showroom experience from the comfort of their homes. Such efforts made by the enterprise also explain why Al Masaood Automobiles is the first ever car dealer to have been recognized by Dubai Islamic Bank as one of its distinguished partners that have made a significant contribution to the bank’s auto finance business.

Having listed a long list of milestones that Al Masaood Automobiles achieved recently, I realize that, in fact, their commitment to excellence must have made any other year equally successful. This observation is evident through some of the industry accolades that the company has received so far. In 2019, Al Masaood Automobiles won the coveted Nissan Global Dealer Award 2019 – National Sales Company for its respective market size, crowning the company with the title “Best of the Best.” In the following year, the company was again awarded the highest accolade for Global Partners, but this time by their French principal brand Renault. Most recently, Al Masaood Automobiles surpassed global targets stipulated by the Nissan brand for aftersales services and secured the Global Nissan Aftersales Award, outperforming other Nissan dealers operating globally within its segment. Once, the company was also named the Best Performing Partner by National General Insurance (NGI), after it recorded the highest sales among NGI’s partners for the provision of affinity insurance products.

One common theme among successful people is that they always make an effort to stay at the top of their game, and I suspect that there must be some element of such habits that Tansel also utilizes in order to win in his career through the years. “First and foremost, it’s discipline,” Tansel explains. “It is the road to accomplishing your goals. Like the saying goes, motivation gets you going, but discipline keeps you growing. Being an early riser, I believe that managing your time wisely is also a very important habit. I have always had the highest doses of clarity and the best ideas at the break of dawn. Planning and diligence are essential for success in business as well.” But let’s not discount the importance of sheer hard work, Tansel reiterates.

“I started my career as an apprentice, and I took every work experience to heart,” he says. “Because I had every intention to get the best out of every job I did, knowing that a greater truth will reveal itself as you give every task your very best.” Here, Tansel is talking about when he, at 15 years of age, worked as an apprentice auto mechanic, but he claims to have learnt some key life lessons even before becoming a teenager. “I was born in Turkey, and as a child, like many, I migrated with my family to Germany,” Tansel explains. “I had to adapt to a completely new culture at a very tender age. This meant learning ways to move out of my comfort zone and embrace change.”

WHAT MAKES YOU A SUCCESSFUL LEADER IS SOFTENING THE EDGES OF YOUR ORGANIZATION BY BEING EMPATHETIC AND UNDERSTANDING VERY WELL, WHERE EACH TEAM MEMBER STANDS IN THEIR LIFE AND WHAT THEY’RE GOING THROUGH. CULTIVATING A HUMAN CONNECTION WITH PEOPLE, BE THAT WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION, OR MERELY PEOPLE YOU RUN INTO IN LIFE, DOES TAKE YOU PLACES.
This is essentially how being self-made became a major personal driver for Tansel. “Being a foreigner means you cannot just be like others, you need to be better than them,” he says. “That created the seed of ambition and competitiveness in my persona, and I have lived a life of welcoming challenges, one after another.”

His hyphenated identity (Turkish-German) has also allowed Tansel to grasp the best out of the two cultures. “My Turkish roots have ingrained in me the tendency to be very people-centric, empathetic, connected, and hold a deep sense of value for family bonds and human relations,” Tansel says. “My German upbringing, on the other hand, sharpened my business acumen by charging me with a profound respect to discipline, precision at work, calculated decision-making, and a deep focus on efficiency of process and planning. In a nutshell, I got the best of both worlds.”

Tansel’s upbringing illustrates two things about him. The first one is already obvious: his absolute love for his work. But the second one - his people-oriented attitude - reveals itself even more when I ask about the mistakes he has made throughout his career.

“I’ve always had a compelling urge to do the right thing, and one important skill I learned along the way is how to confront with grace,” Tansel explains. “To deliver uncomfortable messages to employees in honest yet empowering ways. When you’re in the situation and probably too passionate about it, you don’t realize that you could have applied pressure on the other party. I do recall a time when I was deeply absorbed in a conversation that I may have gone hard on some of my associates. I have learned over the years how to remain adamant, but with grace, and to confront people with empowerment.”

Tansel stresses the importance of treating one’s team well. “What makes you a successful leader is softening the edges of your organization by being empathetic and understanding very well, where each team member stands in their life and what they’re going through,” he says. “Cultivating a human connection with people, be that within your organization, or merely people you run into in life, does take you places.” Tansel is also attuned to the needs of his clients and the larger community. Examples of Tansel’s proactive response to changing customer needs are Al Masaood’s Auto Leasing solution, which is aimed at providing personalized leasing solutions to both their retail and corporate customers, or the Al Masaood Confidence program that is rolled out to boost trust and confidence by allowing customers to ask for a replacement of their new or pre-owned vehicles within 15 days from the date of purchase. One more example is the company’s partnership with Kanari, a Dubai-based experience management technology company, which allows them to leverage the power of real-time customer feedback in driving improvements in customer experience. Furthermore, the recently launched Al Masaood Auto App attracted more than 5,000 customers by the end of 2020, and it currently enjoys an average usage of 70%. The app allows customers to book their vehicle service, track the progress of a current service, request roadside assistance, explore new and pre-owned car models and even trade-in existing cars, to name a few services.
“We built up a good momentum during 2021, and we are now gearing up to end the year with great offers and new launches,” Tansel says. “It’s been a good year for us, and we are pleased with the increased market share and healthy growth that we achieved despite the pandemic.” Al Masaood Automobiles’ strategic mid-term plan “Project Falcon,” which was launched a few years ago, is also a testament to Tansel’s foresight that the company should focus on driving operational excellence by optimising costs and developing new business lines and retail formats. He explains that 2022 will mark the final year of the mid-term plan, and adds, “It’s great to wrap up Project Falcon with all our deliverables fulfilled, as we now set to strategically plan for its next phase.”

Meanwhile, Al Masaood Automobiles’ humanitarian initiatives include being the official partner and exclusive automotive sponsor for the Special Olympics World Games, the world’s biggest humanitarian spectacle that took place in the Middle East for the first time from March 14-21, 2019. In partnership with Nissan, Al Masaood supplied a fleet of over 315 vehicles during the event to help transport athletes, delegations, and coaches, and provided simultaneous support for events throughout the UAE in the build up to the main event. Another of Al Masaood Automobiles’ initiatives aimed at uplifting others can be seen in its support to Al Jazira, an Emirati professional football club based in Abu Dhabi. “Reaching out to the youth of Abu Dhabi in personal and creative ways remains a top priority for Al Masaood Automobiles,” Tansel says. “This partnership with Al Jazira Club made perfect sense for us and our flagship brand Nissan, because football, being the world’s most popular sport, holds a special place in its heart. Nissan already has a legacy of strategic partnerships for several major global competitions, such as the UEFA Champions League.”

Looking back at his career so far, Tansel says, “My younger self would be very proud to see how my journey has unfolded. The ambition has always been there, but it is often the ailment of high achievers to not truly believe in their own potential, and rush into criticism of their own selves. My younger self would never settle, but instead was always on the lookout for the next challenge. It had the assurance that the harder you work, the more successful you are. That the harder you work, the luckier you get as well. And that step by step, slowly but surely, you do win the race.” In time, Tansel has learned a few more lessons too- that one becomes more attentive to even the smallest details, that one cannot keep on monitoring or micromanaging people, and again, that one’s business success is also about being available for one’s team members.
“When you take a genuine interest in their lives, this creates a strong bond built on transparency, trust, and empowerment,” he says. “I know back in the day this truly made a difference to me.”

If he could start all over again, Tansel would not do anything differently, although he does admit that some of the decisions he had to make did take a toll on his family. “I think some of the hardest career decisions I have made were those that were also linked to my family,” he says. “Throughout my career, there were times when my family had to move countries and get reestablished in new regions and cities. This meant a new life starting over for my young children and for my wife.” In the end, Tansel admits to appreciating the journey, with all its setbacks and leaps. “Yes, some lessons were hard and some were enlightening, but I have never felt regret for anything I have done,” he says. “I think the best way to grow and progress is to look in the rear view mirror, and see a road full of opportunities, not obstacles. I honor all the lessons that I have learned along the way, and I am grateful I have experienced them.”

And his final piece of advice for entrepreneurs echoes this sentiment. “I’m a true believer that life is all about taking calculated risks,” Tansel concludes. “Unless we take risks and push boundaries, we are not going to grow.”
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Slow and Steady

With her enterprise, Clay Encounters, Qatar-based entrepreneur Reema Abu Hassan is inspiring a passion for making within the local community by PAMELLA DE LEON

As the mindful craft of pottery gains popularity in the world at large, entrepreneur Reema Abu Hassan is aiming to infuse a love for the art in Qatar through her enterprise, Clay Encounters. As a trained architect, Hassan first encountered her love for pottery during a ceramics class in her final year of study at the American University of Sharjah. “I was drawn to the tactility of clay and watching it transform into a functional object,” she recalls. With her background in architecture, digital fabrication, theory, design and ceramics, the interdisciplinary designer went on to work as an architect at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture in Dubai as well as in its head office in Rotterdam, Netherlands. But after moving back home to Doha, Hassan quit her job as an architect and decided to pursue her passion for ceramics. “I craved making, but I could not find a space to do so,” Hassan says. “Qatar’s art and design scene at the time was slowly growing, but there was a lack of creative studio-like spaces. I saw an opportunity to reintroduce the craft of pottery, and to provide a space for people to be in a creative space focused around making.” And while she got started on a two-year full-time Master of Fine Arts Design Studies program at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (in which she is a professor today), Hassan looked at the potential of setting up a venture with such a concept in mind.
Within seven months, on August 1, 2018, Hassan opened up the doors to Clay Encounters, a ceramics studio and curated design shop located at The Pearl in Doha’s Qanat Quartier. Hassan deliberately started it as a small space to evoke the feeling of a family-run business, saying, “People could sense the warm and welcoming atmosphere in the studio... Everything I did came from a place of love and passion for the craft, and I believe that people sensed that.” It’s no wonder then that the studio quickly gained popularity and amassed a community surrounding it. Designed to create a collective space that brings people together from Qatar and beyond, Clay Encounters offers ceramics classes for adults, kids, and families, with its three-day course being the most popular one. “The course gives the community a chance to learn the basics and to join our studio family as open members,” says Hassan. The studio also offers open studio memberships, if you just need a creative space to make things out of clay, as well as host private events, birthdays, celebrations, and get-togethers, all centered around a creative act of making. “We have built a great community around the studio through our membership program, and the members have become the heart and soul of the space,” says Hassan. The shop’s handcrafted ceramics, which are mostly sold on its website, have also seen an increase in demand. “I believe that the workshops have risen awareness in the country towards handmade objects, and people understand their value,” she explains. “Our products usually sell out in under an hour, and I am very thankful for the support that we have gotten since our opening.”

Besides its classes and open studio membership as revenue streams, Clay Encounters also has The Artisanry as a vertical to accept design commissions and orders of custom-made sets and ceramics for cafes, shops, museums, homes, and institutions. It has also introduced The Design Lab, which allows the team to be more experimental and collaborate with designers and exhibitions to craft objects and other design-based activities. It has since inked several successful partnerships with enterprises like Qatar Museums, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, Qatar Airways, Al Jazeera, and more. The brand has also exhibited internationally at world renowned fairs such as the Maison&Objet in Paris, the Venice Biennial, and the Salone del Mobile in Milan. Hassan’s research work as a professor also aligns with the studio’s research component of incorporating digital tools into analog modes of making within ceramics. The products that are crafted at Clay Encounters are heavily impacted by digital tech, according to Hassan. This has resulted in an ongoing collaboration between the studio’s design shop, Qatar Museums, and the Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, with its finished products sold at the National Museum of Qatar.

Clay Encounters’ multiple revenue streams proved quite useful upon the outbreak of the
COVID-19 pandemic, wherein Hassan notes that, besides being a chance to reflect, it also made her and the team realize the value of their crafting expertise. Indeed, the period was when the team completely shifted to making its handcrafted designs, as they couldn’t host workshops involving the public. “We sold hundreds of handcrafted ceramics during the first few months that we were closed,” Hassan recalls. “We also collaborated on many design projects with both local and international designers. The pandemic is essentially what helped us identify the value of adding The Artisanry and The Design Lab.” But while she is grateful for the growth Clay Encounters has been in the recent past, Hassan is not keen on hurrying things and is happy to let the business develop in its own pace. “I began small, and let the growth of the studio fund the growth of the space, and it has happened quite organically,” she says. At the same time, Hassan reveals that her business has been approached with offerings of funds and partnerships to grow it across the country, and it is something that is definitely on the cards for Clay Encounters in the future.

As a small business, Clay Encounters seems to be following a slow and steady approach to growth, and Hassan confirms that it has been something that she has stuck to ever since the business took off. “The biggest challenge was to start small and to resist growing my business right away,” she notes. “I had many ideas that I wanted to explore; however, I was also aware that I needed to build a community prior to expanding.” Another factor that Hassan and her team wanted to focus on was to design the studio and its workshops to suit the local context. “I had the privilege of visiting many pottery and design studios around the world, and I knew that I had to adapt the standard ceramic studio setup to make it successful in Qatar,” she explains. “I like to think of Clay Encounters as a ceramic design studio that is designed specifically for the diverse community and the context. It is special, unique, and successful because of this, and I constantly fine-tune everything that we do at the studio.” As a successful independent studio, Hassan thus plans to maintain Clay Encounters’ autonomy, while simultaneously growing the design lab of the studio. Besides that, as a professor focusing on design research through making, Hassan is also eager to engage in more design research at the studio, whilst considering the potential of expanding the space further as demand grows.

As Hassan is someone with an artistic bent who started up a business, I ask her about how she regards her entrepreneurial journey to have been like, and she replies, “The process of setting up a business is never easy, because it is a very steep learning curve. I learned so much about entrepreneurship very quickly, and I was not afraid of failure because I believed so much in my concept and my business.” Hassan also admits that she’s been lucky to have been supported in her endeavors from other women in Qatar’s business arena. “There is a willingness among the female entrepreneurs in Qatar to support one another, and I have made many friends over the past few years,” she says. “I have collaborated with many female entrepreneurs, because there is a drive that constantly inspires me. The misconception is that as female entrepreneur things are harder, and I think that this cannot be any more untrue. Women in Qatar are widely supported, and we have many great female role models that we look up to who have a massive impact in the local community.”

Q&A with Reema Abu Hassan, Founding Director, Clay Encounters

What’s been your biggest lessons from the challenges you’ve encountered as an entrepreneur?

“Being an entrepreneur is challenging, but it is also one of the most rewarding things that you can do. One of the biggest things that I had to learn is that no one knows how your business really works more than you, and so, you must trust your instinct. Most importantly, if you love what you do, if you put in the work, and have a passion for it, then you will succeed! Many people have told me that my passion and the passion of my team made them fall in love with pottery and the studio. The community can spot passion, and people will always be drawn to a business that operates from a place of passion, and focuses on community engagement.”

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What’s next?

The Next Level of Performance

Samsung Galaxy Z Fold 3

Samsung Galaxy Z Fold 3 is a phone and tablet hybrid designed to help you get the most out of your smartphone. From the flexibility of its expanded screens, to the versatility of using multiple apps at once, this nifty smartphone is one to watch.

The Galaxy Z Fold 3 is Samsung’s most durable foldable device yet, with it also featuring IPX8 water resistance, and an Armor Aluminum Gorilla Glass Victus display to allow submersion in up to 1.5 meters of freshwater for up to 30 minutes, while also enabling a more optimized use of its apps on its foldable screen.

On first glance, the Galaxy Z Fold 3 may seem like a regular phone. But opening it reveals its 7.6-inch OLED screen for tablet-like activities, such as watching a video, playing a game, or using two or three apps in a split-screen configuration. Besides allowing for a refined split-screen experience, you can save your favorite sets of apps to a multitasking menu for easy access too.

Want to do more with Galaxy Z Fold 3’s massive screen? Well, know that it is robust enough to be used with Samsung’s S Pen stylus too, making it ideal for portable sketching, annotating documents, or even handwriting notes, be it while you’re on a business call, or simply watching a movie. And with the device offering storage capacities of 128GB, 256GB, and 512GB, you’re assured of never running out of space.

Powered by Qualcomm’s latest Snapdragon 888 processor, the device runs on ONE UI 3.1 based on Android 11, developed to fully utilize its large screen. For the camera fanatics, it boasts three rear 12MP cameras as wide angle, ultra-wide angle, and telephoto lenses, a 10MP selfie camera, and a 4MP selfie camera under the top right of the internal screen.

With the device being offered in colors of black, silver, and green, the Galaxy Z Fold 3’s design is sleek, sophisticated, and stylish. Whether for work or for play, using this combination of a phone and tablet is guaranteed to unfold a whole new set of experiences for you.

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**Style and substance ➔**

**Apple iPhone 13**

The new iPhone 13 and iPhone 13 mini have durable flat-edge designs and aluminum frames that come in five gorgeous colors. Both the 6.1-inch and 5.4-inch displays feature Ceramic Shield on the front, making the device less prone to breaks, while the improved Super Retina XDR OLED displays deliver an incredible contrast ratio for true blacks, as well as a 28% increase in maximum outdoor brightness. Both models are rated IP68 for water resistance, and they start at 128GB of storage to accommodate all of your photos and videos. A redesigned rear camera layout with diagonally arranged lenses make up the advanced dual-camera system, which enables the TrueDepth camera system and the Face ID offering. The iPhone 13 and iPhone 13 mini also boast of super-fast performance and enhanced power efficiency thanks to its use of the A15 Bionic. The new models also feature longer battery lives, with users getting to enjoy 2.5 more hours of battery life on iPhone 13, and 1.5 more hours on iPhone 13 mini than previous versions- and who wouldn’t want that?

**↑ Well read**

**Amazon Kindle Paperwhite**

Amazon’s all-new Kindle Paperwhite comes with a 6.8-inch display and a smaller 10.2-mm bezel for a more sleek, flush design. The Paperwhite display is glare-free, delivering laser quality text and resembling real paper for easy reading. To help you read as much as possible, Kindle Paperwhite has fast USB-C charging, which takes only 2.5 hours to reach full capacity. The device features tons of other functions to enrich your reading experience, such as Whispersync, which saves bookmarks and annotations. Word Wise, which provides short definitions that automatically appear above difficult word, and Book Covers, which allow you to see the covers of the title you’re reading on the lock screen. And as with all Kindle e-readers, the new Paperwhite comes with instant access to the Kindle Store.

**↑ Be heard**

**Shure MV7**

The Shure MV7 microphone is designed for podcasters and vocalists. It has enhanced audio controls, and it’s compatible with third party conferencing software such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, making it perfect for use at home. The microphone delivers versatility and control, flexible connectivity options, and high-quality audio in a sleek, compact design. The newly launched bundle includes a mini tripod and a yoke to easily adjust the microphone for maximum comfort.

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**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. Talk to her on Twitter @TAMARACLARKE theglobalgazette.com
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, our picks include Paul Smith’s new line for the season, a reinvention of an Audemars Piguet classic, and more.

DEFYING CONVENTIONS
Audemars Piguet

Horologists, make room in your collection for the new faces of Audemars Piguet’s iconic Royal Oak Offshore Chronograph line. Equipped with the Calibre 4404 flyback chronograph movement, the timepieces make a notable impression with their 42mm sizes. Meanwhile, the Mégatapisserie pattern on their dials, which have been part of the brand’s story since it debuted in 2001, gets a makeover in this installment, with the new versions also boasting of a steel case for the blue dial, and titanium for the green dial. For those of you who like a sporty feel on your wrists, it’s certain that you’ll find something in this Audemars Piguet collection that’s worth your while. audemarspiguet.com
For its Autumn/Winter 2021 line, Paul Smith takes us on a journey of subcultures, reinventing iconic British clothing design for a new generation. In a fully digital presentation directed by Chanel alum George Harvey, the new collection featured remixed versions of some of Paul Smith's signature looks. There's tartan tailoring reminiscent of ska in the 70's, traditional suits fitted as a slim four-button mod suits, as well as modern takes on its jackets from the 80's. We're a fan of the collection's use of dusty, muted colors in shades of green, purple, and brown, accented by faded pink, mauve, and mustard yellow. paulsmith.com

TIME FOR A RESET /
Paul Smith

Taking a break from the grind? Make sure to take these new bags from Brunello Cucinelli's Spring/Summer 2021 men's collection with you as you head out to unwind. Lightness and comfort take centerstage in this pairing of fine materials and practical design (made with the brand's supple leathers, of course) and it's equipped with lots of room in the form of interior compartments as well. brunellocucinelli.com

BREAK THROUGH /
Brunello Cucinelli

Founded by Lyndsay Doran in 2019, luxury athleisure brand L'Couture came about as a result of the UAE entrepreneur's fitness journey, during which she realized there was a gap in terms of the quality of comfortable clothing that is inclusive of women of all sizes. lcouture.com

EDITOR'S PICK
L'Couture

With L'Couture, Doran aims for each of her designs to deliver in both form and function, with soft-to-touch fabrics distinctly designed for high-performance results, as well as fresh colors and patterns. With its offerings now available internationally online, as well as in malls in the UAE and a dedicated boutique in Dubai, L'Couture and its all-female team is eager to help you become the best version of yourselves. lcouture.com
With the new Ferrari Roma, the Maranello-based luxury sports car manufacturer is promising its riders la nuova dolce vit, i.e. “the new good life.”

With its clean and symbiotic form, the Ferrari Roma’s harmonious proportions and balanced volumes are in line with (and inspired by) the Italian brand’s mid-front-engined grand touring traditions of the iconic 250 GT Berlinetta Lusso and 250 GT 2+2.

While the Ferrari Roma embodies a modern design language that underlines its authentic, refined styling, its sleek lines retain the sporty vocation shared by all of the vehicles bearing the Prancing House insignia.

The new offering also guarantees best-in-class performance thanks to the engineers at Ferrari who have developed several leading-edge technologies, one of which is its mobile rear spoiler. Besides being integrated into the rear screen and thus designed to retain the car’s formal elegance when retracted, it guarantees the downforce essential for the Ferrari Roma’s extraordinary performance by automatically deploying at high speeds.

As a member of the V8 family (winner of the International Engine of the Year award four years in a row), the Ferrari Roma features variable boost management for instantaneous throttle response. In addition, due to the adoption of gasoline particulate filters, the sound of the exhaust system on Ferrari Roma has been completely redesigned, with the silencers removed and the introduction of new bypass valves.

The car’s new eight-speed dual-clutch gearbox is more compact and six kilograms lighter than its seven-speed predecessor. As well as reducing fuel consumption and emissions, shifts are faster and smoother, which makes the car responsive on the open road, but also especially comfortable in town. Plus, the new coupé sports a V8 turbo engine that punches out 620 cv at 7,500 rpm, making it the most powerful in its segment.

As for the Ferrari Roma’s interiors, its cabin features two separate cells, one each for the driver and the passenger. Its crafting has been based off a complete redesign of the human-machine interface— for instance, its steering wheel is designed using the “eyes on the road, hands on the wheel” philosophy. As such, all of the car’s main commands are actioned by haptic controls, ensuring that you don’t have to move your hands from the wheel and thereby, making sure you’re enjoying the drive through and through.

IMAGES COURTESY FERRARI
FUN COMES GUARANTEED

YOU DECIDE WHEN THE PARTY STOPS WITH 24HR FOOD & DRINK.
NOW OPEN AT DUBAI DIGITAL PARK.

RADISSONHOTELS.COM/RED
It’s no secret that the COVID-19 crisis led to a period that drained the entrepreneurial juices and handcuffed the business performance of hospitality players around the world. In fact, James Berry, General Manager of the Park Inn by Radisson Dubai Motor City and the Radisson Blu Hotel Dubai Media City, describes the time as having been when most hospitality players around the world found themselves under the most pressure. New protocols, practices, standards, and stakeholder expectations were expected to be read, digested, understood, translated, communicated, implemented, and maintained in an instant, over sessions on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. For Berry, when every moment then was marked with a higher rate of urgency (if not panic, anxiety, or fear), he was reminded of the importance of having a good team when working in the hospitality domain. “Your guests looked to your frontline receptionist of three months tenure for instructions on how to get to the airport, what time to have their COVID-19 tests, provide personal protection equipment, inform them of the airport and quarantine protocols, and personally know every medical center in a 20km radius,” he explains. “They looked to your room attendant for ultraviolet light testing of the particle complexity of the microscopic dust on the light fitting. They looked to your security to personally escort them through a sanitized cocoon of safety all over your hotel. And your team, well, they were expected to work.”

James Berry, General Manager, Park Inn by Radisson Dubai Motor City and Radisson Blu Hotel Dubai Media City, on the COVID-19 crisis enabling a reminder of what hospitality is really about by TAMARA PUPIC
The first lesson Berry grasped from this experience was to appreciate the work his team did on a more concerted basis- virtual recognition, online engagement, and distanced welfare management thus became the order of the day. “We had to adapt to find ways to communicate, share, celebrate, and discuss on different levels and in different ways,” Berry says. “We had to support people through financial sacrifices, job losses, personal losses, family issues, mental health problems, and isolation.” He also notes that being a hospitality manager through the COVID-19 storm gave him no margin for error, but also no right for any kind of excuse either. “You had a choice,” he recalls. “You could say ‘pandemic’ and ‘unprecedented’ as many times as you could in every meeting with owners, management companies, and stakeholders, laying out every reason why commercial expectations were not being met. Or, you could try to adapt, innovate, create, and try to survive.”

The first option, Berry says, would have put him and his property on a permanent path of decline, and that is why he chose the latter- to innovate. “I have stores that are now gift shops, and I have back-of-house stores that are now rented out to dark kitchens, and I have a sushi business on a bar counter that takes over my all-day dining seating after breakfast and lunch are finished,” Berry explains. And as he made all of these adaptations to the current circumstances, Berry followed a “one door closes, another opens” philosophy. “I have challenged every square meter of tile to make a contribution financially, not just aesthetically,” he says. “I have new concepts, new menus, new theme nights, new event nights, new event partners, new catering partners, from a house catering, to a drop-off yacht buffet, to mass tourism volume.”

Berry’s efforts did pay off, and while the F&B and occupancy rates returned in the second half of 2020, he chose to tread the road of recovery very carefully. “As a predominantly corporate hotel location in a business district, surrounded by global corporations that all have their own travel policies and working protocols, we have no real sight of the new normal,” Berry says. “We will need to be ready, yet again, for anything, but with hope that the change will be positive this time.” Today, Berry says, his venues are seeing patrons much like they did before the COVID-19 crisis. One of them is the Radisson Blu Hotel Dubai Media City, located in the region’s leading media hub, which attracts both leisure and business travelers. The hotel features 246 stylish rooms or suites, amenities such as a fully equipped gym and two outdoor pools, as well as dining options that include award winning Italian restaurant Certo, cocktail bar Tamanya Terrace, and others.

The Executive Summary

James Berry’s tips for hospitality execs in a world recuperating from the COVID-19 crisis

Stay in the present.

“Don’t overthink the future, and don’t dwell on the difficulties of the last 18 months. If you focus on the present moment, and try to make a small emotional deposit into your team and your guests’ time with you every day, all of you will feel better for it.”

The glass is half-full, not half-empty.

“In any situation, positive or negative, there is more to learn and more to gain in terms of experience, so embrace the opportunity. The alternative is to sit on your hands and blame your situation, which is not good for your business, your team, or your own state of mind.”

Accept the situation.

“There are things you can effect- focus on them. Then, there are things you cannot, so make peace with these things.”

Party,” Berry says. “We will be the perfect Expo hosts, offering everything from packages to logistical support, tickets, any other information, and memorable stay moments for our guests.”
Find the right freelancer, faster.

A platform that connects you to a pool of freelance talent within the tech, media and education industries.

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THE MIDDLE EAST’S GOVERNMENTS have always known that startups and SMEs form the backbones of their economies, employing the majority of workers, and producing the lion’s share of the non-oil gross domestic product of their countries. But even by regional standards, recent funding activity has been intensive.

In Saudi Arabia, startup investment levels in the first half of this year grew by a staggering 65% over the same period in the previous year, with capital raised in the Kingdom accounting for around one dollar in every seven across the MENA region. The surge was driven by deals like that of fintech firm Tamara, which closed a funding round led by Checkout.com for US$110 million. And in the neighbouring UAE, fledgling businesses attracted $755 million in the same period.

When considering the number of these firms that are technology firms, it is apparent that this is a great time to be a tech entrepreneur in the region. Every government would be delighted to support the next tech unicorn. Because of the cloud, tech firms have a shorter scaling path, and therefore—under ideal circumstances— a shorter path to an initial public offering. But those ideal circumstances all revolve around funding. Investors back the winner, and market share is normally determined by that backing.
So, if you want to be on that fast track, you simply cannot wait for the day when your cash reserves will support you. You must find hungry investors that you can turn into believers. They are searching for a prospect with high growth potential, with the understanding that, for example, growth of just 10% can represent an exponentially greater return on investment for them. Here are some pointers for getting investors on board your enterprise:

1/ **CRAFT YOUR STORY** When assessing the value of your company, investors will look beyond financials to your story and vision. Uber, for example, may be valued at much less when examined as merely a ride-hailing platform, than when viewed as a logistics powerhouse. So, your story needs to be about where you are going, rather than where you are, or even how far you have come. Take your pitch deck, preliminary data on financials, cap tables, market studies, and an information memorandum, and talk to potential backers. Build your story based on their feedback, rather than wasting precious hours and days crafting a message that may not resonate.

2/ **PROTECT YOURSELF (LEGALLY)** Be careful not to give away the farm, in terms of articles of association, shareholders agreements, and veto powers, for investors. Consider legal advisors as one of the most important investments you will make. Do not settle for the cheapest one; rather, hunt for the savviest one. From seed rounds onwards, seasoned legal experts that specialize in venture capital and are part of a global firm will be invaluable in protecting you and other shareholders.

3/ **BUILD YOUR NETWORK OF INVESTORS** Many seem to believe they need to wait for introductions to investors, as if cold outreach is unthinkable. This is not an optimal approach. You do not need to reach out just regarding upcoming fundraising rounds. Try to have a call with a potential investor or investment banker every two weeks, to keep yourself front of mind. As you build your network, it helps to categorize investors. Identifying an initial set to test your pitch on can give you invaluable feedback that you could then use to iteratively refine your proposition, to the point where it is watertight by the time you approach the investors you’re most excited about. Also, do not be afraid of keeping in touch with those who rejected you in previous rounds, perhaps on a quarterly or annual basis. The investor conversation then tends to be that much easier to have than a pure sales pitch.

Most investors are open to hearing your story, even if they are not ready to invest in you yet. Unlike consumers or businesses who may not be in the market for a given product or service, investors and venture capitalists are actively looking for companies with potential. When you start to get serious and enter “fundraising mode,” however, make sure you are talking to the decision maker. Many funders use factfinders as a buffer, and the person you talk to may just be building metrics and gauging the market on their behalf, or assessing you against one of your competitors. Always remember to leverage your shareholder network to make sure you are face-to-face with the decision-maker.

4/ **GET THE TIMING RIGHT** Timelines -getting all your investors to align around expressing interest and signing letters of intent- will be one of your greatest challenges. An advisor from an investment bank can prove useful in moving things forward. But while some regionally-based professionals will be prepared to help you with rounds in the $10 million to $15 million range, you can get away without using them up to the Series C round. From Series C onwards, however, investment bankers can prove not only useful, but necessary, and their absence can even deter investors from fully engaging.

At the end of the day, remember to raise as much as you can in each round of funding. Seek more backing than what you project you will need for the coming 18 months. Always try to close each round before the fourth quarter, so you can deploy the funds in the new year. Concentrate on your growth, as year-on-year progression remains a strong indicator for investors.

The region is awash with success stories, and you can be one of them. With the right narrative, told well to the right audience, you can build your network, bide your time, and mount your funding campaign with confidence.
Tell us a little bit about yourself and your business.

Seera Group started its journey as the Al Tayyar Travel Group in 1979, got listed on the Saudi Stock Exchange in 2012, and rebranded as Seera Group in 2019, with a refreshed vision and mission to take our journey to another level with technology investments and international businesses. Today, Seera Group is the largest travel company in the Middle East and a part of the National Saudi Champion companies. We have a very diversified set of business units such as consumer travel, corporate travel, car rental, religious tourism, hospitality, and corporate ventures. Lately, we launched our last project, Discover Saudi, focused on Saudi destination management.

I have been working at Seera Group since 2018. As Executive Vice President of Consumer Travel, I lead Almosafer, the leisure travel platform in KSA that covers 80% of travelers, as well as Tajawal, which is focused on desktop and mobile booking services.

As an enterprise in Saudi Arabia, how are you and your entity embracing Vision 2030?

Over the last five years, Seera Group embarked on a significant transformation by embracing the Saudi Vision 2030 on different aspects, which include in/outbound tourism generation and management, pivoting to the new digitally driven business model, and empowering Saudization and the female workforce. It’s easier to recap our achievements with some numbers and data:

**Strategy/Bites**

Insights and inspiration from some of Saudi Arabia’s most notable business execs by RAFFAELLA CAMPAGNOLI

*Strategy Bites is a series of interviews* that LIRA Strategy Partners founder and Managing Director Raffaella Campagnoli is conducting with some of Saudi Arabia’s most notable business executives for Entrepreneur.com. In this edition, she talks to Muzzammil Ahussain, Executive Vice President - Consumer Travel, Seera Group.
We strongly invested in tech, data, digital enablement, first of all with Almosafer, by pivoting to the new seamless traveler for inbound and domestic travels.

- We strongly fostered Saudization: 65% of our over 2000 employees in Saudi Arabia are nationals, and about 60% of them are female, which is kind of unique for the travel and hospitality sector.
- Saudi Arabia is planning 100 million tourists by 2030, with 30 million just traveling every year for the Hajj pilgrimage.
- Seera Group is the largest and most advanced travel service provider, and we are targeting to be a key contributor to that growth in tourism.

What are the key changes you are seeing when it comes to the business landscape in Saudi Arabia today?

Saudi Arabia is leapfrogging from a very traditional (and not open to tourism) country to one of the most advanced ones. The business landscape is, for sure, one of the most interesting globally right now. As an example, let’s consider the evolution we have been investing in over the last three years:

- We are managing 80% of our bookings on the Almosafer digital application by having enhanced our seamless journey.
- We launched WhatsApp booking in 2020, which is really successfully paying back the investment, as we have more than 10% of our customers booking through WhatsApp messaging.
- The omnichannel approach we have designed is connecting our stores with the digital ecosystem we have developed, being able to manage 360-degree travel needs with a significant physical presence and powered by a digital engine.
- Customer care has been enhanced with the use of chatbots, allowing consumers to find their answers immediately with effective, artificial intelligence-driven responses.
- Corporate travel bookings are enabled with a very immediate digital portal, covering from car rental to train tickets, VIP Lounge passes, and hotel and flights reservations.
- Last but not the least, Discover Saudi was launched in 2019 to support Vision 2030’s goal of domestic tourism enhancement. We are engaged with our mega and giga projects to create a strong ecosystem enabling the Kingdom to become a unique destination, not only for tourists but also for nationals to explore domestically.

What are Seera Group’s plans when it comes to international collaborations?

Cultivating international collaborations is part of our investment plan. Tourism means being able to embrace different cultures and different languages—for example, one of the challenges we have faced is the availability of Japanese, Chinese, and Russian translators in the Kingdom.

At Arabian Travel Market 2021, we have announced our exclusive partnership with Klook, a world-leading travel and leisure booking platform. Together, we will create a one-stop digital platform with end-to-end content and inventory management solutions that will support tourism and leisure activity providers in Saudi Arabia, and provide an unprecedented choice of product offering for travelers to, from, and within the Kingdom.

- With this partnership, activity providers in the Kingdom will be able to connect with global marketplaces and tour distributors, enabling them to build their business, which will not only support the local tourism landscape, but also elevate Saudi Arabia’s footprint on the global tourism map. The platform will also showcase tours and activities operated by Discover Saudi, Seera’s integrated destination management company.
- Back in 2019, we signed our partnership with Intercontinental Hotel Group (IHG), which counts 15 brands and over 5600 hotels in its portfolio in more than 100 countries, for the leisure travel category. Seera Group has access to automated real-time pricing and inventory across IHG’s portfolio, and we have connected with a wider audience of leisure travellers. Leisure travel is a growing category amongst the region’s domestic and outbound travellers, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with a number of projects initiated under the KSA National Vision 2030.

Given your role, what are the things that keep you up at night? Adding to that, what excites you most about what you do?

Like in any business, there are many challenges; however, the “natural” and more significant one in the Kingdom is about human capital. Vision 2030’s plans are very ambitious— it is the first time the Kingdom is facing such a tremendously fast and significant transformation: culturally, very impactful, and business-wise, very transformational, and internationally hard to benchmark. Seera Group is fully committed to supporting Saudi Arabia in its vision to be considered one of the best countries to experience, and we will continue investing in our growth embracing Vision 2030 and its objectives.
Collaboration is Redefining the Future of Healthcare

The scramble for diagnostics, personal protective equipment (PPE), and vaccines have given rise to a new era of multi-stakeholder collaboration, which is ushering in a new era of discovery.

The COVID-19 crisis has showed us that no matter how good one organization is, we cannot solve the world’s problems in isolation. The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is a case in point, and the spirit of collaboration looks set to define the next chapter in the world’s journey towards medical breakthroughs.

In the early months of the pandemic in 2020, the world needed a breakthrough. A global shortage of respirators saw the Ford Motor Company join forces with 3M and GE Healthcare to develop a new kind of powered air-purifying respirator (PAPR). Ford located some of its off-the-shelf parts like fans from its cooled seats, whilst 3M used its HEPA air filters to filter airborne contaminants such as droplets that carry virus particles.

Transformative collaborations are also shaping the future of testing— and there appears to be a common theme: strategic partnerships between academic research institutions and commercial companies. It was announced in April 2021 that the University of Oxford, the diagnostics company Prenetics, and the Oxford Suzhou Centre for Advanced Research (OSCAR) are collaborating to further develop OxLAMP, a molecular testing technology for infectious diseases. The three-year project aims to establish a scientific and long-term partnership that will advance diagnostic testing for unmet global needs.
Ford and GE Healthcare continue to work together to expand the production of a simplified version of GE Healthcare's existing ventilator design. The hope is that the collaboration will deliver a technology that can support patients with respiratory failure or difficulty breathing caused by COVID-19.

Collaboration is just one of three major developments that are collectively redefining research and development. The accelerated digital transformation is another. As digital solutions advanced in 2020 amidst the pandemic, health information systems (HIS) became more powerful. They are key to healthcare transformation: they enhance efficiency, boost productivity, lower costs and directly deliver better clinical outcomes. In April 2021, 3M introduced a new technology that has again come about through collaboration. The platform, which is called 3M Social Determinants of Health Analytics, allows healthcare providers and payers to prioritize care and allocate resources for high-risk individuals and patient populations. It has been created using social risk intelligence from a company called Socially Determined. The collaboration has delivered a piece of HIS software that brings together clinical, social, and population health data to enable public and private health stakeholders to visualize a holistic, fully-rounded picture of patient health. This is critically important in being able to identify those who are at greater risk of disease.

Understanding social risk factors is all part of the journey towards preventative healthcare— if we know who is at risk, from what and why, we can create early targeted interventions. We have seen many examples of how social determinants of health have left some social and ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others. HIS systems are set to be a crucial tool for prevention and treatment post the COVID-19 crisis.

If we can understand who is most at risk and where, we will know how to direct certain therapeutic interventions like the vaccine adjuvant, 3M-052, developed by 3M. It boosts the immune response and enhances the efficacy of vaccines being developed.

On June 1st, 2021, Laszlo Svinger was appointed Vice President and Managing Director of 3M Middle East and Africa. The AmCham Dubai Member of the Board of Director's mandate is to continue strengthening 3M's footprint both regionally and globally. His career at 3M was preceded by 11 successful years in the oil and gas industry at ExxonMobil and ENI (Agip). Joining 3M Hungary in 2008, Laszlo Svinger began his career as a Business Development Manager in Safety, Security and Protection Systems, now known as the Industrial Business. In 2010, he joined the Healthcare Business group, and was relocated to the Middle East in his capacity as Area Business Director - Healthcare, working across all countries in Central and East Europe and Middle East Africa. Most recently, he was the Area Division Director of the Food Safety Division for Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Laszlo holds a Middlesex University MBA and a degree in economics from the University of Pecs in Hungary. Prior, the academically trained economist graduated in Engineering from the University of Advanced Technologies, in Gyor, Hungary. The regional Vice President and Managing Director MEA is trilingual in Hungarian, English, and Russian.
A new book published by HEC Paris in Qatar is shining light on the country’s emerging startup ecosystem, with it providing data and insights to support stakeholders through every stage of the entrepreneurial journey.

Authored by HEC Paris Postdoctoral Research Associate Dr. Allan Villegas-Mateos, Qatar’s Entrepreneurial Ecosystem has been built based off both research and first-hand experiences of participants in this space.

“I wanted to learn about Qatar’s entrepreneurial ecosystem, but when I started researching it a year ago, I realized that there isn’t too much available data, so, I took on the challenge of collating the data myself,” Dr. Villegas-Mateos said, in an interview with Entrepreneur Middle East. “Hence, the opportunity to write a book came about, and I viewed it as a scientific contribution to the development of Qatar.”

Following its release in May this year, Dr. Villegas-Mateos’ book has been billed as the first to examine Qatar’s entrepreneurial ecosystem and processes in their entirety, with it also listing recommendations for different stakeholders in the country to help bolster the national economy and advance its progress as per the Qatar National Vision 2030.

“Right now, in Qatar, the business environment feels more flexible and open, especially with the FIFA World Cup being hosted here next year, and the end of the blockade at the beginning of this one,” Dr. Villegas-Mateos noted. “Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the country as it has the rest of the world, and it has delayed some growth plans for economic development. I can see that business incubators and accelerators in Qatar are struggling to find good ideas and entrepreneurs to participate in their programs. The dilemma is that even when the country strives to create better entrepreneurship conditions, if the culture and people don’t want careers as entrepreneurs, then you have problems in developing innovation and technology.”

According to Dr. Villegas-Mateos, more inter-institutional collaboration is needed to cultivate a stronger entrepreneurial culture, as well as support those who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs. “The most natural places to find and/or create new entrepreneurs are universities,” he added. “In consequence, from HEC Paris in Qatar, I am leading the creation of a network involving stakeholders of different institutions, from universities, to incubators and governmental players. One example is that for the first time in Qatar, we implemented this year an international study in Education City and Qatar University called the Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students’ Survey to measure entrepreneurial career intentions.”

While Qatar remains the world’s richest per capita country, Dr. Villegas-Mateos pointed out that its intention to transition into a knowledge-based economy requires it to invest in its entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially now that the world’s eyes are on the country ahead of the FIFA World Cup in 2022. “For a country like Qatar right now, supporting entrepreneurship is very important, because it is the fuel for tomorrow’s growth,” he explained. “Entrepreneurship serves as an important vehicle for economic and social prosperity by improving productivity and economic competitiveness, and for this reason, cooperation between participants is essential to acquire and diffuse knowledge in the creation of knowledge-based economies.”

HEC Paris Postdoctoral Research Associate Dr. Allan Villegas-Mateos
The FIFA World Cup 2022 investments are comparable to ecosystem success rates. Several key indicators and datasets are needed to be measured.

Qatar's strategy development must consider an ecosystem branding strategy. The FIFA World Cup 2022 can serve as a trampoline to boost the country's global visibility and show potential investors and entrepreneurs that settling in Qatar is a good choice. The location, the taxes, the easy access to international markets, and success stories will help to build the proposition.

Collaboration among stakeholders is key. The Qatari government is very straightforward in its development plan stated in the Qatar National Vision 2030, but with the current world economic situation, different institutional stakeholders need to strengthen their networks and collaboration, and aim to specialize in some specific sectors, rather than trying to cover them all at the same time.

Strategy development needs to be measured. Several key indicators and datasets are missing or are difficult to access. The most relevant of these are seed funding and venture capital indicators, because the number and amount of early-stage investments are comparable to ecosystem success rates.

Design Takes Centerstage

Qatar's Bedaya Center and Fifty One East launch "Tomorrow's Designers" exhibition to showcase local entrepreneurial innovations in fashion

Bedaya Center for Entrepreneurship and Career Development (Bedaya Center), an entity created jointly by Qatar Bank and Silatech, collaborated with Fifty One East, a Qatar-based department store, to launch an exhibition that showcased locally-made fashion and design innovations by young Qatari entrepreneurs.

Titled “Tomorrow’s Designers,” the exhibition that kicked off in late September aimed to encourage budding designers in the country to take their businesses forward, with it being a showcase of Qatari-made creations that could potentially be considered on par with leading designers in the local, regional, and global fashion and design markets.

The event provided these startups and entrepreneurs to meet varied fashion enthusiasts, while also being given the opportunity to collaborate and cooperate with Fifty One East in order to further scale their products and designs. Among the many brands on display at the exhibition were Keshtban, Lovah, Elo Activewear, Dana Riad, Swayra Jewellery, I L A N, Hindam, ATOURS, Tifa.line, H$H Line, SB Couture, Kaftanii, LUSSO Di S, Soie De Luxe, Gahfia, NT Abaya, Ghand Jewellery, Sadiem Collection, and Nero Fashion.

“The exhibition is a result of the efforts exerted by Bedaya Center to support small and medium enterprises, as it enhances the capabilities and skills of entrepreneurs to adapt to the requirements of society,” said Abdulla Faleh Al Saeed, Board Member and General Manager of Bedaya Center. "The exhibition also confirms Fifty One East’s keenness to support talents and competencies to consolidate the concept of adopting national projects by providing the opportunity for entrepreneurs in Qatar to highlight their talent, present their ideas, and provide a platform to display their products and market their brands, which enhances their confidence and helps achieve Qatar National Vision 2030 in supporting human development."

“We always strive to be a source of support and inspiration for the younger generation in Qatar by sharing our long-standing experience,” said Bader Al-Darwish, Chairman and Managing Director of Fifty One East. "Direct investment in young human energies contributes greatly in achieving the country’s strategy aimed at diversifying its economic activities. We wish all designers continuous success, and we invite all our valued customers to visit the exhibition and discover various brilliant designs and breathtaking inspiration."

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By promising entrepreneurs zero-balance business accounts that can be opened in 48 hours, Ahmed Mohamed Al Naqbi, CEO, Emirates Development Bank (EDB), says the new EDB Business Banking app aims to redefine business banking in the UAE. 

By ABY SAM THOMAS
Emirates Development Bank (EDB) has launched its new EDB Business Banking app, with an aim to redefine the banking experience for entrepreneurs, startups, and SMEs across the UAE.

Powered by YAP, a UAE-based fintech company, the EDB Business Banking app was unveiled on Monday, September 20, 2021, at a ceremony at the Dubai Future Foundation, in the presence of H.E. Dr. Ahmed Belhoul Al Falasi, UAE Minister of State for Entrepreneurship and SMEs, EDB CEO Ahmed Mohamed Al Naqbi, and other dignitaries.

In an interview with Entrepreneur Middle East, Al Naqbi discussed how the app is set to be a gamechanger for the UAE’s banking domain, with EDB promising businesses who use it to create accounts that they will see them activated in a maximum of 48 hours, provided all of the valid documentation has been delivered within the required timeframe.

“What’s fantastic about the app is that anyone in the country basically can use it to set up a business bank account, granted, of course, that they have right documentation in the sense of like their Emirates ID, their trade license, and some other basic information, and they can get an international bank account number (IBAN) within minutes,” Al Naqbi says. “And once they have this IBAN, we’ve actually revised the entire know-your-customer (KYC) process to make it as simple and straightforward as possible—there’s literally one KYC form.”

Once the KYC form is filled and submitted, Al Naqbi says that someone from the EDB team will then almost immediately contact the customer to schedule an appointment for them to visit the latter at a location of their choosing. At this meeting, the EDB representative would verify documents as needed and collect the requisite forms, and should everything be in order, customers are assured of their accounts being activated and ready in a span of 48 hours or less.
“The second you download the app, you should have everything already ready and in place, and within 48 hours, you will have an active account,” Al Naqbi says. “Now, compare that to the horror stories that I’ve heard, where people take months [to launch an account], and they also have to go through all kinds of hurdles and hoops, where they have to speak to this person, and then speak to that person. Anybody that’s listening to me right now, who’s in the startup world, will understand exactly what I’m saying. Forget that; we want you to come to EDB.”

According to Al Naqbi, who was appointed as the CEO of EDB just about four months ago, the EDB Business Banking app came into being after conversations with a variety of stakeholders from across the UAE business domain, just as he started his tenure at the bank.

“One key element that kept coming up over and over again was the fact that entrepreneurs face a lot of difficulty when opening up a bank account,” he remembers. “So, I knew, within a month of joining, that this was something that we could solve, and that it would have a real impact on entrepreneurs, SMEs, and startups in the UAE.”

The effects of these discussions that Al Naqbi and his team at EDB had with members of the public and private sectors of the UAE’s business landscape can be seen in the characteristics that the EDB Business Banking app professes today solely for the benefit of entrepreneurs.

“We have no charges; this application is completely free to use,” Al Naqbi points out. “There are no monthly fees. There are no maintenance fees. There is no minimum account balance requirement... You can have zero balance. It’s your money- we’re not here to make a profit off of you. We’re here to try to support and enable you.”

Al Naqbi reveals that plans are already in place to build on the offerings that will be available on the app, which include features that allow for payrolls, remittances, and other such services, although they may have costs associated with them. “What we promise as EDB is that we will partner with the best people on those value-added services,” Al Naqbi declares. “And we will make sure that whatever cost is on there is as fair as possible.”

As a bank whose mandate is to develop the UAE’s economy, Al Naqbi points out that as a non-commercial entity, EDB is uniquely positioned to bring out solutions like the EDB Business Banking app, which is solely targeted at furthering business within the UAE.

“We are not looking to compete with commercial banks,” Al Naqbi explains. “They are doing what they are doing, and more power to them- they’re doing the best they can on behalf of their shareholders. For us, it’s about addressing that gap that we completely understand cannot necessarily be addressed on the commercial side of things, but at the same time, is a critical need for the growth and development of the country.”

When asked how he’d go about pitching the app to be used by entrepreneurs in the UAE, many of whom have had difficulties dealing with banks in the past, Al Naqbi urged them to look at this new digital initiative with an open mind. “The only thing that I can say is that the proof is going to be in the pudding,” he says. “When you actually use this application, you will see. If you have access to your funds in your accounts, and you’re able to use it to your needs, and you’re not seeing anybody trying to charge you or price gauge you, and that there’s nothing for you there to feel like you’re being taken advantage of, then all of this should be a new experience for you. But again, you have to try it, and I hope that you do, as an entrepreneur.”

Anyone in the country can use it to set up a business bank account, granted, of course, that they have right documentation. They can get an international bank account number (IBAN) within minutes.

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The Executive Summary

A closer look at what you can expect from the new EDB Business Banking app

- Offers SMEs access to 24x7 secure, convenient, on-the-go digital banking services
- Free to all, across all Emirates, with no minimum balance criteria
- Account can be applied for in seconds online
- Business account IBAN is reserved in a matter of minutes
- Account activation completed as fast as 48 hours
- Offers a comprehensive suite of banking facilities including a fully operational business bank account, bill payments, invoicing, budgeting, and analytics.

edb.gov.ae/en#/download
Having observed that the regional real estate market provide services that were largely haphazard in nature, Mohammad Almunaikh, co-founder and CEO of property management and rent collection platform Ajar, decided to create a software that could potentially bridge the many communication and other gaps between tenants and landlords. With this goal in mind, Almunaikh had initially set out to offer payment solutions to landlords in an attempt to make rent collections easier. But that didn’t solve the underlying issues that were truly ailing the sector, he says. “The payment solutions only added extra effort to the landlords’ workload,” adds Almunaikh. “So, we decided instead to offer safe, fast, and more organized solutions in the field of property management and automated rent collection.”

OUR VALUE PROPOSITION AT AJAR IS TO REDUCE LANDLORDS’ ANXIETIES AND INCREASE THEIR RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI) BY AUTOMATING HOME MANAGEMENT WORKFLOWS, ENABLING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING, INCREASING TENANT LIFE EXPECTANCY, AND PROCESSING SWIFT MONEY TRANSACTION.
That was how Ajar’s property management software came to fruition in Kuwait in 2016 (with it now also being used in Bahrain and the UAE), and with it, Almunaikh is attempting to kill two birds with one stone. “The first of the two main problems that we are focusing on is that there are too many boundaries between landlords and tenants, which add unnecessary costs and inefficiency to both of them,” he explains. “The second issue is that factors such as investment performances and monitoring reports for landlords do not exist in the traditional real estate industry. We want to change that with Ajar!”

Ajar’s services reflect the vision Almunaikh speaks of. Among other aspects, one point worth noting is that these services are for landlords who own as little as one property to those with more than 1000 property units, which essentially opens up Ajar’s offerings to everyone, regardless of how much they own. Through a “message center” feature, it allows for individual landlords to directly communicate with tenants, understand their requirements, and also receive online payments. On the other hand, it also enables better decision-making for property managers by providing them with important insights and data on the units they’re in charge of.

For real estate companies, Ajar eases the process of monitoring requests through its maintenance tracking system and provides automated invoices and receipt generation. With such a holistic approach, Almunaikh believes his startup can prove to be of great value to landlords. “Our value proposition at Ajar is to reduce landlords’ anxieties and increase their return on investment (ROI) by automating home management workflows, enabling artificial intelligence-driven decision making, increasing tenant life expectancy, and processing swift money transactions,” he adds.

When setting up in the UAE, Almunaikh admits that it was initially quite a task to access the wide network of property managers in the country, and convince stakeholders to shift to digital payments—however, the COVID-19 crisis helped in overcoming the latter challenge. “The biggest benefit was the talent pool available in Dubai, and the access we had to the banking sector,” he adds. This also leads into why the startup decided to become a part of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program. “We chose to be a part of MBRIF, because we’re interested in connecting with likeminded individuals in the UAE, and being part of this great initiative certainly also helped us to scale our business and in easing access to desired markets and clients,” Almunaikh says.

The Ajar team is currently a team of 20 people, and having closed its last funding round of US$5.6 million in 2019, Almunaikh hopes the firm can keep gaining the trust of landlords across the region. “The point we are trying to make is that if you are a landlord in the GCC region, with less than 100 units, Ajar will be the best solution for you to manage your property, and increase your RoI!” he declares.

We got started in the first place based on a simple observation that inefficient communication and knowledge sharing cost companies 20-30% of their annual revenues!” With this statement, Giisty co-founder and CEO Mohammed Alami encapsulates the essence of the concept of his tech startup. Built with the sole aim of fostering interactive communication within corporate offices and teams, the Abu Dhabi-based startup offers to replace emails, meetings, and typical knowledge sharing methods with short peer-reviewed audio and video messages. “In our daily lives, we send tons of video and audio messages to friends and family to share information and experiences, but almost none at work,” explains Alami. “And despite knowing the negative effects of miscommunication, many companies continue to ‘make do’ with their current applications, while they might not be the most suitable solutions. Through Giisty’s services, corporations would considerably improve knowledge sharing, access to information, engagement, and overall workforce productivity.”
Initially launched as Tuitify in 2018, the organization rebranded as Giisty in early 2021. “We started off with my co-founder in Paris with only an idea, and decided to come to the UAE to develop it and make it grow as a business,” recalls Alami. “Since then, we have hired over 20 collaborators and signed industry leaders such as AXA, Sanofi, and HSBC. Our solution is used in 15 countries and across four continents.” Alami believes that what was launched in 2021, through Giisty, were brand-new offerings that were much more in line with what the corporate market was in need of—particularly in light of how the ecosystem had changed in the aftermath of the global coronavirus crisis. “With the pandemic, communication and knowledge sharing had been disrupted, and corporations had an urgent need for a solution that would help their teams keep their productivity or even enhance it, and that’s how we came up with Giisty,” he explains.

One of the platform’s many offerings is the somewhat unfamiliar concept of video emails. As an approach that the Giisty team says can increase productivity by up to 30%, this feature encourages team members to send short videos to quickly summarize what they intend to communicate, thereby leaving little room for misinterpretation or confusion.

Another interesting feature the platform offers is a Centralized Communication Hub wherein questions that are frequently asked to managers and team members can be reduced by up to 70%. Giisty’s platform also provides a Partners and Customers Portal where companies can share short video content with just their partners and customers with the aim of improving their understanding of the products and services they offer.

While there were a few hurdles that had to be overcome during the startup’s journey thus far, Alami insists being located in the UAE has played a major role in elevating their success rate. “Once the business is all set, being in the UAE gives us access to several markets and positions us in a technology hub that allows us to spread across four continents, as we are pretty much in the middle of all of them,” he says. “The vision of our leaders about the importance of technology and innovation is a locomotive that is helping us convince corporations to use a solution like ours.” Being part of the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program also helped the enterprise a lot, Alami notes. “The MBRIF team, contrary to other programs, created a tailor-made experience for each one of the startups to target our needs and help us overcome our weaknesses,” he says. “We worked with several mentors to better identify our core values and re-rewrite our pitch deck, and we are already seeing great feedback and tangible results from clients and investors. The high level of commitment from the team and the knowledge of each mentor made us grow faster in three months than we would have on our own in a year or more.”

BEING IN THE UAE GIVES US ACCESS TO SEVERAL MARKETS AND POSITIONS US IN A TECHNOLOGY HUB WHICH ALLOWS US TO SPREAD ACROSS FOUR CONTINENTS.
Based in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, Hawa Water’s business model provides one such solution. “Hawa Water, born in the UAE, is harvested from the humidity of the air and delivered as bottled drinking water in a returnable glass bottle,” explains General Manager Jaufre Rouanet, who co-founded the startup along with Gregory Sauvage and Nabil Hamade. “Respecting the environment and protecting the water resources of the UAE, Hawa is fresh water from a sustainable abundant source: the atmosphere, with a strong commitment to eliminate plastic waste, and reduce the carbon footprint of the simplest resource of earth required for life.” With this approach, Hawa Water eliminates one obvious element of drinking water production: relying on existing water bodies. It is also a concept that very neatly aligns with one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. “Our team, with a diverse background, is united around the objective of making a long-term pledge to the planet: providing fresh water without adding waste or brine,” adds Rouanet. “We are clear when looking at all the various water brands coming from ‘the other side of the planet,’ or from desalination plant factories, we believe in decentralized and decarbonized local water generation from the atmosphere.”

What this approach has resulted in is the production of zero sodium, pure, and alkaline still as well as sparkling water, that are sold in glass water bottles, thereby ensuring zero plastic waste. “Hawa Water is not a concept anymore,” says Rouanet. “Production has started in our factory in the UAE, and after
There are over 20 Arab countries in the MENA region, and with each country having its own set of distinct dialects, it poses a communication challenge that often goes under the radar in many industries. To cater to this specific issue, California-based startup Kanari AI launched its dialectal Arabic speech technology solutions, with specific features that focus on automatic speech recognition as well as text-to-speech conversion, in 2020. “There is a lack of speech technology adoption in the MENA region, and our technology addresses the four main pain points of speech technologies in the Arab world: poor accuracy, deployment concerns, lack of customization, and complicated integration,” explains Kanari AI founder and CEO Ryan Carmichael. “We detect 19 Arabic dialects in one global speech model. We have also licensed our technology from Qatar Computing Research Institute, and have since improved accuracy and focused on commercialization efforts.”

OUR TEAM, WITH A DIVERSE BACKGROUND, IS UNITED AROUND THE OBJECTIVE OF MAKING A LONG-TERM PLEDGE TO THE PLANET.

a long administrative journey, Hawa is now distributed in the UAE by our local partner, United Foods, and we are now available online. We have also been gratified by supporters who helped us during our journey to bring Hawa to reality, and we are now looking at opening the doors to hotels, restaurants, and specialized organic shops to bring Hawa within the reach of everyone in the country!”

Having worked on developing the idea for two years, and subsequently been funded by the co-founders’ circles of friends and family, the Hawa Water team expects the startup to fare well in the months to come. However, Rouanet remains wary of the challenges that lie ahead. In particular, he is attentive to the fact that many restaurant and hotel owners may not necessarily want to immediately switch from their previous water suppliers’ contracts. But he remains hopeful that the spirit of the nation itself will ensure that more and more clients will be welcoming of Hawa Water in the near future. “The UAE is a unique hub of culture and diversity of profiles, and throughout our journey, we have been able to engage with so many different individuals sharing our view of sustainability and engagement,” he adds.

As such, this would explain why the Hawa Water team participated in the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program. “Hawa is at a stage where it needs a booster!” Rouanet explains. “MBRIF is the booster we expect for reaching out to our clients, to the world, for giving the opportunity to Dubai visitors, residents and nationals to taste the water from the sky. We trust that MBRIF will help us share our vision with opinion leaders and visionaries of the country: this is a solution to water scarcity and opening a new horizon for a local decarbonized water. Life is in the air!”

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According to Carmichael, Kanari AI’s speech technology can be adopted across a variety of sectors, ranging from media and education, to legal and government, and it also provides valuable assistance to firms deploying security and voice assistant services. But detecting a variety of Arabic dialects isn’t all that there is to the startup either. Within its automatic speech recognition offerings, it can also use pre-existing datasets, that Kanari AI’s clients have on their own systems, in order to increase the accuracy of its results. It also enables on-premise, cloud, and hybrid cloud solutions that make its speech-to-text features flexible and quick.

The team behind creating this technology is spread across the globe, which makes the startup what Carmichael calls a “global remote company. The Kanari AI team currently comprises of 10 members, with the founder himself based in California, while the engineering team is currently located in the Indian city of Bangalore. “Our Chief Scientist is based in Doha, and we have artificial intelligence (AI) researchers in Lebanon, UAE, and Egypt,” adds Carmichael. But while having such a diverse, remotely-based team poses a challenge in itself, Carmichael also had to deal with the problems associated with launching a startup in the middle of a global pandemic. “Launching a global startup during COVID-19 has been challenging, especially with in-person relationship building being important for enterprise solutions,” he says. “But having a local presence in Dubai has allowed us to not only build our local brand, but has also provided more access to top AI and engineering talent.” Joining the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund (MBRIF) accelerator program also helped the company in this regard. “MBRIF was able to provide much needed regional support for our company,” adds Carmichael. “The MBRIF team has been very responsive by helping us in setting up our local presence, and they also introduced us to enterprise partners and local investors.” Given the increasing number of industries in the region that are finding themselves in need of Arabic speech technology solutions, Kanari AI looks to be all set to capitalize on the opportunities ahead- it’s only a matter of time.
Graduates of TAQADAM’s 2018 cohort, Luisa Javier and Sandra Medina launched their biotech startup Wayakit in 2019. Wayakit started out by developing a laundry spray that can be used by travelers on the go—a product that Medina very succinctly describes as “a washing machine in your pocket!” The inspiration for it, in fact, came out of a traveling mishap of sorts which both ladies experienced a few years ago. “The first spark for Wayakit came when we were travelling for a conference, and the airline lost our luggage during that trip,” recalls Medina, who is also the startup’s CTO. “At that moment we realized the challenge of doing laundry while travelling, and thought of using our technology and our knowledge to solve this issue.”

As scientists, what we wanted to do whenever we had a new idea was to go to the lab and start developing on it. But what TAQADAM taught us is that you need to understand the customer first, and validate the market.
While this initial idea went through multiple iterations when both founders enrolled in TAQADAM, the biggest, and possibly most significant, step in this entire journey was one that happened outside the science laboratory, says Medina. “As scientists, what we wanted to do whenever we had a new idea was to go to the lab and start developing on it,” she explains. “But what TAQADAM taught us is that before anything, you need to understand the customer, and validate the market. So, we conducted more than 120 interviews, and identified two pain points for travelers: smells and stains. Our laundry spray was created to target these two issues.”

TAQADAM’s approach to entrepreneurship held special significance for CEO Javier, who says it completely changed the way she perceived her job, despite having ventured into other entrepreneurial endeavors in the past. And that mental shift in perception was only accentuated with mentors like 500 Startups MENA’s Partner Amal Dokhan to guide them, she says. “I still remember the first conversation I had with Amal Dokhan,” adds Javier. “She said: ‘Are you ready to put a bit on hold all the entrepreneurial knowledge that you have? Leave it there and re-learn!’ For me coming from doing a business, and having a background in entrepreneurship, that was impressive. I think there was a shift!”

But with the laundry spray targeted primarily towards the travel sector, one of the most adversely affected industries during the peak of the global coronavirus crisis, it was effectively rendered unusable for a while. That didn’t stop the duo however- they quickly pivoted towards a new product: an organic disinfectant. “We knew that our laundry spray had some antibacterial properties, but we had never tested for viruses before,” elaborates Medina. “So we modified it to create our second product- a disinfectant that kills the coronavirus in 30 seconds. It is nothing like what you find in the market. Our product is based on natural components -our active component being citric acid- and it is really effective.”

Of course, this transition was made easier with KAUST offering the entrepreneurs the use of a new production plant, located at the KAUST Research Park, which allows manufacturing of up to 20,000 liters of its new disinfectant per day. But as sudden and unexpected as this pivot was, it was also one that opened new doors for Wayakit. “Our product is now used to disinfect the cabins of aircrafts like Air France and KLM,” explains Javier. “We migrated a little bit from the solution of the spray, and went to a solution that can help with disinfection in the B2B area.”

Now, with the travel industry slowly getting back on its feet again, and plans to close a US$4 million pre-Series A round later this year, this duo of female scientists are keen on taking their enterprise forward. “Right now, we are in a position of starting business in the complicated aviation industry but it is exciting,” explains Javier. “However, in the Middle East, we see a great potential for introducing this type of disinfectant in the B2C segment as well. We are planning to use the next round of funding to increase our production capacity.”

Born out of an idea inspired by the French car-pooling marketplace BlaBlaCar, Rehla Car essentially functions as a ride-sharing company in Saudi Arabia. A 2017 TAQADAM alum, its founder Abdualrahman Alshaikhy says he had observed many glaring issues in the way intercity travel in the Kingdom occurred. “I found there is a lack of resources when you want to find ways to move from city to city, and during times like Ramadan, the roads are even more crowded than usual,” explains Alshaikhy. “And with issues like fuel and maintenance, travelers also cannot sleep during long-distance journeys. It was around that time when I came across the BlaBlaCar app, and I thought why don’t I create a similar concept for Saudi Arabia.”

TAQADAM TALES

REHLA CAR

REHLA CAR

REHLA CAR

REHLA CAR

REHLA CAR
Launched in 2019, Rehla Car’s business model is quite simple. Potential drivers can register their vehicles on the app, and specify which city they will be traveling to and when, and these routes are then presented as options for travelers to choose from. Currently, Rehla Car’s offering caters to tourists visiting Jeddah, as well as the two holy cities of Makkah and Madinah, which see hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visiting every year. “Rehla Car has now created a way for tourists and visitors to travel in an affordable way, while also getting to find out more about our culture,” Alshaikhy says. “We have also added some services like ride hailing and booking-in-advance, which are similar to what some other companies offer, but a concept like ride-sharing is not heard of in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East.”

The lockdowns during the COVID-19 crisis proved to be the biggest hurdle for the startup, since road travel and social distancing protocols challenged the very essence of its business model. But that opened doors for some new features to be added, says Alshaikhy. From a sociological perspective, there is one interesting point Alshaikhy raises when speaking about his future plans: with Saudi Arabia now issuing driving licenses for women, it opens up the opportunity for female drivers to use Rehla Car. “Women in the country can now also travel in the safety of having all-female passengers and drivers by using our app,” says Alshaikhy. “So I really hope more female drivers use Rehla Car.”

Now, with a new workspace provided by KAUST, the opportunity to avail its many connections, and a keen focus on Vision 2030, Alshaikhy is working to further expand his business. His aim: to make Rehla Car a super app. “There are 53 million monthly road trips between Saudi Arabian cities,” he adds. “Now, imagine if that could be significantly reduced- we can also reduce pollution, traffic, and accidents. By providing ride-sharing, ride-hailing, parcel delivery, booking in advance, and tourism trips all in one place, we plan to become a super app in the region.”

Launched in 2018, UnitX is an AI company whose flagship enterprise solution, Vizard, takes in streaming video feed coming in from drones or CCTV cameras, and analyzes it in real-time to trigger instant insights, alerts, and notifications. “Vizard basically leverages the combination of deep learning with edge computing, and it is uniquely positioned to capture the computer vision market for safety and surveillance,” explains CEO Kiran Narayanan. “The industries we are targeting right now are oil and gas industrial sites, airports, as well as event management companies.”

Frustrated by the knowledge that contemporary scientific academic research didn’t necessarily always translate into real-world solutions that achieve economic impact, Narayanan admits that he entered the TAQADAM program with a fair amount of trepidation. However, those worries soon melted away. “My co-founders and I had a passion to commercialize high-performance computing and artificial intelligence, and TAQADAM helped us in realizing and conceptualizing that dream,” explains Narayanan. “The team there assured us they have a program that can help define whatever ideas we had.”
As a college student in 2017, Miqyas founder Abdulla Almazrooa was fascinated by the idea of offering online custom-fit options, and initially pondered upon the possibility of using it for measuring the Arabian thobe, a garment that’s traditionally worn by men of the Middle East. “I was just observing what was happening in computer vision and the quick advancements in deep learning, and it occurred to me that it was just a matter of time before we are able to scan human bodies using only a camera,” recalls Almazrooa. This idea was then modified to incorporate all clothing, from across the fashion e-commerce realm, and eventually led to the launch of Miqyas in 2020. Built as a software as a service (SaaS) platform, Miqyas helps online fashion retailers precisely measure clothing sizes for customers. “We developed two Miqyas products,” Almazrooa explains. “The first service, ‘custom-fit,’ takes two customer images and measures exact body measurements. The second one, ‘size-it,’ asks users simple questions on product pages, and then recommends the perfect size on all brands. Our clients can use these plug-ins on their platforms to solve the problem of online fit, and we charge them a subscription fee.”

By offering a US$20,000 grant, TAQADAM was particularly helpful in kickstarting the business. But while the business itself is entirely technological in nature, Narayanan says it is the emotional support he received that proved to be the biggest source of strength. “What TAQADAM really did for us was it created a safe space for us to go crazy and take the plunge into entrepreneurship,” he adds. “To this day, I still meet up with my mentors for dinner, and that gives you the emotional solidarity that you need. I think TAQADAM is the best in the Middle East when it comes to that!”

It’s interesting to note that UnitX’s initial product was, in fact, a high performance computing platform called Sentient targeted at entities like banks and aerospace firms. But the COVID-19 pandemic changed course for the startup. “We’ve always been B2B as a business, but with businesses shrinking their innovation budgets and focusing on operational cost reduction in 2020, we had to pivot to Vizard,” explains Narayanan. With plans now to open UnitX subsidiaries across the region as well as India, and with companies expanding their innovation budgets again, Narayanan is optimistic about UnitX being able to cater both its products to the market. “We are right now in a post-seed stage,” he says. “In 2019, we closed a seed round of $2 million led by Saudi Aramco’s Wa’d Ventures Fund and KAUST Innovation Fund. So, right now, we’re hitting that growth stage where we’re getting production orders, so we need to scale our team in order to deliver.”

But when asked what keeps him going despite all odds, Narayanan reverts to his stance on the importance of emotional support and the spirit of camaraderie. “When I meet my TAQADAM mentors today, I can see that the sense of camaraderie they instilled in me is in our team now,” he says. “This is what keeps me going now! Before, the emotional support was from TAQADAM; now it comes from our own team. At the end of the day, a company is just a few people who come together and create a product or a service. So, it should always be about the people, and we’ve got the ‘people’ aspect of UnitX right!”

As a college student in 2017, Miqyas founder Abdulla Almazrooa was fascinated by the idea of offering online custom-fit options, and initially pondered upon the possibility of using it for measuring the Arabian thobe, a garment that’s traditionally worn by men of the Middle East. “I was just observing what was happening in computer vision and the quick advancements in deep learning, and it occurred to me that it was just a matter of time before we are able to scan human bodies using only a camera,” recalls Almazrooa. This idea was then modified to incorporate all clothing, from across the fashion e-commerce realm, and eventually led to the launch of Miqyas in 2020. Built as a software as a service (SaaS) platform, Miqyas helps online fashion retailers precisely measure clothing sizes for customers. “We developed two Miqyas products,” Almazrooa explains. “The first service, ‘custom-fit,’ takes two customer images and measures exact body measurements. The second one, ‘size-it,’ asks users simple questions on product pages, and then recommends the perfect size on all brands. Our clients can use these plug-ins on their platforms to solve the problem of online fit, and we charge them a subscription fee.”
BUILT AS A PLATFORM THAT PROVIDES IN-HOME AS WELL AS ONLINE SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH PETS, VETWORK WAS LAUNCHED IN EARLY 2019 BY FADY AZZOUNY, WHO MAKES IT A POINT TO INTRODUCE HIMSELF AS “CO-FOUNDER, CEO, AND PET OWNER” WHEN TALKING ABOUT HIS STARTUP. “OUR MAIN MISSION IS TO MAKE PETS HEALTHIER, AND PETS OWNERS’ LIVES EASIER,” SAYS AZZOUNY, WHO HAS PREVIOUSLY WORKED ON TWO OTHER ENTREPRENEURIAL VENTURES IN THE VETERINARY INDUSTRY. “WE PROVIDE BASIC ANIMAL HEALTHCARE SERVICES THAT CAN BE DONE AT HOME. WE ALSO HAVE VETWORK CARE THAT INCLUDES GROOMING, DOG TRAINING, DOG WALKING, AND PET SITTING, AND A VETWORK STALL WHERE WE SELL PET PRODUCTS INCLUDING DRY FOOD, FRESH FOOD, AND ACCESSORIES.”

THE STARTUP, FOUNDED BY ABDELREHEEM HUSSEIN AND FADY AZZOUNY, HAS MANAGED TO RAISE A 7 FIGURE NUMBER FROM 500 GLOBAL, THE CAIRO ANGELS, QCAL, LEANNODE AND SEVERAL ANGEL INVESTORS.

With many fashion retailers moving towards e-commerce as a result of the repercussions of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the demand for Miqyas’ services has increased. Take, for example, its recent partnership with Femi9, an online women’s fashion retailer. “Femi9 had a problem with online sizing, so we gave them the solution, and they’re not only using it on their e-commerce, but in their physical stores too,” Almazrooa explains. “Women in Saudi don’t have fitting rooms in malls, which is inconvenient. But with Femi9’s physical stores, we eliminate that problem completely, by integrating our solution to their physical retail store, which resulted in less returns, higher convergence, and higher basket size.”

VA附注：While the startup has been bootstrapped ever since its launch, Almazrooa says it was TAQADAM’s network that helped in gaining its first client. “I got in touch with a fellow TAQADAM entrepreneur from 2018, although we’d never met before, told him about our business and sure enough, that is how we got our first client through TAQADAM’s network,” he says. And it is this sense of togetherness that sets the accelerator program apart from the rest, according to the founder. “I can definitely see that everyone at TAQADAM wants to help each other out,” Almazrooa says. “We all want to see the other startups succeed and it’s a great community to be a part of. If you’re in the MENA region, I think it is the best accelerator program that exists!”

Now, with plans to have the startup enter into other sectors in the future, Almazrooa believes that KAUST will continue to play a major role in Miqyas’ journey. “Our plan is to continue expanding in the short term in the fashion market, and in the medium term, as we expand and get more data, we want to move to other applications such as fitness, augmented and virtual reality,” he says. “In order to do that, there are a lot of things that we need to do—on one of them is having access to a super high performance computer, and I think KAUST is the best option that we have, since we are already familiar with its supercomputer, Shaheen.”

With ample experience stemming from his previous experience in the veterinary industry (with his current co-founder Abdelreheem Hussein) and having already graduated from 500 Startups’ accelerator program, Azzouny already had a wealth of knowledge under his belt while starting VetWork. But even so, Azzouny says it was TAQADAM’s help last year that ensured his startup made it through the COVID-19 crisis relatively unscathed. “I honestly don’t know if we would still be here had we not joined the program,” he admits. “The guidance, the mentors, and the spirit of the program itself—it all helped us immensely. I’m an Egyptian so obtaining relevant data about the Saudi market was only possible for us through TAQADAM.”

But one of the biggest takeaways for Azzouny, which ultimately helped strengthen VetWork’s business model, was a course on defensibility by TAQADAM’s Program Manager, Abdulrahman Aljiffry. “It was something I was not even thinking about; I was only thinking about how to make the product better,” he adds. “But now, if someone wants to compete with Vetwork, they will have to provide all our services and have an e-commerce vertical too, which will make it harder for them.” Azzouny also touches upon
an aspect of the program that other TAQADAM startup founders have mentioned as well. “It can be a bit lonely for startup founders sometimes,” he says. “So, it is nice to receive emotional support from someone who knows what we’re going through, and the people at TAQADAM really understand what the founders are going through.”

BOONUS
/boonus.app

aunched in July 2020 by Abdulrahman Jami and Yahia Battach, Boonus is a fintech company that specializes in providing loyalty and rewards programs by enabling retailers and merchants to curate their own loyalty solutions. “By using Boonus, retailers can have their own loyalty programs, run it the way they want, create campaigns, get to know their clients, and get more insights about their customers and clients,” explains CEO Jami. “It is dedicated for small- to medium-sized businesses, particularly restaurants, cafes, and entertainment outlets.”

When Jami and Battach joined TAQADAM in June 2020, they’d initially had the plan of creating a links and quick response (QR) code platform. That plan was quickly redefined with the help of the mentors at TAQADAM. “We had to pivot and come up with something easy for the customers to understand and clients to get, and a service that actually provided them with benefits,” explains Jami. But while the business plan changed owing to the COVID-19 crisis, Boonus CTO Battach notes that the startup wasn’t keen on catering to retailers that already had an online presence anyway. “We weren’t really focusing on the e-commerce sector, because our initial thought was about how we can help local retailers who have physical stores sell in this pandemic,” he adds. Notably, this also entailed saying “no” to the rising demand that came in from some already established online businesses.

By adding features such as online services and complementary healthcare kits, as well as working with animal care shelters, Vetwork has thus managed to persevere as a business, and Azzouny is now gearing up to build its future as well. “I’m a veterinarian, and the biggest problem for us is that our patients cannot speak,” he says. “So, I want to give the animals a voice. That is my crazy dream! I want a dog to be able to enter the clinic, and directly tell the vet that he is not feeling well— not literally, of course! But with the help of a wearable device that reads the important metrics of the animal’s body, this device can help us for telemedicine as well. And KAUST has the technology and the people to help realize that dream!”

It is perhaps this forthright approach that helped Jami and Battach despite the many struggles they had to face early on—an aspect of the program that other TAQADAM startup founders have mentioned as well. “It can be a bit lonely for startup founders sometimes,” he says. “So, it is nice to receive emotional support from someone who knows what we’re going through, and the people at TAQADAM really understand what the founders are going through.”

↑ BOONUS CO-FOUNDERS Yahia Battach and Abdul Rahman Jami
Life’s challenges are sometimes a way for us to reset, and part of that reset is a moment of nothingness that sets in our minds, turning off the creative thought process, kind of like a computer. This happens to just about all photographers, film directors, writers, and creatives.

When this happens, I escape to the desert, the mountains, or the oceans. I sit there and do nothing, but look and smile, and it allows me to recharge or reboot. I also make it a point to enjoy the work of others in my field during this period. This part helps me feel like I’m part of a circle or a group of people who love doing what I do, and I love seeing what they see.

So, when things get really tough and I begin to draw a blank, doing both of the aforementioned things helps me get back on track and refocus—indeed, it makes me realize that whatever I am going through is simply not the end of the road for me. In fact, it’s only just a reset.

IHSAN EID SALHIA (perhaps better known as The Guy, aka TG) is the founder and CEO of TG Media Productions LLC. Follow him on Instagram @TGFROMDUBAI. tgmproductions.com

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