TAKING OFF

Dr. Khalid / Omar Al Midfa

THE CHAIRMAN OF SHARJAH MEDIA CITY TALKS VENTURE BUILDING, STARTUPS, AND SUCCESS RATES
SIGN UP & SAVE 25% ON STAYS
BOOK & WIN 1 MILLION REWARD POINTS
ALL.COM
RAFFLES \ BANYAN TREE \ FAIRMONT \ SLS \ SOFITEL \ RIXOS \ MANTIS \ MGALLERY
PULLMAN \ SWISSÔTEL \ MÖVENPICK \ GRAND MERCURE \ NOVOTEL \ MERCURE
ADAGIO \ IBIS \ IBIS STYLES
HOLIDAY IS
ALL YOU NEED
RAFFLES
THE PALM DUBAI
رأفت الخنّالة

A Majestic Retreat Crafted by Masters

NOW OPEN

RAFFLES.COM

RAFFLES HOTELS & RESORTS - A PROUD MEMBER OF THE ACCOR LIVE LIMITLESS LOYALTY PROGRAM. ALL.COM

DUBAI PARIS WARSAW JAKARTA SEYCHELLES SINGAPORE PHNOM PENH BALI SIEM REAP MAKKAH MALDIVES SHENZHEN MANILA HAINAN ISTANBUL UDAPUR

COMING SOON - LONDON BOSTON JAIPUR BAHRAIN JEDDAH MACAU MOSCOW
As a celebration of women business leaders across the Middle East and Africa, Mastercard has partnered with Entrepreneur Middle East to present the first ever Women SME Leaders Awards 2022.

We are inviting every women SME leader across all walks of life—individuals and organizations—to take part.

There are no costs for attending or nominating at this event. Good luck to all and let’s celebrate women SMEs together!
As a celebration of women business leaders across the Middle East and Africa, Mastercard has partnered with Entrepreneur Middle East to present the first ever Women SME Leaders Awards 2022. We are inviting every women SME leader across all walks of life—individuals and organizations—to take part. There are no costs for attending or nominating at this event. Good luck to all and let’s celebrate women SMEs together!

WOMENSMELEADERS.COM
#WOMENSMELEADERS

NOMINATE NOW
FEATURES

P.22 Taking Off
Dr. Khalid Omar Al Midfa, Chairman of Sharjah Media City talks venture building, startups, and success rates.
by ABY SAM THOMAS

P.28 Off the Beaten Track
Lessons in leadership from Indra Nooyi, the first woman of color and American immigrant to run a Fortune 50 company.
by TAMARA PUPIC

P.34 10 Great Ideas
A celebration of individuals and initiatives that impress with their ingenuity.
by ABY SAM THOMAS

P.64 A Purpose-Led Vision
Ramy Koussa, Associate Vice President for the MENAT at Organon, on how his global healthcare company is aiming to create a better (and healthier) every day for every woman in the world.
by TAMARA PUPIC

PEPSICO FORMER CHAIRPERSON AND CEO INDRA NOOYI has consistently ranked among the world’s 100 most powerful women
QX55

ALL NEW INFINITI QX55
#UNFOLLOWTHECROWD

INFINITI

المصموود للسيارات
Al Masaood Automobiles
(800) 300 800
60 On the Fast Track
Having co-founded B2B solutions FOO in the region, GHADY RAYESS explains how your startup can succeed in the Middle East’s thriving fintech landscape.

57 A Whole New World
As someone who recently spent US$60,000 on buying real estate in Decentraland, PALLAVI DEAN reflects on five things that she learned about this virtual universe.

62 Strategy Bites
As part of a series of insights and inspiration from some of Saudi Arabia’s most notable business execs, LIRA Strategy Partners founder and Managing Director RAFFAELLA CAMPAGNOLI talks to MARWAN MOUKARZEL, CEO, Fawaz Alhokair Group Fashion Retail.

67 Rethinking Education
Jordan-based startup Abwaab is on a mission to change the way MENA students learn outside the classroom.

by PAMELLA DE LEON

71 Breaking New Grounds
Axis founder Mishaal Al Gergawi on becoming a part of the internationally acclaimed Y Combinator accelerator program.

by TAMARA PUPIC

76 Driven By Impact
Raed Masri, Muna Abusulayman and Rama Chakaki - the co-founders of Transform VC - are on a mission to help create 1,000 Middle Eastern billionaires in America by 2040.

by TAMARA PUPIC

| HAMDI TABBA is the co-founder and CEO of Jordan-based edtech and online learning platform Abwaab
| "TREPONOMICS"

EDITOR IN CHIEF Aby Sam Thomas
aby@bncpublishing.net

CEO Wissam Younane
wissam@bncpublishing.net

DIRECTOR Rabih Najm
rabih@bncpublishing.net

CREATIVE LEAD Odette Kahwagi
design@bncpublishing.net

MANAGING EDITOR Tamara Pupic	
tamara@bncpublishing.net

STARTUPS SECTION EDITOR Pamella de Leon
pamella@bncpublishing.net

FEATURES WRITER Aalia Mehreen Ahmed
alia@bncpublishing.net

DESIGN Simona El Khoury

DIGITAL SOLUTIONS DIRECTOR
Mahdi Hashemi mahdi@bncpublishing.net

HEAD OF INNOVATION
Sarah Saddoun sarah@bncpublishing.net

GROUP SALES DIRECTOR – B2B GROUP
Joaquim D’Costa jo@bncpublishing.net

COLUMNIST Tamara Clarke

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Raffaella Campagnoli, Fida Chaaban, Pallavi Dean, Ghady Rayess

SUBSCRIBE
Contact subscriptions@bncpublishing.net to receive Entrepreneur Middle East every issue

COMMERCIAL ENQUIRIES
sales@bncpublishing.net

ENTREPRENEUR.COM
Access fresh content daily on our website
Find the right freelancer, faster.

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

Make it happen at marketplace.ae

brought to you by
I was recently invited to moderate a panel discussion being staged as part of one of the MENA region’s most prominent events, and while the speakers for the session hadn’t been decided then, I agreed to be a part of it given that its topic was very much in my wheelhouse. But when I found out a few days before the event that the panel was featuring only male speakers in it, I told the organizers that I wasn’t keen on chairing a “manel,” and that I’d need female speakers to be a part of this session if I were to be a moderator for it.

I’ll admit here that making this demand of the organizers was not something I found easy to do- on the contrary, I hemmed and hawed for a long time wondering if I was being too difficult, rude, or pretentious in asking for a more gender-inclusive panel at a conference. As someone who has organized and staged plenty of such discussions and events in the past, I am well aware of how hard it can be to put them together, and having to change things at the proverbial last moment is never -ever- a welcome thought.

But my work in this particular domain also makes me aware of there being plenty of women in the MENA who could eloquently opine on the topic of the panel I was being invited to be a part of, and so, the fact that it had still ended up becoming a manel only pointed to the fact that the event organizers were simply not putting in the work needed to allow for a diverse discussion to take place. Indeed, I can tell you from first-hand experience that it’s quite easy to put a manel together- what’s difficult is to recognize why that’s wrong, and then actually changing it.

I also wondered if any of the other speakers on this panel had noticed that it was a discussion that was set to feature only men. All of them were influential voices in the region’s business ecosystem- did none of them care to have any of their female peers join them on stage? I’m willing to bet that they and their respective organizations will be finding ways to be a part of the conversations surrounding International Women’s Day in March- but now, I wonder: how much of what they do in this regard is just performative activism?

At this point, an argument can be made that the fault here lies solely with the event organizers, and that the speakers themselves can be absolved of any responsibility in allowing a manel to take place- they were, after all, only invited to share their insights in a session, they shouldn’t be concerning themselves with the mechanics of how it has been put together. In response to that, I’d like to point toward an especially pertinent line in a Medium post written by Gulf Creative Collective co-founder Bhumika Ghaghada on structural issues in the UAE’s art scene.

“No matter where on the ladder you may be, you are a gatekeeper, consciously or unconsciously,” Ghaghada wrote. “You always have power- and every time you choose to not act or shut up, the institutional needle clicks back to the default setting.” Now, Ghaghada may have been focusing on the arts domain when she wrote these words, but I think that the point she makes applies to the world of business as well- especially one that is still struggling with issues relating to diversity and inclusivity.

And so, I decided to make use of my power- I suggested alternative female speakers that the organizers could add to the panel, and I also offered to pull myself out from the session so that I may be replaced by a female moderator. In the end, the latter is what ended up happening, as the organizers weren’t able to confirm new speakers given the short notice- and while it may have been a stopgap solution, I like to think it was at least better than a manel. At the end of the day, remember that it’s easy to profess our support for a more equitable world- but what we actually need is less talk, and more action.

Aby Sam Thomas
Editor in Chief
aby@bncpublishing.net

Giving everyone their fair share of airtime is no longer an option
ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT SETTING UP A BUSINESS IN DUBAI?

DO YOU NEED ADVICE ON PITCHING YOUR BUSINESS IDEAS?

DO YOU WANT GREAT ACCOUNTING AND LEGAL SERVICES RATES FROM TOP RECOMMENDED CONSULTANTS?

SCAN HERE

To access Dubai Chamber’s preferred service providers

For inquiries, contact solutions@dubaichamber.com
LAUNCH YOUR IDEAS IN AN AWARD-WINNING TECH STARTUP COMMUNITY

At Dtec, thriving coworking spaces come with accelerator programs, funding, networking events, industry mentors, and exclusive benefits.

- 10,000 sqm business centre facilities
- Easy free zone business set-up with visa processing
- Subsidized business licenses
- Plug & play facilities and high-speed WiFi
- 24/7 access with ample parking
- Access to fundraising, acceleration & incubation programs
- Hot-desk, dedicated desk and office options available
- Conference facilities & meeting rooms
- Restaurants, cafés & social areas
- Access to events, mentorship & curated list of services

BOOK NOW: 04 501 5656
dtec@dso.ae / www.dtec.ae
As someone who started cooking at the age of five in her native city of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, NGUYEN is clearly at home in her role today as the Executive Chef of Vietnamese Foodies, the award-winning homegrown restaurant franchise that she founded in 2018 in the UAE.

Getting Ahead (Together)

Lily Hoa Nguyen, owner and Executive Chef of Vietnamese Foodies, explains how her business has been growing from strength to strength by AALIA MEHREEN AHMED
There is a popular proverb that goes, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” And when preparing for my interview with Vietnamese Foodies owner Lily Hoa Nguyen, I came across multiple instances of her journey so far that almost instantly reminded me of these lines. As such, I was pleasantly surprised when Nguyen used the same saying in her responses to one of my questions. “If you wish to get ahead in your business, then you need to make sure that people work well together,” Nguyen says, and then goes on to quote the aforementioned aphorism, while adding, “Growing up in a big family of six taught me that there is a place for everyone in a team, and everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses.”

AS SOMEONE WHO STARTED cooking at the age of five in her native city of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Nguyen is clearly at home in her role today as the Executive Chef of Vietnamese Foodies, the award-winning homegrown restaurant franchise that she founded in 2018 in the UAE. Since then, the restaurant has become extremely well known for its take on fresh and authentic Vietnamese cuisine, with everything from its flavorful pho to its hearty bánh mì sandwiches finding favor with the people of Dubai. With four branches spread across the Emirate, Vietnamese Foodies has been the recipient of several industry awards and accolades, and as the brand has grown over the years, so have Nguyen’s leadership skills. “When we used to be in one small location in Dubai’s Jumeirah Lake Towers (JLT) neighborhood, leading the team was about being a role model, and showing the team the standards to follow,” she says. “Today, with four locations leading our Vietnamese Foodies team, it’s about finding the right people for the right job, and giving them the tools to thrive and develop beyond their limits. Leadership now also means developing the right strategy to recruit talent from within and outside the UAE, and crafting the most effective retention policies.”

FOR NGUYEN, LAUNCHING THE FOURTH BRANCH of Vietnamese Foodies in December 2021 at Dubai’s Nakheel Mall in The Palm has been the biggest achievement of her entrepreneurial trajectory so far. “The newly opened location is
located right alongside international chain restaurants such as Din Tai Fung, Le Pain Quotidien, and Starbucks, and we are also receiving our fair share of business from shoppers,” says Nguyen. “This showed us that we are being considered and chosen at the same level of quality and value for money with international brands that are a lot more established. This, in particular, has made me so proud!” But ask the founder what, or who, she attributes this quick growth to, and she only has one answer: her employees. “It has been said that a restaurant is only as good as its people,” says Nguyen. “To me, the people of Vietnamese Foodies are the most valuable assets that we have. They give us the competitive advantage against many other businesses in the same market segment.” Here, I ask Nguyen if her upbringing had any influence on the leader she is today—cooking with a big family is, after all, a task that requires strong interpersonal skills. “When I was still cooking from our family kitchen, I was sometimes assigned to cook for family meals for 20 to 30 people, and I had to employ help from anyone I could get a hold of,” Nguyen recalls. “I think that experience taught me that harmony is very important in running a kitchen and running a business. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to make someone do something using authority alone. You need to somehow inspire them towards achieving the same shared goals. Only when you are able to do that will you be able to lead big groups of people.” Nguyen’s words are perhaps best reflected in how Vietnamese Foodies’ annual celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year’s “red envelope” tradition, which is catered specifically towards acknowledging her employees’ efforts. In East and Southeast Asian cultures, a red envelope is typically used to gift money during holidays or for special occasions, and for Vietnamese Foodies, the occasion of the Chinese Lunar Year sees all profits generated on the day are handed out in crimson covers to the staff as tokens of gratitude for their hard work at the enterprise. This year’s event, held on January 31, saw all four of the restaurant’s branches partaking in the event, which ended with all 71 employees being treated to a cruise boat party as well. “The most rewarding moment of the day for me was
when I distributed the red envelopes to our people, knowing that some of that money is going to their country to support their families,” Nguyen recalls. “I am blessed to think that Vietnamese Foodies is a stable corner of their lives, and that we are able to touch many people’s lives through it.”

While this style of leadership is one that Nguyen takes pride in, it isn’t one that is necessarily adopted across the UAE’s hospitality industry, she admits. “Personally, I think more can be done to take care of people in hospitality, because the F&B sector and wider service industry is a very labor-intensive sector, and to elevate the service level overall, we need happy people in the workplace,” says Nguyen. “Having said that, Dubai is also a high-cost market, and the number of people that businesses can afford to employ is much lower than many other markets. This poses a dilemma for restaurant operators, especially small operators like us.” Nguyen thus believes the industry needs to put in more work to ensure better retention policies. “What we need to do is to think of a long-term solution to retain people in order to reduce recruitment and visa fees, and instead use that to invest in a retention program,” she adds.

**IT IS THIS KIND OF ATTENTION TO THE FINER DETAILS THAT HAS GOVERNED Nguyen’s strategy for business growth too. The founder says she and her team meticulously worked towards ensuring they followed through on their expansion plans. “Being focused and consistent in our product offering, but at the same time, ambitious in expanding our footprint, has contributed to our quick growth in Dubai,” says Nguyen. “Instead of introducing different concepts, we try to fine-tune Vietnamese Foodies menu to the best offer possible, and replicate that offer in different locations within the city. That way people can expect to receive the same service and culinary experience in any of our four Vietnamese Foodies locations.” In fact, this approach encapsulates the vision Nguyen has had from day one of her entrepreneurial journey. “When Vietnamese Foodies JLT just opened, in the very first few months itself, I had a dream that I would like to, one day, see pho restaurants and banh mi stands in every corner of Dubai, and that dream is slowly becoming a reality!” Indeed, further growth is on the cards for Vietnamese Foodies, Nguyen says. “Part of our mission is to make Vietnamese Foodies available for people in every corner of Dubai, and the entire UAE in the near future, so our goal for 2022 is to open one other location,” she says. “We are also working to refine our menu to make sure that we keep offering the same delicious healthy food that we have become known for and excite our customers with new offers at the same time.”

As Nguyen looks back on her journey so far, she admits there have been a few hiccups along the way. The founder is, after all, a female, Vietnamese chef leading a franchise in a primarily male-dominated industry that doesn’t often see Asian talent at the helm. “Both gender and race biases are existing challenges for many in the Middle East, including myself,” Nguyen admits. “But I just don’t let it bother me too much, and with my tenacity, I have created my own table, where I’m sitting at the head.”
E-COMMERCE MADE EASY

Supercharge your ecommerce and online operations with Lyve. Get fast, flexible, and full-featured delivery and technology solutions that meet your customers’ needs and allow you to focus on what you do best.
come as you are.

Overlooking the museum of the future, near Dubai International Financial Centre, 25hours hotel one central boasts 434 rooms and suites in addition to flexible events and co-working spaces. A total of four characterful restaurants and bars take guests on a culinary trip around the world from northern India to the beer gardens of Bavaria: this is where urban nomads meet desert flowers, where local heroes meet the well-traveled. Alongside rental of mini cars and Schindelhauer bikes, the hotel will also feature the extra hour spa, rooftop pool, and Dubai’s first mixed-gender rooftop sauna.
#hellodubai
we are now open!

Overlooking the museum of the future, near Dubai International Financial Centre, 25hours hotel one central boasts 434 rooms and suites in addition to flexible events and co-working spaces. A total of four characterful restaurants and bars take guests on a culinary trip around the world from northern India to the beer gardens of Bavaria: this is where urban nomads meet desert flowers, where local heroes meet the well-traveled. Alongside rental of mini cars and Schindelhauer bikes the hotel will also feature the extra hour spa, rooftop pool and Dubai’s first mixed-gender rooftop sauna.

enjoy
25% off,
book via
25hours-hotels.com
It’s always great to find someone who shares the same principles as you do, and that should explain why I had a renewed sense of appreciation for Sharjah Media City (Shams) Chairman Dr. Khalid Omar Al Midfa when he shared with me his personal philosophy for governing people at his enterprise. “My mantra is: ‘Don’t expect others to do a task that you would not be prepared to do yourself,’” Dr. Al Midfa says. “I think this is something that makes a leader stand out.”

This is perhaps a tiny detail, but I like to think that this statement from Dr. Al Midfa offers a glimpse into the strategies and systems he has used to make Shams a pioneering entity that’s now known for being “a catalyst for creative businesses to grow and thrive” in the UAE. Launched in 2017 following an Emiri decree from H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, UAE Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, Shams is today described by Dr. Al Midfa as a unique free zone with its own integrated infrastructure that aims to become a first-choice investment environment for everyone from large companies to small- and medium-sized enterprises in Sharjah and the UAE, with a particular focus on the media and creative industries. “Since its inception, Shams has been working on two main tracks,” Dr. Al Midfa explains. “The first is establishing an integrated business community, and incubating small-, medium-sized, and emerging businesses to help them to grow and prosper; the second is training media professionals to advance in the creative industries sector, and providing talents capable of growing Sharjah’s and the UAE’s media scenes. Along with my dedicated colleagues and partners, I am committed to elevating Shams into becoming a global media hub— one that offers the most innovative and up-to-date media services, and the center of a thriving regional media industry.”

LAUNCHED IN 2017, SHARJAH MEDIA CITY FREE ZONE (SHAMS) IS A WORLD-CLASS FREE ZONE HUB FOR MEDIA, INNOVATION, AND CREATIVITY. SHAMS sets the benchmark for service and support for those aiming to set up and launch their business with specialized facilities for the creative and media industries.
“I am committed to elevating Shams into becoming a global media hub.”
Extending over an area of two million square meters, Shams currently boasts of a vibrant community of businesses from a variety of sectors, with media, e-commerce, and real estate being key among them. The free zone had 5,689 companies registered with it in 2021, and it’s worth noting that a total of 4,293 businesses renewed their licenses with the entity in the same year. This can be seen as a testament to the benefits Shams provides to its tenants, which include 100% ownership for foreign investors, a suite of integrated business development solutions, as well as a wide range of commercial activities that can be used as desired. “We believe in creative ideas, and we have the capacity and enthusiasm to turn these into viable projects,” Dr. Al Midfa says. “Shams creates talent and entrepreneurs by providing opportunities for their ideas to take flight. Every pioneering project starts with an idea, and we take these concepts and shape them into tangible initiatives that can set new standards in the media sector. Our future is bright, and I see Shams becoming established as a leader in the local and regional media sector within the next few years. With the first of our three main buildings complete, we look forward to our business growing as our physical environment progressively expands.”

98% of construction work has already been completed on Shams’ three buildings, with the first opening its doors to the public in March this year. But even while its built environment was being realized, Shams made sure it continued to engage and interact with its target communities—Dr. Al Midfa points out here that his entity organized 43 workshops in 2021, which had 1,173 experts and members of the public participating in them. “A standout achievement was our successful launch of 218: Behind the Wall of Silence, the first crowdsourced film in the Arab world,” he adds. “To cap it all, we have achieved a customer satisfaction rate of almost 90% according to our latest survey, something that we are very proud of in view of the challenges of the global coronavirus pandemic.” Indeed, while the onset of the COVID-19 crisis did present Shams with plenty of challenges to deal with, Dr. Al Midfa and his team were able to keep business going relatively unscathed. “During this trying and testing period, Shams remained proactive by utilizing the latest virtual and digital technology to manage its business, communicate with customers, and provide access to its services,” he says. “This was aided by 99% of its offerings being available on digital platforms. Pre-pandemic, we had utilized electronic platforms for virtual communication between employees and departments, and for managing meetings—this put us at a high degree of readiness to run our operations smoothly during lockdowns. The figures show that Shams achieved a considerable growth in its number of registered companies in 2020—something that proves that our preparedness was instrumental in enabling us to expand our business.”

The manner in which Shams was able to circumvent the challenges resulting from the global coronavirus pandemic does offer an alternative take to the doom and gloom that is often associated with the COVID-19 crisis, and it’s a perspective that Dr. Al Midfa wishes for entrepreneurs operating in the MENA business arena to embrace as well. “The global pandemic—a situation unprecedented in modern times—has created a unique set of challenges for entrepreneurs, with the startup ecosystem suffering high burn rates and companies requiring stimulus support packages from governments to survive,” he says. “However, the crisis has also created an array of opportunities, with the rapid expansion of digitalization and the need to conduct transactions remotely enabling companies to fill gaps in the market that have dramatically widened. Companies in the MENA region that have done well in this new landscape and have made an impression on me include established online food delivery services such as Talabat, Zomato, and Deliveroo, and e-commerce platforms, such as the automotive marketplace SellAnyCar.com, online optical store platform Eyewa, and mobile-only e-commerce network Zon.”
According to Dr. Al Midfa, the trajectories of these different ventures show that, even through the course of the COVID-19 crisis, the principles that govern success in the entrepreneurial domain remain the same as ever. “The pandemic hasn’t changed one aspect— if you have a good idea, conduct proper due diligence, and commit yourself to never giving up, your startup has a high chance of success,” Dr. Al Midfa declares. “With these qualities in mind, it is never a bad time to bring your startup to the market.”

And the Arab world is a great place to do just that, he adds. “The MENA region is a popular investment destination for both regional and global investors, and it is set to be the only region in the world to record a rise in economic growth this year, driven by higher oil prices and an acceleration in business-friendly reforms,” Dr. Al Midfa says. “With a country-specific focus, we can see that the UAE market has strengthened its presence in 2022 with more opportunities— a sign of the UAE economy’s flexibility and resilience. These attributes facilitate entrepreneurial activity, whether it be with new startups, or the expansion of existing businesses.” Dr. Al Midfa believes that Shams is particularly well-placed to support enterprises in this regard, especially when it comes to those that operate in the media and creative industries. “Shams was established to support Sharjah’s vision of developing human capacity, and to value the notion of knowledge as being the most important asset of all,” he notes. “Its field of focus is on building the skills and expertise of those either already working in the media and creative industries, or who wish to find a fertile environment in which to launch a new venture in this area... It also encourages those with an interest in the industry to consider a media career and to actively pursue opportunities, whether as presenters, camera operators, technical specialists, entrepreneurs, or indeed any role that is found in a diverse media ecosystem. Ultimately, Shams aims to be a resource for all who wish to become more involved in the exciting and rapidly evolving media scene, and thus become an environment where future media leaders can hone their skills.”

Looking at Dr. Al Midfa’s own skills as a leader, it’s clear that he has built them through his years of experience in the UAE’s business scene, which he entered with a bachelor’s degree from the UAE’s Etisalat University College (which is today called Khalifa University), as well as a master’s and PhD degree in telecommunications engineering from the UK’s University of Bristol. He kicked off his career trajectory as an Assistant Professor at Khalifa University from 2004 to 2007, which was followed by a year-long stint in 2009 as the CEO of the UAE’s Advanced National Research and Education Network, Ankabut. In 2011, Dr. Al Midfa became the General Manager of Sharjah Media Corporation, the governmental...
“WE BELIEVE IN CREATIVE IDEAS, AND WE HAVE THE CAPACITY AND ENTHUSIASM TO TURN THESE INTO VIABLE PROJECTS.”

Leadership lessons from Sharjah Media City Chairman Dr. Khalid Omar Al Midfa

1/ Be a role model “As the head of your organization, you need to serve by example. Good leaders should exemplify the behaviors and attitudes that they want to encourage in their team. By doing so, employees will respect and admire you, and they will strive to emulate your actions and deeds.”

2/ Encourage feedback “Have an open door to your office, and allow your team to come to you with their thoughts and ideas. Work on being a participative leader by encouraging your employees to give their feedback to you, and involving them in organizational plans and strategies. Having team members be active contributors will improve morale and workplace productivity.”

3/ Be passionate “Showing zeal and enthusiasm for what you do is a powerful motivator. Great leaders look beyond the bottom line of achieving targets and generating profits; they show that the journey to reach the goals is one that should be fun and all-consuming. By showing passion for projects, you will inspire your team to display the same.”
organization in which his responsibilities included “leading operations, providing strategic vision and long-range planning, maximizing business operational efficiency, and creating year-on-year business growth.” This led to his appointment as the Chairman of Shams in the same year it was launched, and in this role, he oversees the entity’s leadership team in delivering a variety of key performance indicators, which run the gamut from “aligning organization-al objectives” to “creating consensus for solutions and future direction.” “I believe that one of the most important things I do is to promote an environment of openness and transparency within my team, and to encourage employees to speak out without fear of censure,” Dr. Al Midfa says. “You get the best out of people when they are comfortable in expressing themselves fully, and this generates a positive atmosphere in the workplace. Allowing people to talk freely enables the prompt identification of any issues, which may otherwise go undetected, and it also aids in discovering new and effective ways of working. It all adds up to being a recipe for good enterprise operations and organizational growth, with high morale and low staff turnover aiding productivity and efficiency.”

This tactic may sound like an easy thing to accomplish, but Dr. Al Midfa admits that putting it into practice does take a bit of work and patience. “The main challenge I have faced with this approach is conveying to new team members that there is no catch,” he reveals. “At first, naturally, they can be reticent about speaking their mind. However, after just a few months, I am proud to see their confidence grow, and for them to feel that they are established members of the team, with their own unique voices.” This brings us back to Dr. Al Midfa’s ethos as a leader that was mentioned at the beginning of this article– he’s clearly someone who has no qualms about getting his hands dirty while on a job, and he pushes those around him to follow a similar mentality as well. “Of course, effective delegation is an essential aspect of any organization– people have different skillsets and professional training, and they need to be assigned to roles where they can effectively utilize their assets most effectively,” Dr. Al Midfa says. “However, I also believe that a degree of ‘cross-pollination’ is good business practice, as it enables employees to undertake different roles if needed. I actively encourage my team to learn what their colleagues from their own and other departments are doing. Not only does this help ensure functions can still be successfully completed if we happen to be a team member down, with a colleague able to step in and temporarily take over, it also engenders a more holistic understanding of the organization, with employees able to understand how different roles contribute to the whole.”

It should be pretty apparent by now that Dr. Al Midfa is someone who believes in the adage of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, and he confesses that it’s a lesson that he learnt when he was younger. “I was very headstrong in my youth, and whilst this gave me the drive to succeed, it also blinded me to opportunities to learn from my colleagues,” Dr. Al Midfa recalls. “I was locked into thinking I had to be very competitive in everything that I did, and too often, I would see my colleagues as rivals in the workplace, not co-workers aiming for the same organizational goals. This changed for me one day when someone who I hadn’t previously regarded very highly saved me from a mistake that I had made– one that had the potential to cause me a problem. His act of generosity changed my attitude, and it made me realize that the key to enjoying my work was to make the most of the people around me, and to draw on my workmates’ strengths to enhance my own.” The significance of this particular moment in Dr. Al Midfa’s life cannot be understated– in fact, if he were ever given a chance to go back in time to change something he did, this is the lesson he’d be keen on learning much sooner in his life. “If I could change anything, it would be to have adopted this mindset earlier on in my career,” he says. “However, I learned a valuable lesson on that day, and it is one that I carry with me to this day. I believe it has shown me how to be a better employee and – now– a better leader.”

**THE UAE MARKET HAS STRENGTHENED ITS PRESENCE IN 2022 WITH MORE OPPORTUNITIES – A SIGN OF THE UAE ECONOMY’S FLEXIBILITY AND RESILIENCE. THESE ATTRIBUTES FACILITATE ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY, WHETHER IT BE WITH NEW STARTUPS, OR THE EXPANSION OF EXISTING BUSINESSES.**

THE UAE MARKET HAS STRENGTHENED ITS PRESENCE IN 2022 WITH MORE OPPORTUNITIES – A SIGN OF THE UAE ECONOMY’S FLEXIBILITY AND RESILIENCE. THESE ATTRIBUTES FACILITATE ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY, WHETHER IT BE WITH NEW STARTUPS, OR THE EXPANSION OF EXISTING BUSINESSES.
INDRA NOOYI IS AN INDIAN-AMERICAN BUSINESS EXECUTIVE AND FORMER CHAIRPERSON AND CEO OF PEPSICO. She joined Amazon’s board of directors in 2019, and has consistently ranked among the world’s 100 most powerful women.
For the first time ever, other countries in the Middle East are saying we want to be a center too, so Dubai is now on the edge of whether it will preserve its dominance.” That’s what Indra Nooyi, the former Chairperson and CEO of PepsiCo and now a sought-after corporate strategist and advisor to entrepreneurs, executives, and governments, said to a packed audience at the 14th Emirates Airline Festival of Literature held in February this year in Dubai. Nooyi was invited to the Festival to promote her memoir, My Life in Full: Work, Family, and Our Future, which presents the arch of her life from being a middle-class girl from Chennai in southern India who went on to become one of only five women studying management at the prestigious Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta, and then she got a scholarship for the Yale School of Management. Most importantly, she went on to build an iconic career in corporate America, and thus becoming known as the first woman of color and American immigrant to run a Fortune 50 company.
Shortly before Nooyi addressed the audience at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, I also got a chance to speak to her for a few minutes, during which she revealed that she had been coming to Dubai for more than a quarter of a century, every time witnessing “more construction, new iconic buildings coming up, more excitement, and more billboards.” Nooyi said, “Obviously, Dubai is open for business. I think that this whole region is very active now, and there’s a big competition among the regional countries going on here, so the real challenge for Dubai will be whether it will maintain its preeminence in the region.” In true Nooyi fashion of over-delivering on a particular premise, she did also share a valuable insight which, if converted into a well-executed policy, might help Dubai preserve its supremacy as the region’s main business and financial hub. However, before sharing that with all of you, I’d like to first touch upon some of the most interesting parts of my conversation with Nooyi, which sought to unravel the threads of wisdom that she made use of throughout her career path.

There are a few work-specific situations that Nooyi mentions in her memoir to which, I believe, required a very high level of emotional intelligence to properly respond to, and when I asked her how she kept her cool in those instances, she replied, “It’s a small price to pay.” One of those situations happened during a summer when, as an Indian intern wearing a sari at a Booz Allen office in Chicago, Nooyi was not being taken to client meetings. Or, much later in her career, when she was already the Chairperson of PepsiCo, she had to have regular one-on-one meetings with a board member, almost always having to travel to his home city to see him, during which he would oppose her opinions, only to later “repeat, verbatim, what I’d just said.” “All of these were very small prices to pay. Big deal, never mind,” Nooyi reiterated. In her memoir, Nooyi further recalls male executives being “rude and patronizing,” and when I asked about the soft skills that were required to overcome all of this, she put it down to self-awareness. “In that Booz Allen example, here I was in a sari, in the summer of 1979,” she said. “This was long time ago, because first of all, there were hardly any women, hardly four or five women in the whole Chicago office. And there were not many immigrants either, it was a whole different time. So, I think, when you are faced with that situation, you have to be practical and understanding to say, ‘If I’m not being taken to the client, that’s okay, because I’ve learnt enough in the office.’ They’ve all gone out of their way to teach me. They all were really wonderful people at Booz Allen. They never once commented about my sari. They treated me like one of their own. So, going to the client, or not, who cares! I think that you have to process everything that is happening around you in a way that is relevant to the circumstances of that time. For example, when I was at PepsiCo and men used to have golf weekends, I was happy that they didn’t invite me, because I had family at home. If they invited me, I’d have to say no every time, and then they’d think I was anti-social. In reality, I’m glad they didn’t invite me.”

But this is not to say that Nooyi did not stand up for herself either. In My Life in Full: Work, Family, and Our Future, Nooyi does list a few anecdotes in which she stood her ground and refused to go with the status quo. For instance, she remembers when, in management meetings at PepsiCo, her comments where labelled as “too theoretical,” but once the exact same proposal was made by a man, they were viewed as “terrific, insightful ideas.” Once, towards the end of one of those meetings, Nooyi leaned over to a senior executive, loudly asking him to “bring up a thought of mine,” lest it would again be viewed as “too theoretical.” Such stories offer a perspective into how Nooyi was breaking the mold when she became the CEO of PepsiCo in 2006- at the time, she was one of only 11 women running a Fortune 500 company; in 2021, there were 41 women on Fortune’s Global 500. During her time at the helm of PepsiCo, Nooyi says that she didn’t think she could
do anything about how people treated her personally, but she always made it a point to try to support women in the organization. One example of this was when she noticed “the and-but phenomenon” during performance reviews at PepsiCo—when managers reviewed the results of their male peers, they’d commend them on their “terrific potential,” whereas when they would assess the performance of women, it would always include an explanation of an issue that “might derail her future success.” Nooyi decided to turn things around in this department by not letting the managers get away with such consequence-free indictments of the women under them, and instead telling them to “to make it work with that female executive.”

This brought us to an important point that Nooyi raises in her book—the need for topics like gender equality and women’s progress to be discussed by all, and especially by men in positions of power, because “otherwise, it’s women talking to women.” Nooyi explained, “In some global meetings, when we start talking about these issues, there are only women in the room, and a few already ‘converted’ men. The other people sitting there are doing their emails, because they didn’t find any other place to sit down.” To further highlight the importance of bringing men in power to the table, Nooyi shared an interesting story. “Even about this book, I have to tell you, one thing that was a disappointment to me is that men bought the book to give it to their wives and daughters,” she said. “So, I look at them, and say, ‘Why don’t you read it yourself?’ Why do you think that you shouldn’t read a memoir written by a woman?” I’ve been forcing men to read the book now. Then, they read it and they go, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize it was so profound.’ I think it’s high time that we brought men to the table, and said: ‘Which one of you is going to be progressive enough to be able to talk about these issues?’

For these reasons, Nooyi insists that the most profound change that needs to happen in society will come through educating men—particularly men in leadership roles—to support women in the workforce. “There are more and more women coming into senior levels, so we should call into question why those issues still exist,” she said. “It is because the men in power need to pause and say, ‘Wait a minute, we just took on that guy who hasn’t fulfilled his objectives, but we say he’s got great potential, whereas this woman has played down her potential—shall we talk about why that’s the case?’ Let’s have men talk about why they think that women have no potential, while men have infinite potential. I think that we have to find a few male leaders who can model this behavior.” While she commended more and more men publicly taking on this issue, she admitted that “until there is a critical mass of people asking for change, one person cannot do it all.” Nooyi added, “But if that person is a CEO, then he can change the people, meaning if they won’t change their behavior, change the people.”

“Without failures, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

Indra Nooyi recently published her memoir, My Life in Full: Work, Family, and Our Future.
Such changes were hard to even imagine during her own career, which included very demanding roles at Boston Consulting Group, Motorola, ABB, and of course, PepsiCo. Nooyi once described herself as “an ideal worker,” which translates into a ferocious work ethic that, for instance, made her not walk a trail in front of the PepsiCo office called the Golden Path for the first 20 years she spent at the company, because “she just didn’t have time.” Her professionalism is further illustrated through the story of when she flew to the Russian capital of Moscow over a weekend to help a junior PepsiCo team prepare a report that would be presented to her the following week. Another anecdote from her memoir that left me in awe of her commitment to her work describes her, after a very long day at her job, calling her husband Raj Nooyi from a Fond du Lac police precinct, because she could not pay a speeding fine with her American Express card. Then, she “spotted a neat bed in a jail cell and -I actually can’t believe it now- asked if I could sleep on that bed for the night, until my husband could come the next morning with the cash.”

At the time, all of this seemed “a small price to pay” for the fundamental changes that she introduced with PepsiCo’s Performance with Purpose initiative, which resulted in its healthier and more nutritious products, limited environmental footprint, and empowered staff. Plus, PepsiCo’s revenue grew by 80% under Nooyi’s 12-year leadership. However, she assures me that it was not achieved without occasional failures and regular resistance at every turn. “I use failures as learning, teachable moments about what went wrong, and what I could have done better, then I learn from that and improve next time,” Nooyi said. “Without failures, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

This is also the ethos with which Nooyi characterizes her departure from PepsiCo, which reports have suggested happened when the company’s “North American beverage unit was stagnating amid a general decline in soda consumption” (TIME), and therefore, a place that offers an incredible talent pool, you will keep and attract even more businesses,” Nooyi predicts.

“to revamp the company’s U.S. beverage business by spinning off its bottling operations, or even splitting up the company.” (The Wall Street Journal). “When I had to walk out of PepsiCo, when I said, ‘I’m leaving,’ that was a failure of the system and of me too, because I felt like, ‘What could I have done differently to avoid that situation from happening?’” she continued. “So, I think that sometimes the system fails you, sometimes you don’t anticipate what needs to be done and you feel like a failure, but every one of these moments, you should make a teachable moment and consider what you could have done differently.”

We touch upon the COVID-19 pandemic next, and according to Nooyi, the world is currently in a trial period of assessing what it means to have a work-life balance, and she hopes that this will lead to the embracing of a set-up that takes into consideration different needs. In fact, that is her book’s “moonshot” pitch: requesting a better balance between work and family that would “enable women to rise to the top of companies, but also enable families to be built.” That would explain her urgent call for business leaders to enable efforts like paid leave, work flexibility and predictability, and support systems that would allow employees to care for their young families or elderly parents. That’s the way to unleash the full potential of our economies, Nooyi states, and that is also her invaluable and timely advice for Dubai as it carves out its place in the future. “If Dubai can make itself as a women-friendly and a family-friendly place, and therefore, a place that offers an incredible talent pool, you will keep and attract even more businesses,” Nooyi predicts.
WE CARE FOR WHAT’S RARE
A WALKATHON FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Join us at this fun event
SAT 19 MAR
7AM - 12PM
DUBAI SCIENCE PARK
AL BARSHA SOUTH 2

Get your tickets now!
wewalk.ae

All proceeds will go to the
UAE Rare Disease Society

In association with
Ever stumbled upon something and think, “Wow, that’s a great idea!” That’s the feeling we sought to achieve for ourselves as we went about building this collection of 10 great ideas- and while this is by no means an exhaustive list of all the inventive concepts out there, we are still pretty excited to see how our selection will pan out in the long run. 

by Aby Sam Thomas
AT A TIME when the top food aggregators in the UAE’s F&B space are notorious for their single-minded pursuits of profit (often at the expense of the entrepreneurs actually fueling this ecosystem), Ian Ohan is hoping to subvert the ways thing currently operate by launching Locale, which he has branded as the country’s first food aggregator “with a heart.” Ohan, who is the founder and CEO of KRUSH Brands, a homegrown full-service, multi-kitchen, brand development, operating, and franchising company that’s behind popular F&B concepts like Freedom Pizza, Salad Jar, and several others, says that Locale has been designed to be an economically sustainable ecosystem for the UAE’s innovative entrepreneurs in the F&B space -aka foodpreneurs- to thrive and reconnect with the communities in which they operate.

“**Locale is the only true alternative** to the harmful third-party delivery ecosystem, which charges unsustainably high fees to the most innovative and passionate people in our industry, globally,” Ohan says. “Locale is not about making money on delivery, technology, advertising, nor fees- our objective is to minimize these costs for all. Instead, Locale is about making money on great food.” Looking at Locale from an entrepreneur’s point of view, its appeal is easy to see- it’s been built by foodpreneurs for foodpreneurs, and that’s explain how, besides the seven brands in the KRUSH Brands portfolio, the aggregator has already got fellow homegrown players like artisanal bakery Viking Bageri and meal plan concept JetLagged Chef to list on it.

“Customers are enjoying the clean and customer-focused interface of Locale- no advertisements, no questionable customer reviews, and it rejects the paradox of too many, poor quality choices,” Ohan says. “When customers come to Locale, they know that each brand is high quality, and service is backed up by Locale’s fully integrated technology, operating and delivery capabilities, and powered by the love of great foodpreneurs.”

**AS SOMEONE** who has been following Ohan and his pursuits in the UAE’s F&B ecosystem for a long time now, it’s pretty apparent to me that that Ohan is someone who believes in the power of food to bring people together, and that is what he wishes to safeguard with Locale. “For Locale, great food is not a commodity,” Ohan declares. “Silicon Valley money exploited the weakness of our industry, which is also our greatest strength- our singular focus on and passion for food, people, and experience. We are taking it back. Locale fills the gap -great food technology, convenience, multi-kitchen operating efficiencies, last mile logistics- but this is not our product. Our product is great food.” And in case you’re wondering why that matters, Ohan has his answer ready, “Food is culture,” he declares. “We celebrate with food, commiserate with food, and commune with food. It enriches the fabric of our lives. There is no greater gift than when someone gives something of themselves to create something to be enjoyed by others. Our goal is to preserve and protect this culture- the creators, the people, and most importantly, the food they create.”
ANY WOMAN with a golden-hued complexion will tell you that finding a concealer to perfectly match their skin tone is rare— if not, impossible. In the vast spectrum of skin tones represented by makeup brands around the world, warm skin tones have long been misclassified and left underserved. In fact, complexions with prominent golden-yellow undertones are prone to under-eye circles and skin discoloration, and the industry’s stereotypical “warm” or “cool” labels have traditionally exiled these tones to a generic medium-tan label. And if you don’t have the right concealer, the rest of your makeup simply doesn’t work.

THAT’S THE PROBLEM Dubai-based makeup artist Fizah Pasha -the founder and CEO of Brulée Beauty- set out to solve. “I’ve been a makeup artist for about 10 years, and I struggled to find the right formulas for my clients with yellow undertones,” she says. “I would constantly need to mix two or three different foundations and concealers to get the right color and texture. Our dark circles are a bit different, and we don’t really fit the cookie-cutter formula. Your complexion can appear ashy and grey if you’re using a concealer that doesn’t match your skin and undertone.”

TRAINED AT THE WORLD-RENOVEND Delamar Academy in the UK, and working across London, Dubai, New York and Karachi, Pasha heard women from diverse ethnic backgrounds all sharing the same skin concerns as they collectively struggled to find flattering, color-enhancing under-eye shades for their specific skin tones. And that’s how she ended up employing advanced color theory, dermatology, and cosmetology principles to develop the Brulée collection of high-coverage concealers that celebrates multifaceted skin tones that exist in a spectrum of shades ranging from macadamia to deep caramel.
EUREKA!
Fizah Pasha explains how to make an idea a great one

- Trust the process— it can take time. “After having worked on the formula for two years to get it just right, the product works as a corrector and concealer, and it takes literally a minute to blend.”

- Always fill a need in the market. “There isn’t a brand in the market that thinks of all the issues that women of golden and yellow undertones face. That’s why Brulée works.”

- Purpose should come before profit. “I came up with the idea of my own beauty line, catering to a niche that was forgotten, shortly after my divorce. I was fortunate to have the means and education to pursue my idea. Brulée helped me empower myself. And so, I thought to myself: how can I empower women to stand on their own feet and not feel compelled to stick around in unhappy situations? I wanted to empower women of yellow and golden skin undertones through representation, but also use my brand to help give women a voice by supporting education for girls. To start, we’ll be donating 5% of our profits to trusted charities that support young girls and women in developing countries in three key areas: formal education, skills and training, and mentorship. I discovered my purpose through working on this brand. When someone buys Brulée, I want them to know they’re not just buying a product. They’re buying a piece of me and my vision.”

HAVING LAUNCHED IN 2020, Pasha says it was doubly hard to get Brulée noticed in an ultra-competitive and oversaturated industry. “It was tough launching in a pandemic year, as there weren’t many opportunities to meet people or go to events to introduce myself or the brand,” Pasha recalls. But the old adage rang true for the founder: build it, and they will come. “The feedback I got was most fulfilling, from people switching from some pretty holy grail brands to Brulée,” she says. And the icing on the (Brulée) cake, Pasha added, came when Bollywood actress Sonam Kapoor—who frequently posts her glam routine tips and tricks on Instagram—shared how much she loves the Brulée concealer.

Looking ahead, the founder plans to expand her product range beyond concealers that will further serve women with sun-kissed undertones. “Inclusivity in makeup matters,” she says. “Every skin tone should be seen and considered when creating products.”

KHALID AL MUAWAD is the co-founder and CEO of Midwam, the first Saudi experience design company that specializes in immersive experiences.

FOUNDED IN 2012, Midwam is a Jeddah-based immersive experience design company that specializes in designing and curating unique immersive experiences for organizations and institutions. Led by co-founder and CEO Khalid Al-Muwad, Midwam is currently the only company of its kind in Saudi Arabia, and its standing in the market can be seen in the number of leading events that it has already worked on in the Kingdom and abroad. “Midwam counts tier-one government entities as its clients, including the Ministry of Culture, the Saudi Art Council, and MISK Innovation, as well as large enterprises, such as Saudi Airlines,” Al-Muwad reveals. “Midwam has also worked with leading lifestyle and entertainment brands, including the first MDLBeast SoundStorm, Saudi Arabia’s biggest transformational event that took place in Riyadh in December 2019, drawing the participation of 400,000 attendees. Outside of the Kingdom, the company has worked on multiple events in Moscow, London, New York, Paris, and Cannes.”

MIDWAM’S OPERATIONS in Saudi Arabia come at a time when the country is currently seeing revolutionary growth in sectors like entertainment, real estate, tourism, arts, culture, and more. The company is thus extremely well-placed to take advantage of these changes happening in the Kingdom as it pursues its Vision 2030 mandate, and that’s thanks to Al-Muwad spotting these opportunities and then tapping into it. “I come from a banking and financial background, and I saw a huge unmet demand for creative cultural and entertainment spaces in which people can connect,” he recalls. “Through relationships with companies in Saudi Arabia, the United States, Europe, and the Far East, we were able to fill this gap, and offer experiences that focused on various parts of culture, heritage, tourism, sports, and entertainment.”
WITH SAUDI ARABIA’S CULTURAL and technological change, the company is in a unique position to capitalize on opportunities in the development of the aforementioned emerging core industries. Tourism, for example, is one of the Kingdom’s most crucial pillars of growth, and Midwam will play a key part in providing immersive experiences that will attract visitors. Similarly, the cultural sector is predicted to grow at an exponential rate by 2030, and the extended reality industry will gain traction.

According to Al-Muawad, the demand for immersive experiences is going to increase as the world moves past the effects of the COVID-19 crisis. “Individual behaviors have changed dramatically since the pandemic, as digital experiences have become the norm, and thus, any physical encounter must be absolutely exceptional,” Al-Muawad says. “Following the relaxation of restrictions, Midwam is well positioned to benefit from this new reality. As the tourism and events business returns to pre-pandemic levels, we will continue to collaborate with leading institutions.” However, Al-Muawad is clear that he wishes for Midwam to stand out not just on the local level, but also on the global playing field. “On a worldwide scale, we want to maintain our position as a pioneer in immersive experience design,” Al-Muawad declares. “We aim to accelerate the development of creative, cutting-edge products to deliver the most captivating experiences across many industries through our pioneering methodology, which leverages the best of local know-how and human capital.”

“WE WANT TO MAINTAIN OUR POSITION AS A PIONEER IN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE DESIGN.”
A CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT who has experience working in the finance and banking realms across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East may not be the typical profile one would expect from the founder of a fashion label— but then again, that’s exactly who Winifred Mills-Amui is. Having launched her eponymous brand in the UAE in September last year, Mills-Amui likens launching a business in this domain as going through a crash course in an entirely new industry. But she has managed to power through it all, and she continues to do so even today— all of which points to the strength of the factors that drove her to launch Winifred Mills in the first place. “I have, for many years, felt that the clothing available to women like myself—with fuller figures, with professional needs—never fully represented the many facets of our being,” Mills-Amui says. “As such, I wanted to launch a label that reflected my tastes and my identity—a desire that, at times, seemed unique, but is actually something shared by so many globally.”

In fact, Mills-Amui recalls tweaking, adjusting, and altering existing brands in an attempt to create looks that were a better expression of her style— but those efforts never panned out in the way she hoped. “What was missing was authenticity,” she recalls. “My friends shared my feelings, so I knew the need was there— I just needed to figure out a way to make it a reality.”

THIS IDEA TURNED INTO A BUSINESS after Mills-Amui heard an ad that was prompting new business registrations in early 2020— the opportunity, quite literally, fell into her lap, and she grasped it with both hands, even while the coronavirus pandemic had begun to inflict its terrible toll on the world. “The biggest challenge was deciding to set up a brand, and to do it properly,” Mills-Amui remembers. “I wanted to understand all the stages involved in establishing a brand, from the branding of the business, right through to pattern-making, designing, sketching the pieces, and getting the outfits made.” Note here that Mills-Amui had entered a domain that was quite foreign to her— but she made use of the resources available to her to master the craft she had chosen. “I enrolled in two courses by [online education platform] MasterClass with Dionne Von Furstenberg and Marc Jacobs, amongst others, which gave me a very good insight of what was required,” she explains. “Following that, I consulted with professionals in the fashion industry, and it became apparent this was by no means an easy feat. And then, there was social media to contend with— the media landscape I knew had completely changed.” Nevertheless, Mills-Amui persisted. “What kept me going was my passion, and my mother, who has always been my rock,” she says. “She is an example of a woman who accomplished all she set out to do— a wife, mother of four, a professional working woman in the medical industry, and an entrepreneur. I felt if she could do it, so could I.

Launching the brand in September last year was a huge triumph— an accomplishment that took 18 months to achieve, a true labor of love.”
The Winifred Mills label draws on Mills-Amui’s Ghanaian heritage, with her making use of the rich West African textile traditions of kente, ankara, and aso oke to make clothes that would not only fit, but also flatter and accentuate strong silhouettes.

“Designed to empower and celebrate the wearer, each piece expertly balances classic shapes and feminine details with bold uses of print and color,” Mills-Amui says. “With versatility at the heart of each design, the wearer is given the tools to experiment and explore their individuality. With a global and cross-cultural mindset, this label is for women who want to confidently showcase their heritage, celebrate their femininity, and harness their power.” And while Mills-Amui may have started on her entrepreneurial journey to fulfil her particular needs in fashion, she has seen her brand be welcomed by other women as well.

“We are consistently told, ‘This was just made for me,’ ‘This is extremely comfortable,’ ‘This brand had me in mind,’ ‘Every outfit fits perfectly,’ etc. As an inclusive brand catering to strong silhouettes, and with a growing list of repeat customers, it is evident we are servicing a gap in the market, and we are well positioned on the runway for a steep take-off.” Add to all of this the fact that Winifred Mills is a Black-owned enterprise in the fashion landscape, and that, by itself, makes Mills-Amui a trailblazer in her own right. “With there being very few renowned African female fashion designers to look up to, I hope my journey will inspire others,” she says. “As a wife, and a mother to an amazing 12-year-old young man, while working full-time for an international bank, my experience as an entrepreneur in the UAE has been a very interesting one. The pre-launch journey has had its peaks and troughs, ups and downs, wins and losses, but it has been rewarding to build my vision from scratch, prioritizing my needs, and the needs recognized in the market.”

EUREKA!
Winifred Mills-Amui explains how to make an idea a great one

〉Seek the right kind of support
“As the saying goes: ‘Stop asking people who have never been where you’re going for direction.’ We often rely on friends and family for advice, but setting up a business requires knowledge from that industry. Seek advice and guidance from industry experts.”

〉Stand out from the crowd
“Have a product that differentiates you from the market, and know your why. It is imperative that your product is offering something unique to the market.”

〉Be your own cheerleader
“You should be passionate about the product you’re selling. That is absolutely key!”

IMAGES COURTESY WINIFRED MILLS
WATERFRONT DISTRICT

Explore Waterfront Living with endless moments of experiences in the centre of Dubai. 1, 2 & 3 bedroom apartments starting from AED 981,000*

Waterfront promenade  Amazing views  Resort-style amenities

Call 800 999 999 and schedule your visit to Sobha Hartland, MBR City

*T&C apply
As a celebrated chef in the Philippines, JP Anglo doesn’t need much of an introduction to the Filipino population in the UAE, and that may well explain why there has been a lot of love and support pouring in for the launch of his first F&B venture in the UAE, Kooya Filipino Eatery. With its name being a derivation of the Tagalog word *kuya* (meaning “brother”), the restaurant aims to be a celebration of Filipino cuisine. And Anglo, who is perhaps best known for being the man behind the hugely popular Sarsa Kitchen concept in Manila and bringing an irresistible twist to the Philippines’ cuisine, hopes that the fare at Kooya will wow not just his fellow kabayan, but also those who may not be as familiar with it. “Our main idea is really to bring good Filipino food to countries outside of the Philippines,” Anglo says. “Not ‘elevated’ Filipino food per se, because Filipino food is already great. It just needs to be presented differently for those who have yet to experience it. Why can’t we have good quality Filipino food that people would have access to, much like Vietnamese food or Thai food?”

Located in Dubai Marina, Kooya is currently in its soft opening phase as a business, but the food Anglo has been serving at the restaurant has already been getting a lot of rave reviews. Kooya’s beef kalderata and chicken inasal appear to be its biggest hits, but praises have been aplenty for its inihaw na adobong tokwa and pancit palabok as well. Commenting on the reception he has seen so far, Anglo says, “So far, it’s been good. We’ve also been seeing a lot of different nationalities eating at Kooya, and it’s great that they like it. Most people have no idea what Filipino food is, even though they have so many Filipino friends. It’s time to start bringing Filipino food to the world. The campaign I am really pushing is to push #FilipinoFoodForward, because it’s time that people realize how good our food, culture, and heritage is.” And that ties into Anglo’s advice for anyone wanting to follow his lead in becoming an entrepreneur. “Don’t be afraid to break barriers and stereotypes,” Anglo says. “Go for it, and go for it through and through. There is nothing worse than half-baked anything—make sure your ‘why,’ or the reason for wanting to do something, is on point.”

With Kooya, Anglo is aiming to bring good Filipino food to countries outside of the Philippines. "Don't be afraid to break barriers and stereotypes."
EUREKA!
JP Anglo explains how to make an idea a great one

- **You need to be inspired**
  “Find your inspiration, and follow your gut feel. Of course, do your research too.”

- **Choose the right partners**
  “Choose allies based on their values, visions, and abilities. They should complement yours, and make up for the things you lack.”

- **Hire a good team**
  “The one thing you should invest in are your people. Invest in your key people, and your life will be so much easier.”
KYMA CO-FOUNDERS
Left to right: Farida El Agamy, Dima Samaan, and Samar Sayegh
EVERYONE WISHES to keep a tidy household— and that’d explain why all of us have a number of plastic bottles containing cleaning products in our homes at any given time. And when the last drop has been squeezed out of any of these bottles, it’s safe to say that we’d just throw away the empty container, and then replace it by buying a new plastic bottle filled with the requisite cleaning product. It’s this scenario that Kyma co-founders Farida El Agamy, Dima Samaan, and Samar Sayegh want to reimagine— what if, instead of buying a new bottle, we could reuse the empty one by refilling it with the product we need? And that’s exactly what their UAE-born startup is proposing. “Kyma has reengineered and reinvented cleaning by creating surface cleaners in tablet form,” the co-founders explain. “By adding water to a reusable bottle and dropping in this tablet of concentrated cleaning product, we are able to reduce our use of single-use plastics in our home.”

CEO El Agamy, CMO Samaan, and COO Sayegh say that Kyma is the result of the three women coming together as friends wanting to battle the global problem of plastic pollution, and find ways to safeguard the future of the planet we all live in. “Much of single-use plastic enters our oceans, and it has harmful effects on everyone,” they point out. “Up to 90% of the water we drink and the food we eat contain microplastics, and by 2050, scientists predict that the ocean will contain more plastic by weight than fish. We were shocked to learn all of this, and this is where Kyma was born.” Kyma’s refill and reuse model is thus an attempt by these women to disrupt the manufacturing processes of an industry that they believe has been quite limited on innovation. “We need bold innovations that challenge existing designs, materials, and business models,” they say. “Our priority is to rethink traditional approaches, and pave the way for new solutions such as reusable and refillable models.”

Kyma proudly declares its cleaning products to be non-toxic and biodegradable, and the co-founders say that the “refillution” the company is spearheading is finding favor among the UAE’s population. “Kyma was created with the mission of empowering customers by offering them the option to be sustainable, and the opportunity to contribute to enhancing the future of our planet,” they note. “We believe the consumer of the future wants it all, the opportunity to have a high-quality effective product, while also reducing their impact on the planet. Our goal is to make sustainability convenient, affordable, and attractive.” And while they may have started with making sustainable cleaning products under the Kyma brand, El Agamy, Samaan, and Sayegh are clear that they want the company’s portfolio to grow further. “Our plan is to continue developing products that will impact everyone’s life, and reduce our consumption of single-use plastics,” they explain. “We aim to build a lifestyle brand that uses chemical and technological innovation to reengineer fast-moving consumer goods to make them more ecological and consumer-friendly.”

EUREKA!
Farida El Agamy, Dima Samaan, and Samar Sayegh on how to make an idea a great one

Find a problem— and then solve it
“Identify a problem that you are facing personally as a consumer that has no evident solution, and come up with an idea that would solve it for you! Chances are, that if you’re continuously facing an unsolved problem, there is an unaddressed gap in the market.”

Dare to try, fail, and try again
“It is very likely that the idea you will eventually end working on is not among the first ideas you came up with. It’s important to be okay with trying things, them not working out, and moving on.”

Speak to entrepreneurs that have done it
“The best advice in entrepreneurship comes from the people who have done it and managed to build a successful company. Their advice and insight will make it easier for you to take a decision regarding your next steps.”
WHEN AMIR FARHA announced in November last year that he had launched a new venture capital (VC) firm catered towards early-stage startups in the Middle East, it might be fair to say that his new enterprise piqued the curiosity of everyone who’s anyone in the region’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. After all, Farha can be likened to being a veteran of the Middle East’s investment arena, having spent close to 15 years investing in the region, perhaps most prominently in his time as the co-founder and Managing Partner of the Dubai-headquartered BECO Capital, with the list of startups he funded including now-famous names like Careem, Swvl, PropertyFinder, Kitopi, and others. So, given that he already had a successful career and an impressive track record behind him, one can be forgiven for wondering why Farha would now be attempting to start an altogether new enterprise with the stated aim to “transform the culture of early-stage investing in the Middle East.”

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION is indicated in the name Farha chose to call his new firm: COTU Ventures, where COTU stands for “Champions Of The Underdog.” Farha says that he was driven to launch his new VC firm after coming to the realization that the majority of relationships that currently exist between founders and investors in the region is one of fear, manipulation, and power dynamics. “Very few investors know how to truly foster deep connections with founders that is focused on trust and openness, and, as such, create a safe place to share and be vulnerable,” Farha explains. “This is especially prevalent at the earliest stages, where there is little traction, and the founder is at their loneliest, i.e. when they are a true underdog. Most investors wait for traction, and they are often uncomfortable with the uncertainty of a startup’s life before it reaches product-market fit. We at COTU Ventures are here to fill that gap. We help people become extraordinary by showing them how to believe in themselves when they are at the loneliest, earliest, and most challenging parts of their journeys.”

WITH AN EXPLICIT FOCUS towards supporting founders who are in the seed stage of their businesses, COTU Ventures aims at offering such entrepreneurs “a diverse and unique value-add” to their respective journeys. “We believe that the first investor (believer) in a founder’s journey can be the most impactful, if they are able to build a strong foundation of trust and connection with each other,” Farha says. “They can help in the early team hires, key product roadmap decisions, culture and values setting, and in fundraising and cap table construction. All of these are essential areas to solve for early on and compound in value over time. Hence, being the ‘first check’ can really alter the company’s chance of success. Very few investors have that stage and value-add focus, and that’s why there are not many impactful partners to founders early enough in their journey. And while we’ve been in the market for only a short period of time, we were able to attract some high potential founders to our roster, and we have forged strong relationships with all of them.”
COTU VENTURES HAS BEEN REPORTED to have been an investor for three MENA-based businesses in the recent past: MoneyHash, a fintech enterprise operating out of Egypt, Supy, a UAE-based digital enterprise that streamlines restaurant-supplier relationships, and Englease, an edtech startup also based out of the UAE. And as per Farha, COTU Ventures is standing out from its peers in the investment domain by managing to build fruitful relationships with the entrepreneurs behind these companies. “Our founders love us, and this is shown by how they involve us in critical decisions, and give us more ownership in their companies over time,” he says. “We do not take this for granted, and we are always open to feedback to continue to improve our proposition and interactions as we grow. Everything we do is through our values and principles.” And Farha is insistent that these tenets will remain the underlying characteristics that govern the VC firm as it develops and grows in the months and years ahead. “We are building a network of venture partners who believe in our mission and stand by similar values,” Farha reveals. “This is a relationship business that is long-term, so investing in people, growing our team, and expanding our value-add are all areas that we will continue to focus on in the future.”

EUREKA!
Amir Farha explains how to make an idea a great one

› Find a (small) community of like-minded people “Be surrounded by other people that are also looking to start something, or work for a startup. Work out of co-working spaces. Meet new people. Attend events. This can be physical or virtual. These days, I’d recommend virtual, for example, OnDeck. Learn.”

› Write down ideas to build depth and conviction “Write down ideas as they come to you. Take each idea, and research it online in order to learn about the market and the dynamics, and if there are alternative solutions that exist. Then, explore the idea further through asking questions to the right people, and testing the idea with others. You’ll either get more excited by the problem or opportunity, or less excited. That’s your measure of conviction.”

› Start building “Nothing is every clear at the start, but if you have enough conviction, then you will be able to fight through the struggles that will inevitably hit you early on. Whether you start with a basic minimum viable product, or even something that’s done totally offline but can test the viability of the solution, it doesn’t matter. Most people don’t have the courage to actually start.”

THE WOVEN HOUSE
thewovenhouse.ae

BIANCA OBRIQUE is the co-founder of The Woven House, an online home décor store based out of the UAE that sells a variety of exquisitely handcrafted products that have been sustainably made by weavers in the entrepreneurs’ native country of the Philippines. Weaving in the Philippines is a distinct expression of art, culture, and tradition, and from hanging planters to rattan shelves, each item in The Woven House portfolio is a testament to the talent of the artisans that the company has empowered, whom Obrique proudly declares to be “the life force, sheer power, and vitality” of the company. “Every woven piece is fabricated exclusively by one weaver, and marked with the maker’s identity,” Obrique explains. “By empowering the members of our local handicraft industry, we feel humbled and connected to our Filipino roots. It also shows our appreciation and recollection of our homeland’s achievements and heritage... They are not only a product of hard work, but they are also developed with a lofty goal in mind, and that is to help mitigate the harmful effects people inflict on Mother Nature by making possible the production of similar commodities in the most environment-friendly manner.”

Obrique was driven to launch The Woven House after she herself found it hard to source such handcrafted home décor products—which are quite characteristic of the Philippines—from her home in Dubai during the onset of the global COVID-19 crisis in 2020.
“It was at the height of the pandemic, and most countries were on lockdown,” she recalls. “Since I was mostly at home then, I remembered that I’ve always wanted to redecorate my place, make it cozier, more relaxing, and somehow bring the freshness of the outdoors, indoors. Also, since we all couldn’t go home to our country, we wanted to bring some pieces of home here. That’s when I realized the rarity and absence of these products here in the UAE.” It is thus with a dream to introduce these Filipino works of art to a global audience that Obrique partnered with co-founder Roseller Enriquez to build The Woven House, and the first market they decided to target was the Middle East.

“The Woven House is an affirmation of our belief in the Philippines’s potential to differentiate itself from other similar industry-related products,” Obrique says. “We believe it is high time for Filipino crafts to be known on a global level. In the coming years, we aim to see it thrive. Furthermore, we seek to change the way the public sees, buys, and thinks about local craftsmanship, while contributing to the uplifting of our local artisan’s standard of living.” From a personal standpoint, Obrique is also hoping that her and Enriquez’s efforts with The Woven House will also help reframe mindsets about what the Philippines has to offer the world at large. “My desire to keep changing the narrative for us Filipinos grows more and more each passing day,” Obrique declares. “I believe that Filipino craftsmanship can surpass the stereotypical norm to remain local. I also do want everyone to realize that we, for that matter, can be as knowledgeable, skilled, and competent as our counterparts from other countries. That is why I commit to every step towards being a platform that will fulfill this kind of potential.”

“Stop undermining yourself, and start believing”

“Sometimes, it can be tricky to catch yourselves undermining yourself, but whenever you do, try to refocus your attention on something that inspires you, and go back to your why: why do I want this business to happen? Believe that you are capable of achieving greater things!”

“All the excuses need to go”

“Excuses are a sign you are starting to fall into the same trap of losing yourself again. It is okay to put off something when you are tired (your mental health matters), but you have to not let it become a constant habit. Know that you are worthy of anything. If you set your mind to it, you can achieve it.”

“Surround yourself with a good support system”

“Having family and friends who support your dreams is great, since they will encourage and boost your confidence to continue what you’ve already started. Your loved ones might also give you some ideas or other inspirations that you can incorporate into your business. And of course, I just want to add that you are your biggest supporter. You have to motivate yourself, and do not let the challenges along the way impede your growth. Doing something new can be nerve-wracking, but if you don’t try, you will always feel entrapped by the ‘what could have been’ feeling. Do not wait for that ‘aha’ moment- create it!”

“Take action”

“It’s really just about taking one baby step at a time- I really believe that every effort, big or small, goes a long way. It doesn’t matter how simple it is, you have to start from somewhere. This will set the momentum of your overall entrepreneurial journey.”

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”

“To be honest, for me, trying new things was scary; it’s hard. For a lot of reasons, I was gripped with potential fear of failure, paralyzed by the notion of inconsistency, and questions like, ‘What if I don’t meet up to the level of those I admire?’ In short, I was overwhelmed by the workload required to start. But in the end, I realized that trying is the only way we grow and learn. I had to gather the courage, put my nose to the grindstone, and crank it up to get started. I realized that the things required to define my new path were just a few more achievements off.”
AS A CHILD, Jessica Kahawaty remembers people complimenting her mother, Rita, for the food she made, saying things like, “Your food is so great; you should open a restaurant!” But at the time, Rita was too busy being a devoted mother, and she never found time to pursue that line of thought. Fast forward many years later to 2020, and Jessica, who had, by then, become an internationally acclaimed model and humanitarian living in Dubai, decided to tap into the potential of this idea of her mother spearheading a food business when Rita, who had traveled to Dubai from her home in Australia, found herself staying on with her daughter for longer than she planned thanks to the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic. This is, in effect, what led to the mother and daughter becoming the co-founders of Mama Rita, an online food delivery concept specializing in the provision of homecooked meals that are both healthy and delicious.

THE MAMA RITA MENU is an eclectic one - there are hearty offerings like the oriental rice with lamb and the beef stroganoff, interspersed with lighter fare like the fattoush salad and the newly introduced Mediterranean prawn wrap. “Our idea for Mama Rita is premium quality food with democratic pricing, and a menu carefully curated by the family,” says Jessica, who essayed the role of CEO at the enterprise, while Rita is its Head of Culinary. “We are a light-asset digitally native vertical brand that uses cloud kitchens to operate and expand. Being at the forefront of the virtual brand, we can speak to our consumers directly through a combined reach on social media of 1.2 million followers. Innovation is at the heart of what we do. Our menu items are unique, many of which were my grandmother’s recipes. The best part is that they are bestsellers and much loved by our Mama Rita customers, which allows us to stand out from the vast pool of players in the market.”

AND JESSICA HAS THE NUMBERS to prove her statement. “The reception towards Mama Rita has been incredible so far, with over 150,000 meals served since launch, and an incredible retention rate of 80%,” she points out. “Looking ahead, the vision for Mama Rita is to expand geographically to reach more people who are already fans of the brand.” At the same time, Mama Rita has also been inking strategic partnerships with influential brands in the market. Jessica proudly notes that in the fifth month of its operation, Starbucks approached the company to have one of its desserts called the “Fresh Fruit Paradise” in hundreds of the former’s outlets across the UAE. Such achievements bode well for the future of the business, and Jessica, for her part, seems to be all fired up for the road ahead. “Looking back on my journey, there is nothing I would’ve done differently,” Jessica notes. “We jumped into this so fast without knowing what to expect, and the greatest businesses come from a moment of magic and serendipity.”
DUBAI-BASED 3FILS was declared to be the best restaurant in the MENA at the region’s inaugural edition of the renowned World’s 50 Best Restaurants held in Abu Dhabi in February this year, and when I ask Ahmed Saleh, co-founder and CEO of The Lab Holding (the UAE-based operator of the concept) if he ever expected his homegrown enterprise to reach the levels of success it has scaled to today, he replies in the negative. “I don’t think it was ever on our minds,” Saleh admits. “We wanted to create a small, humble, and casual restaurant, where we all can enjoy high quality food and have fun. Whatever success we have is all thanks to an incredible team, and the amazing guests that continue to join us at 3Fils.”

Tucked away in Dubai’s Jumeirah Fishing Harbor, 3Fils, which opened in 2013, may not fit one’s stereotypical assumptions of an establishment that’d win top honors on a 50 Best list- for starters, there are no fine dining elements offered at this restaurant. The vibe at 3Fils is casual and laidback, and all tables are served on a walk-in basis- the unlicensed restaurant has a no-reservations policy. But all of these points don’t take away from the fact that the food being offered at 3Fils is exemplary- it is premium Asian fare, heavily influenced by Japanese cuisine, made using high quality ingredients, designed to be served in an approachable manner. “The great idea we have at 3Fils is about ‘making complex simple,’” Saleh says. “It’s not just a slogan, it’s a way of life. We implement and live this daily, and simplicity always wins.”

Of course, there’s a lot of work that happens behind the scenes to enable such simple, seamless dining experiences for the patrons of 3Fils, and that shows the importance of the collaborative manner in which this business is run. “We’ve all played our part in giving our three fils in everything about the restaurant,” Saleh says. “From the logo, to the dragon maki roll, all our research, experience, and knowledge -from myself, the chefs, even the waiters- all of our opinions and ideas have made their way into 3Fils.” Such efforts have clearly worked out well for 3Fils, and given the success it has seen so far, Saleh admits that growing the brand is something he and his team are certainly considering. “We are thinking of expansion, most definitely, taking into account that the experience has to be the same for all our 3Fils guests, no matter where we open,” Saleh concludes.
EUREKA!
Ahmed Saleh explains how to make an idea a great one

› Be curious, be observant
“Look at everything, everywhere. Find a gap that you’ve personally experienced and build on it. Find alternative solutions to eliminate or fill in the gaps.”

› Keep in mind that you’re on a two-way street
“We’re in the business of exchanging value, all part of a giving and receiving cycle.”

“THE GREAT IDEA WE HAVE AT 3FILS IS ABOUT MAKING COMPLEX SIMPLE.”
#TamTalksTech

Gadgets and doodads that you might’ve missed out on, sourced by a tech aficionado. by TAMARA CLARKE

A cut above ➔
/Samsung Galaxy S22 Ultra

The Samsung Galaxy S22 Ultra combines the power of the Note series and the iconic S-Pen with a pro-grade camera. The improved S Pen experience means that you write and draw directly on the screen. The S Pen also gives you instant access to signature S Pen tools such as Samsung Notes and Live Message, and the handwriting-to-text function has been upgraded to support 87 languages. And that’s not all- the S Pen can also act as a remote control to run presentations. Capture stunning photos and videos all day and night using the camera which features a 2.4um pixel sensor (Samsung’s largest pixel sensor ever), and photos can be further refined using the free Expert RAW app. At the same time, multitasking is easier than ever on the Galaxy S22 Ultra due to its 4nm Processor. With all the powerful features built into the Galaxy S22 Ultra, rest assured that the device is well-equipped for long hours of use with a large 5000mAh battery, which lets you record more than 50 minutes of video (after only a 10-minute charge), so you can keep calm and carry on with minimal disruption to your work or play time.

Sounds good ➔
/Sony LinkBuds

The Sony LinkBuds are here to give you a premium listening experience, whether you’re working from home, gaming, or simply streaming music. Approximately four grams in weight, these earbuds are easy to carry wherever life takes you. Make calls without noise, for crystal clear conversations, thanks to LinkBuds’ precise voice pickup technology, which is supported by Sony’s noise reduction algorithm. LinkBuds also allow you to enjoy high quality sound, no matter how busy life gets, thanks to its Digital Sound Enhancement Engine. Sony’s Integrated Processor V1 reproduces all the detail in your music with minimal distortion for a stunningly authentic listening experience, so your favorite artists always sound great. To sweeten the deal, Adaptive Volume Control automatically optimizes volume based on where you are, letting your music seamlessly blend into your environment. Meanwhile, gesture controls keep you on top of things with its Wide Area Tap feature. By double or triple tapping in front of either of your ears, you can adjust the playback to your liking– there’s no need to touch the LinkBuds themselves.

I’ve got the power ➔
/Zendure SuperMini X3

Zendure’s new SuperMini X3 weighs in at just 200 grams, so it doesn’t weigh you down when charging on-the-go. The 10000mAh power bank is portable, and packs a punch with 45W power delivery output. It’s ideal for charging a variety of devices including tablets, phones, laptops, and Nintendo Switch- it reportedly only takes 30 minutes to charge a MacBook Air up to 40%. Meanwhile, the SuperMini X3 takes about an hour to fully recharge itself, and it features three charging ports (one bidirectional 45W PD USB-C charging port, and two USB-A charging ports), thereby allowing you to charge up to three devices at the same time. The SuperMini X3 comes with an LED screen along the side as well, so you can easily keep an eye on the battery.

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
Fun comes guaranteed

You decide when the party stops with 24hr food & drink.
Now open at Dubai Digital Park.

Radissonhotels.com/RED
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 the Santoni’s Fall/Winter 2022 line, a new timepiece from Audemars Piguet, and more.

EYE ON YOU → Versace
Versace has teamed up with actor and photographer Cole Sprouse to present its latest eyewear capsule line. The six-piece collective of frames includes Medusa Focus, a pair of aviator sunglasses, as well as Medusa Mesmerize, a pair of sunglasses with a futuristic vibe, both produced with black temple details and dark grey lenses. Get them while they’re hot! Versace.com
REFINING ELEGANCE ➔
Audemars Piguet

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Royal Oak, luxury Swiss watchmaker Audemars Piguet is debuting its first Royal Oak Selfwinding Flying Tourbillon in an openworked dial configuration. Encased in a 41mm diameter, we see the timepiece in all its glory, offering a look on its all-new Calibre 2972 movement, while also exposing all of its intricate inner workings and a skeletonized dial display. From the flying tourbillon at 6 o’clock and the tiny revolving cage around the balance wall, it’s an impressive piece of art. Add to that the wider polished chamfers on the bezel and caseback, plus the new thinner bracelet that makes the time a lot more comfortable to wear. If you’re looking for a timepiece that screams luxury, this staple is hitting stores this March—don’t miss out. audemarspiguet.com

EDITOR’S PICK
Aloushi’s ➔

Founded by UAE-based entrepreneurs Alia Jashanmal and Alkesh Thayrani, e-commerce platform Aloushi’s aims to bring sustainable brands from around the world under one platform. We’re quite delighted to see Kal Hans, a vegan, all-natural skincare brand, as part of its offering. As a brand that encourages embracing one’s flaws, Kal Hans is for the real beauty minimalists who want a no-fuss, on-the-go skincare routine. From its aloe cucumber mist, to its skin brightening under-eye cream, the Kal Hans formula packs in plant-based active ingredients to create multifunctional products that are vegan, cruelty-free, and eco-friendly. aloushi.com

WALK IN STYLE ➔
Santoni

Effortlessly fusing formal and sporty in a novel way, Santoni’s Fall/Winter 2022 men’s collection narrate craftsmanship as well as unexpected color combinations. It has a palette of warm shades of brown and yellow, as well as cooler shades of blue and bright green. And of course, its details can’t be missed: materials made out of calf skin, soft suede, nylon, and wool are crafted with the signature Santoni style; they are also rubberized and shaded for its color to evoke a tactile consistency. Almost every pair of shoes can be accessorized with a suit and leather bag— they work for the boardroom, or even for a casual night out. santonishoes.com
How blockchain, artificial intelligence and IoT is revolutionising the logistics and supply chain industries

WAREHOUSING
How automation is reinventing the warehousing business and disruptive technologies are allowing warehouses to accommodate the F&B, retail and pharma sectors' growing requirements.

SUPPLY CHAIN WOES
The shipping network upended by the pandemic shows no respite — supply chains continue to find itself in a logistics knot, ports face a never-seen-before congestion and shipping rates are yet to fall. What is the solution?

SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY
Green fuels, sustainable infrastructure and sustainable modes of transport.
A Whole New World

Five things a metaverse sceptic learned by buying real estate in a virtual universe

by PALLAVI DEAN

As the head of Dubai-based interior design and architecture studio Roar, I recently spent US$60,000 on buying real estate in Decentraland, which has billed itself as “the first fully decentralized world.” Here’s my explanation of how and why I did this- and what I learned in the process:

1/ I WAS SO WRONG TO TURN MY NOSE UP AT THE METAVERSE

FULL DISCLOSURE: my name is Pallavi, and I am a recovering metaverse sceptic. For a long while, I have been reading about bitcoin going through the roof, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) selling for millions, and people trading plots in Decentraland- and I’d think, “These guys are nuts, frittering their hard-earned cash on useless digital nonsense.”
It’s a well-trodden argument— but then, I had a realization, and I finally got it. The turning point was my credit card bill. To be precise, the credit card bill for my kids’ video games such as Minecraft, Fortnite, and Roblox. As it turns out, I’ve been spending a fortune in the metaverse for years now, buying characters, weapons, skins, even a few virtual countries—and I have the receipts to prove it.

As it turns out, I’m not alone. Bloomberg crunched the numbers on the metaverse economy, calling it “a nearly $800 billion market opportunity.” Earlier this year, Microsoft paid $67 billion for video game company Activision in what has been described as the biggest tech takeover in history. (“The deal will provide building blocks for the metaverse,” said Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella.) And then there was Facebook changing its name to Meta. I could go on—the examples are plentiful.

2/ BUYING IS HARD: WE NEEDED THOUSANDS IN CASH AND A GUY IN A LAND CRUISER
It’s one thing deciding to buy property in the metaverse; it’s another thing to actually do it. I’m doing my MBA, and my professors at INSEAD constantly remind me: “Execution is everything!” And in this instance, the execution was excruciating!

Here is the problem: I wanted to invest about $60,000 in Decentraland (more on this later) with my colleagues at Roar, Kathryn and Leigh. But I live in the UAE, and lots of the top cryptowallets are designed for residents of the US. Even when we set up a local wallet, frustratingly, it had a 60-day cooling off period before we could spend our ethereum to buy mana, the crypto for Decentraland.

Eventually, it was old school cash that won the day: we withdrew thousands and thousands of dirhams in notes from an ATM and contacted Intex Pearl, an ethereum trading company, who collected the money and completed the trade on our behalf. I’m sure there’s a better way to do this, but this is how we got it across the line.

It’s certainly a good thing that crypto brokers take compliance, anti-money-laundering, and know your customer (KYC) protocols seriously. But it can make the process of buying metaverse real estate akin to walking through treacle.

3/ WE BOUGHT FROM DECENTRALAND- THE NUMBER OF PLOTS IS CAPPED
Once you have made the initial general decision to invest in the metaverse, you have a specific decision to make: which ‘verse are you going to pick? We chose Decentraland, which was created in 2017 by a couple of Argentinians, and formally launched in 2020.

Here’s why: first, Decentraland capped the number of plots at 90,601. Scarcity is key in the crypto world, which is why bitcoin
does so well—thankfully Decentraland plots have a lower carbon footprint. Back in 2017, a plot cost around $20; today, they sell for tens of thousands. The Canadian cryptocurrency company Tokens.com bought a patch of land last year for $2.4 million, Sotheby’s has re-recreated its London auction house in Decentraland, and so, yes, it seems to be gathering steam.

One final stat: back in 2017, you could buy one mana for $0.02—today it’s above $3. Now, of course, other metaverses are available and we have no particular affiliation to Decentraland, but we had to take a punt, and this is the one we picked.

4/ THE METAVERSE BUSINESS MODEL FOR AN ARCHITECTURE FIRM

Here’s how we did it: we bought four plots of land on the main access road in Decentraland, close to Genesis Plaza, for about $60,000. If you have four plots, it’s classed as an estate, rather than an individual parcel, and that gives you extra height restrictions. We’re calling it @RoarMetaSpace. (The exact coordinates are RoarMETA -135, -75 next to Genesis Plaza.)

Our space will have an art gallery and bar on the ground floor, a co-working space on the first floor, and an experimental hotel room on the second floor. As a business, we hope to make money in three ways:

- **Sell UAE-centric art as NFTs** In February, we launched our first collection on the New York City-headquartered NFT marketplace OpenSea, and they’re already for sale at $1,000 each. We’re also working on furniture designs. Too many contractors just copy designer furniture, giving the photo to a manufacturer to rip off. That’s a flagrant infringement of intellectual property. Instead, we want to give them the chance to buy original designs that they can own legitimately.

- **Be contracted for design projects in the metaverse** Charge a fee to design real estate in the metaverse, in much the same way as we have done for nearly 10 years with physical buildings.

- **Make use of the developer model** Much like how Dubai-based real estate players Emaar and Damac do in the physical world, we are also thinking of buying plots, building them, and then sell them as individual apartments, offices, shops, etc.

  We are all new to this, and so, there’s a lot to learn, and it will be a lot of trial and error, not just in buying the space, but in designing it. But that’s how design thinking works— it’s an iterative process. There’s clearly potential: an anonymous buyer this year paid $450,000 to be Snoop Dogg’s neighbour in Decentraland, so let’s see where it all goes.

5/ IT MIGHT ALL END IN TEARS—BUT DOING NOTHING IS ALSO A RISK

The bottom line is that we don’t want to be Dick Rowe— that’s the 1960s music producer who didn’t sign The Beatles!

Also, luckily, we haven’t bet the farm. While $60,000 isn’t nothing, it’s not going to break the bank— Roar has had a good run through its core business of selling design services for physical buildings like offices, hotels, homes, etc., so we can afford to dip our toe in the water. With traditional real estate out-pricing buyers, buying digi-assets to diversify our investment portfolio is a good idea. It’s time to go “phygital”— this digital-real world hybrid is here to stay!

Pallavi Dean is the founder and Creative Director of Roar. Pallavi plays at the intersection of design and entrepreneurship, having founded her design firm Roar in 2013. A trained architect and sustainability specialist, she has won multiple awards for work across a range of sectors including commercial, hospitality and residential. Recent work includes The Accor House of Original in Dubai, Sensasia spa at Kempinski Dubai and Mckinsey HQ in Doha. She was born in India, raised in Dubai, and spent years working in London; her designs reflect these eclectic influences.

A former professor of design, she strives to implement the latest theoretical and practical research into the firm's designs. As a product designer, Pallavi collaborated with Artemide to launch Interweave, an interactive lighting system for Euro Luce in Milan 2019. Her work has been profiled in some of the world’s leading international media including the Financial Times, BBC, Monocle, Wallpaper, and Architectural Digest. designbyroar.com
Fintech is not exactly a new industry—after all, technology, to some extent, has always been intrinsically connected to finance. From the introduction of credit cards to the onset of high-frequency trading platforms, technology has swiftly evolved over the years to serve the financial demands of both consumers and businesses in many ways. Many factors have driven the growth of the fintech industry today, which include traditional payment providers adopting new technologies to improve end user experiences, the birth and speedy uptake of cryptocurrencies and blockchain, and the growth of machine learning and artificial intelligence to spot trends and risk. These factors, amongst others, have accelerated the advancement of the fintech industry, and it has been further amplified by the effects of the global coronavirus pandemic.

In a post-pandemic world, a digital experience is not only desired, but it is demanded. As consumers become more digitally minded, so do businesses, provoking companies to innovate and deliver fintech solutions across industries such as banking, telecommunications, retail, and insurance. In the Middle East, the burgeoning fintech market offers entrepreneurs profound potential for growth, growing rapidly at a compound annual growth rate of 30%. By the end of this year, it’s predicted that over 800 fintech companies from sub-segments that include payments, open banking, smart lending, blockchain, and regtech, will raise over US$2 billion in venture capital funding in the region.

As fintech flourishes in the Middle East, we see the emergence of diverse entrepreneurs and SMEs in the field. Having co-founded a successful fintech company named FOO in this region, here are a few of my tips on how you can crack the fintech market in the UAE and beyond:

1/ IT’S ALL ABOUT EXPERIENCE When creating your fintech solution, creating an effective user experience (UX) should lie at the heart of everything you do. You can innovate to deliver the most advanced technology; however, it will fall flat if not supported by a remarkable user experience. A strong connection between the back-end technology and front-end user experience is necessary. It’s striking this balance, the combination between innovative technology and an effective user interface and experience that enables the delivery of a successful solution. At FOO, we build all solutions in-house, using a diverse pool of talent, to ensure delivery on both fronts. Since our solutions are built on a modular platform, using microservices, we are able to achieve high quality with both technology and user experience.

2/ STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD True innovation is born as a solution to a problem, from solving a common challenge that people face. Identity your
challenge, find your niche, and focus on creating an attractive value proposition that makes you unique. Entering the market with a strong differentiating factor is what will give you an edge in an increasingly saturated market. We started FOO with this in mind. Before the startup ecosystem really existed, my partner and I started coding from my grandmother's house, creating an app that provided digital solutions on the Nokia platform. This was before app downloads were monetized, pre-existing the creation of Apple or Android app stores. Eventually, we pivoted to focus more heavily on fintech-related projects. This is when we were able to focus on building our differentiating factor. As we entered deeper into the digital space, we noticed that many fintech companies focus on functionality, rather than holistic, end-to-end experiences. We would use this insight to establish our edge- we became dedicated to ensuring that we could deliver the utmost quality on both functionality and design. This meant that clients no longer needed to seek out multiple providers to build a single solution; we could do it all in-house.

**3/ TIMING IS EVERYTHING** As with most things in life, timing is key when breaking into the fintech market. Patience has a big role to play in entrepreneurship. There will be highs and lows, but what entrepreneurs must understand is that it’s all part of the journey. For example, in the early stages of your business, growth and revenue may be hindered to ensure the best customer satisfaction. This sacrifice is vital to building brand reputation. As the business gains momentum, it’s important to be aware of when it’s the right time to raise funds and go for it. Fintech entrepreneurs operating in Dubai are fortunate to have the corporate structure and flexibility offered by the city’s business landscape. If leveraged at the right time, your fintech business has the potential for great growth. This has been the case with FOO- after moving our headquarters to the UAE and focusing on growth in the past few years, we are now planning to raise a Series B round of funding.

**4/ INVEST IN RELATIONSHIPS** The successful adoption of this advice can only be delivered and maintained by investing deeply in your team. Your employees are your biggest asset. Go that extra mile to ensure your team possesses robust industry know-how and a diverse skillset to deliver the best possible solution for your clients. Just as important as your team are the partnerships you forge. Particularly for SMEs, partnering with regional and international players provides the opportunity to accelerate growth. Since the early days of FOO, we were able to form meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships with leading companies like Nokia, Microsoft, Zain, Mastercard, and Visa. These partnerships played a key role in shaping our own company culture as we grew. Collaborating with successful partners will also give entrepreneurs and SMEs the chance to experience how larger companies operate and learn from their strategy, operations, and business models, and then use these lessons to focus on scalability both regionally and globally. Fintech entrepreneurs in the Middle East are fortunate to be operating in such a dynamic market. Operating from the UAE, the heart of economic activity in the GCC, we at FOO have been able to benefit from the industry’s natural growth, giving us access to a large talent pool as well as immense market potential. Going forward, we hope to delve further into the fintech industry in the Middle East, and keep supporting the ecosystem to thrive and grow.

Ghady Rayess is the co-founder and Managing Director of FOO, an award-winning B2B fintech company focused on empowering businesses with in-house built innovative products. foo.mobi

WHEN CREATING YOUR FINTECH SOLUTION, CREATING AN EFFECTIVE USER EXPERIENCE (UX) SHOULD LIE AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING YOU DO.
Can you start by giving us an introduction to your enterprise and its operations in Saudi Arabia?

Since the opening of its first store in 1991, Alhokair has grown considerably and now trades in circa 1,684 stores across 100 shopping malls in 11 countries, with a retail platform operating on a total gross leasable area of more than 470,000 sq.m. All of this is managed by a workforce numbering more than 10,500 dedicated employees. Today, we continue to build our position as the leading franchise retailer in the markets we operate in, and to position ourselves as the first choice for regional and international brand partners seeking exposure to strategic markets.

This is demonstrated by the exciting new franchise agreements we finalized during the past couple of years alone, which included Subway (the world’s largest restaurant brand), Decathlon, Fnac Darty, Alo Yoga, and Flying Tiger, but also by our transformation into an integrated omnichannel model. Our digital initiatives are supported by the acquisition of Vogacloset, and the establishment of FAS Lab to drive our digital initiatives. This approach will ensure that we provide our customers with tailored experiences that run seamlessly between the physical and virtual worlds.

Internationally, our operations span across 10 countries, and we have seen an impressive rebound in performance, while we continue to migrate some of our existing brands to these markets. Similar to Saudi Arabia, the top-down dynamics in the countries in which we operate, notably countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States, Egypt, and Jordan, are conducive for growth and value creation, with rising income levels, and young population bases.

Alhokair is the only listed business of its type in the Middle East, and we currently represent around 85 brands, spanning from womenswear, menswear, kids and babies, department stores, shoes, and accessories, and a series of restaurants and quick service restaurants. From our current base,
we will drive the growth of our F&B network alongside beauty, electronics, and sports to deliver long-term growth and realize our vision to build a true lifestyle brand.

As an enterprise with a heavy focus on Saudi Arabia, how are you and your entity embracing the Kingdom’s Vision 2030?

Alhokair is contributing to the agile and sustainable Saudi business landscape by aligning the Company’s mission with that of the nation’s 2030 agenda. Our approach is threefold:

- **WE ARE DRIVING OUR DIGITAL STRATEGY**, and deploying our omnichannel model. We see synergy between traditional retail and online, and we know this is what works for our markets. To this end, we are:
  - Integrating Alhokair brands on Vogacloset, supported by optimized marketing efforts and a “buy later” functionality
  - Accelerating the virtual roll-out of all our partnerships with 19 KSA mono-brand platforms, and seven international sites set to be live by the end of March 2022, having launched the Decathlon online platform in late 2021

- **WE ARE COMMITTED TO CONTINUOUS TALENT ONBOARDING**, professional development, and career opportunities. Our support towards Saudization goals also continues, and we have now reached a 72% rate, which is equivalent to the Platinum status on Nitaqat. Today, 70% of our colleagues are women, with two senior members reporting directly to me.

- **WE PARTNER WITH GOVERNMENTAL AND SEMI-GOVERNMENTAL ENTITIES** to support the SME sector in Saudi Arabia, especially in the F&B sector.

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

Saudi Arabia’s retail and F&B sectors enjoy strong fundamentals that are underpinned by favorable demographics, evolving lifestyles, low e-commerce penetration, and the government’s ambitious transformation plans. 62% of Saudis are between 15-49 years old, with internet penetration standing at just about 65%. F&B spend of about SAR220 billion in 2021 is expected to grow by 6% per annum over the next five years, supported by a growing tourism sector and a rise in the share of household spend on entertainment.

Saudi Arabia’s business landscape is evolving and thus introducing a myriad of opportunities, as the Kingdom drives its Vision 2030 agenda to diversify the economy. We are witnessing a new era of growth and transformation, and I encourage businesses across all sectors to participate in the country’s economic development. The recent reforms that have been introduced by the country for different sectors like education, digital transformation, and sustainability enables businesses to engage with these promising sectors. The country is developing fast as a residential, touristic, and entertainment hub with an agile workforce.

What impresses you most about Saudi Arabia’s plans for the future, and how are you and your business taking advantage of them?

I love the dynamic nature of our sector and the continuously evolving trends driving it. The ability to bring fresh and new concepts to the Kingdom is really exciting, and you can feel the consumer response that encourages us to constantly look for the next opportunity. Successful businesses also require entrepreneurial leadership. I enjoy developing strong and multiskilled teams from the executive level, right across to our customer-facing colleagues. Great products and services alone can’t make you thrive, you need great people too, and I am particularly grateful for our colleagues’ continued dedication, especially considering the enormous economical and human pressure that we have all experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have been agile and innovative during the past two years of major disruption, launching multiple complex and multifaceted projects to execute on our turnaround strategy. We have made great progress in a difficult environment, as demonstrated by our financial and operational performance. I believe that the decisions we took to ensure the company’s survival have set us well to drive growth and profitability into the future, and we are on track to deliver revenues of SAR6 billion for our financial year ending 31 March 2022. Of course, external factors beyond one’s immediate control add to the challenge of leading a complex international business such as Alhokair. Socio-economic stability as well as reliable supply chains are important factors for a consumer business such as ours, and I look forward to seeing a normalization in the global trade and shipping during 2022.

Raffaella Campagnoli is the founder and Managing Director of LIRA Strategy Partners. With over 20 years of experience in strategy consulting in international firms, she was formerly the Managing Director at Accenture Strategy Middle East and Turkey for nine years. Raffaella left Accenture after 13 years at the company, during which she led transformation programs in multiple regions (Europe, US, Turkey, Singapore, Middle East), specialized in strategic planning, operating model transformation, zero based budgeting, digital transformation and innovation, ecosystem strategy. Raffaella has been leading impactful transformations in industries like travel and hospitality, fashion, consumer products goods, and retail, thereby developing a trusted network of partners and experienced professionals.

March 2022 / ENTREPRENEUR.COM / 63
A Purpose-Led Vision

Ramy Koussa, Associate Vice President for the MENAT at Organon, on how his global healthcare company is aiming to create a better (and healthier) every day for every woman in the world

by TAMARA PUPIC

Organon, a global healthcare company with a portfolio of more than 60 medicines and other products across a range of areas, added the MENAT region to its list of more than 140 global markets in October 2021. Globally, Organon’s goal is to deliver innovation, improve access, and expand choice in order to address the therapeutic gaps in women’s health around the world, and now, its presence in the region will enable the Organon team to take a step closer to achieving this goal by offering tailor-made solutions for women in the MENAT.

In line with this objective, Organon’s launch event for its MENAT operations at Expo 2020 Dubai last year, which was held in partnership with United States Chamber of Commerce, the USA Pavilion, Jhpiego, and Friends of Cancer Patients, highlighted Organon’s mission to listen to women’s health needs, first and foremost. “I would say that we are the first big pharmaceutical company to have its vision fully dedicated to women,” says Ramy Koussa, Associate Vice President for the MENAT at Organon. However, Koussa points out here that Organon’s work on accelerating advancements in women’s health in the region only starts by listening to women, while the company’s long-term vision is to have all stakeholders involved and committed to this cause. “It’s everyone’s duty and responsibility, both men and women, to advance this,” he notes.

Zooming into this goal, it becomes clear that Organon’s promise to deliver significant interventions in women’s healthcare requires them to prioritize the areas where critical therapeutic gaps exist. And uncovering these gaps indeed requires a deeper insight into women’s needs, and for that very reason, the Organon team boasts of a high participation of women in the company,
with 70% of its global board members being women, and the female representation in the MENAT currently standing at a very high 40%. “Having this high percentage of women in our company is in line with our decision to start by listening to women, and we want women to listen to women to whom they can relate,” Koussa explains. “We want to understand what needs to be done, and, accordingly, to do that, but at the end of the day, it will not take only one single group of people or one single organization or any sub-segment to get us where we want. So, we need to activate everyone.”

Organon has a long history of innovation in women’s health. Organon is an ancient Greek word meaning “an instrument for acquiring knowledge,” and it became the name of a Netherlands-based company established in 1923 that became known as an innovator in the area of women’s health. When Organon was acquired in 2007 by American pharmaceutical company Schering-Plough, and then became part of the New Jersey-headquartered multinational pharmaceutical company Merck (known as MSD outside of the US and Canada) in a 2009 merger, its name was rejuvenated for the new company with an aim to preserve the important links to the past both in terms of its products and its passion for women’s health. Today, Organon is a global healthcare company formed through a spinoff from Merck in mid 2021, and its business is based composed on three pillars: women’s health, biosimilars, and established brands. Within just a few months of its launch, Organon has managed to initiate three transactions across some of the most urgent areas of need, aiming especially to advance innovation in large, underserved markets, which has been lacking in this domain for decades.

Organon Global has made quite a statement with these three major business deals, because they are in areas that are beyond the typical definition of reproductive health,” Koussa explains. “One is pre-term labor and postpartum hemorrhage (PPH), which is devastating when it happens, and we want to work on saving the mother’s and the newborn’s life. The other one is endometriosis, which is really very unspoken of, although it’s an issue that affects a big percentage of women across the world. And the third one is polycystic ovarian syndrome. So, we’ll continue to keep listening first, then we’ll continue enabling solutions and innovations in areas that are related to women’s health.”

Speaking specifically with respect to its operations in the MENAT region, Koussa says that Organon will be focused on building partnerships and collaborations that contribute to its overall goal—one example of this can be seen in its launch of the Femtech Accelerator Program in partnership with Egypt-based Flat6Labs to support female-founded, women’s healthtech startups across the MENA region. “If we think of our end objective to create a better and a healthier life for every woman, we need to partner with everyone—governments, medical and paramedical societies, patient groups, some segments of the business sector, academia—who have the vision and mission to advance women’s healthcare to the next level,” Koussa says. “That being said, our partnership with Flat6Labs is to really empower young women to move forward with their healthcare and femtech projects. But we are also working very closely with medical societies on educating women, regardless of their age, because there are different needs in every part of a woman’s lifecycle. So, we want to create a whole ecosystem that can support her. That is why we partner with different stakeholders, such as with different groups and societies to raise awareness, with governments to enable access, with universities to create the right scientific platform, and to encourage academia to start researching the science of women’s healthcare.”

Koussa notes here that Organon has “the best of both worlds,” in that it has the strength of a Fortune 500 company and the agility of an innovator. “This helps us enter the MENAT region, which is very interesting, because it has more than 48 markets and five key languages. Overall, in the MENAT region, we have about around 400 founders, not employees—we consider our team as not employees but founders, because, although we are a Fortune 500 company, we want to keep this entrepreneurial mindset as we go.” Indeed, the 400 Organon founders in the MENAT region will be joining the company’s global movement for International Women’s Day 2022, with the call to action being to highlight inequities in women’s health. For its part, Organon has declared paid time-off for all its employees globally, including across MENAT, which will allow women to focus on their health, and for men to prioritize the health and wellbeing of women in their lives, whether by attending routine health check-ups with them, or by instilling healthier habits across the family.

In this region, Organon has also launched a campaign under the tagline, “We believe in her,” which aims to support women’s healthcare choices, as well as a platform called “Her Health,” available in both English and Arabic, which is mainly designed to focus on women’s needs in healthcare. “Across all our projects in the MENAT region, we see that everyone is willing to join us,” Koussa concludes. “It’s a time of great empowerment of women here, and especially because the COVID-19 pandemic showed us how little women prioritize their own healthcare needs, because of their many roles. What we are trying to say is that this should not happen before she puts on her own oxygen mask first, and only then can she take care of everyone else.”

IT’S A TIME OF GREAT EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN HERE. AND ESPECIALLY BECAUSE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHOWED US HOW LITTLE WOMEN PRIORITIZE THEIR OWN HEALTHCARE NEEDS, BECAUSE OF THEIR MANY ROLES.
It's Worth Transferring your salary

Much More Offers

Pay flexibly with your Al-Tayseer cards, with usage limits of up to KD 5,000 and many other benefits.
Rethinking Education

Jordan-based startup Abwaab is on a mission to change the way MENA students learn outside the classroom by PAMELLA DE LEON
With schools across the world diving into online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, edtech ventures have been quick to capitalize on this shift and finding ways to thrive in this new landscape. Jordan-based startup Abwaab is filling a distinct gap in this space with a platform catered to secondary school students that offers a self-paced learning experience adhering to the country’s national curriculum, access to bite-sized engaging videos, assessment and performance analytics to track progress, as well as chat and video tutoring options.

Founded in 2019, the edtech platform is the brainchild of Hamdi Tabbaa, Hussein Alsarabi, and Sabri Hakim. The trio has had their fair share of working in the MENA region’s tech ecosystem, with previous stints at ride-sharing companies Uber and Careem, as well as Arabic content platform Mawdoo3 and retail venture Dukkan. Tabbaa, who leads Abwaab as its CEO, was driven to venture into the edtech sector following his personal experience with online learning when completing an online executive course from Harvard University in 2017. “I was left so impressed by the idea that I was able to receive [an] Ivy League education in the most seamless of ways, despite being thousands of miles away in my hometown [in] Jordan,” he says. “In parallel, I could not stop thinking about the hundreds of millions of young students in our region who are in dire need of access to education, and who would benefit from an online ecosystem.”

This experience, coupled with the impact Tabbaa saw firsthand during his time working at Uber, made it a no-brainer for him to disrupt education as the next step on his career trajectory. Partnering up with Alsarab and Hakim, the co-founders are united in their zeal to tackle a common problem that students face in the region. “In the MENAP, there are approximately 160 million students, most of whom lack access to high-quality education, and in turn, end up heavily depending on after-school tutoring, whether in the form of tutoring centers or private one-on-one lessons,” Tabbaa explains. “This is where Abwaab comes in. Abwaab substitutes after-school tutoring by providing an online ecosystem that allows students to learn, solve, play, interact, and ask questions, anytime and anywhere.”

Invigorated by their mission to fill the gap in educational resources available online, as well as to tackle the region’s...
dependence on offline tutoring, the co-founders hit the ground running for their startup by diving into developing their minimum viable product (MVP) as soon as they started. “Abwaab has experimentation deeply rooted in our core values,” Tabbaa states. “As Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, says, ‘If you are not embarrassed by the first version of your product, you’ve launched too late.’” In Abwaab’s case, the team launched their first beta product in February 2020, with it having only a basic functionality of simply viewing lessons in just three subjects of Jordan’s 12th Grade curriculum. But once they went live, the team started going to schools to onboard students, while also trying out online marketing to gauge student appetite for their offering. “We designed and launched our first MVP while speaking and sitting with students continuously, so, technically, our first users were part of the process,” Tabbaa says.

Going to schools directly has considerably helped the entrepreneurs in attaining the first users of their startup. “The beginning was humble, but promising, with thousands of students signing up,” Tabbaa recalls. “I believe any startup needs to explore two routes of user acquisition, both the traditional methods of performance marketing through Google and other social media channels, as well as doing guerrilla marketing, with boots on the ground, to be as close to the users as possible. The ultimate goal should be strong organic growth.” Being user-focused is an aspect that the startup takes on seriously, as it currently makes use of a direct-to-consumer (D2C) business model. The startup has also collaborated with schools in Jordan, as well as King Abdullah University of Science in Technology in Saudi Arabia, where it enabled students to practice standardized test (known as the Qiyas exam) ahead of applying to universities. Currently, the platform, available on web and mobile devices, runs on a freemium model in Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, and it also offers a discounted price of US$50 as an annual subscription fee for full access in Jordan. Catering to students from Grade 7 until Grade 12, it offers over 50,000 lessons on core subjects such as math, biology, chemistry, physics, Arabic, and English. Abwaab also develops and offers high-quality in-house content; moreover, it offers various forms of assessments such as quizzes, practice questions, and tests to give students the opportunity to answer questions and get instant feedback on their responses. “If a student is stuck on a certain topic and has a specific question, he/she can snap a picture of their question, and connect with a tutor instantly in 10 seconds,” Tabbaa points out.

The startup also tries to incorporate a fun aspect to the platform by introducing a gamified experience called the Abwaab League, where students can go head-to-head against each other, while collecting trophies and coins to promote healthy competition. On another note, there’s a social aspect as well: the platform offers discussion boards to give students a space to interact with each other, ask questions, and also get support from verified teacher assistants who jump into conversations when needed. “This is one seamless app,” Tabbaa declares. That’s explain how Abwaab saw its membership skyrocket during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. “I believe our level of speed in execution propelled our growth as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we quickly reached a million students within the first three months of launch,” Tabbaa says. As a product that launched right before the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic, the team saw a chance for Abwaab to amplify its impact in the new circumstances the world at large found itself in. In mid-March 2020, when
the product has only been operating six weeks, the team saw a chance to help the education system in Jordan. "Seeing what the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Jordan was planning to launch at the time, we just felt the obligation to show up and propose a better solution, where, otherwise, two million students would've been left without formal education for months, if not years," Tabbaa recalls. "We presented to the Minister of Education who fell in love with Abwaab, and asked us to take the project on, giving us only 48 hours before the schools were ordered to shut down."

The team created a consortium consisting of Mawdoo3, Edraak, a massive open online course platform by the Queen Rania Foundation, and another local Jordanian startup. The result was a white-labeled solution for the MoE named Darsak, an online platform that sought to teach over one million students at a time when schools across Jordan closed down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While the Mawdoo3 team launched the product, Abwaab became the main provider of the educational content on Darsak, which quickly became popular among students in Jordan. Three months into its launch, the team handed over the project to the MoE, and Abwaab went back to focus on its core offerings.

In June last year, Abwaab launched its subscription in Egypt for the upcoming 2021-2022 academic year. It even partnered with Egyptian science influencer Abdullah Anna, who is behind the popular YouTube channel Shar3 el 3loom (Arabic for “Science Street”) in a bid to create engaging and fun science lessons for Arabic-speaking students. Following the success of the kick-off in Egypt, in July 2021, the startup acquired Pakistan-based social e-learning platform Edmatrix in a bid to make its first move into wider Asia, and Abwaab has now started to operate in the country as well. And investors are taking notice of the company too—having raised funds across three rounds, Abwaab’s total investment now sits at $27.5 million. Abwaab started off by raising $2.5 million in a pre-seed round, followed by $5 million in a seed round, and then, $20 million in its latest Series A round. The enterprise has been backed by renowned global and regional VCs, with UAE-based BECO Capital leading its last round. It is also backed by Silicon Valley-based GSV Ventures, New York-based 4DX Ventures, and Abu Dhabi-based Chimera Capital. “Over a dozen of our ex-Uber and Careem alumni have also invested with us, after having worked very closely with them for five years each,” Tabbaa adds.

In conclusion, when asked for advice for those considering careers in entrepreneurship, Tabbaa shares a few candid, yet important, notes. “Building a startup from the ground up requires a certain degree of naïve optimism, with the strong belief that you will be able to create the value you are aspiring to do,” he says. And despite the challenges presented by the global pandemic, Tabbaa is optimistic about the future of the startup space. “[There are] unique opportunities for value-creation. Multiple industries have risen in the tech space during the pandemic, which, in the long term, will make life better for us.” Keeping that in mind, Tabbaa believes that entrepreneurs operating in our current landscape need to “be optimistic, be proactive, and be bold”—that’s what matters at the end of the day.
Excitement aside, pursuing a business opportunity in a new city with almost no network and limited knowledge of its inner workings can be quite overwhelming. However, Mishaal Al Gergawi, founder of Axis, a New York-based enterprise platform for accurate and instant information on countries and industries, wanted his entrepreneurial journey to unroll in that specific manner. “Personally, I moved to New York, because I wanted to build Axis without any particular advantages that I may have had as a UAE national in Dubai,” Al Gergawi says. “It was a very personal choice to experience building this business in the biggest city in the world, with little connections and zero differentiators.”

And now that Axis has been accepted into the Winter 2022 startup batch of the internationally acclaimed accelerator program, Y Combinator (YC), with Al Gergawi currently gearing up to present his startup at its Demo Day on March 29th to an invite-only audience of 1,500 investors and media, it’s safe to say that moving to New York was the right choice. “Y Combinator is a very special place, because it’s an extremely supportive and open-minded community,” he says. “The only advice I can really give to other entrepreneurs is that YC is looking for people with strong conviction and defensible insights. At Axis, we’ll be looking forward to raising our seed round and spending the next two years iterating on the product, building some key features, and expanding coverage to many markets and countries.”

Dubai-born Al Gergawi started out his career in 2005 as an analyst at HSBC and Deutsche Bank, having earned a bachelor’s degree from the American University in Dubai and an MSc in International Finance from CERAM Sophia Antipolis in France.
Some years later, he joined his family’s building materials business and eventually became its CEO. “I started off as an investment banker, but my career was cut short when I was pulled into a family business, during which I found time to write columns in the local papers,” he says. “I enjoyed writing and quickly established myself as a voice on Dubai-related economic and social topics. I expanded my interest to the UAE, the GCC, and eventually the Middle East. By 2010, it was clear to me that I wanted to do this in a more organized fashion, so I set up The Delma Institute, a political risk consultancy in Abu Dhabi, which I ran till 2017.

Al Gergawi considers researching and writing an obligatory precondition for any entrepreneurial venture, and this habit has definitely contributed to him launching not only The Delma Institute, but also his current startup, Axis. “It’s very hard to build a startup if you’re not curious,” he says. “Founders are not musicians, they’re DJs who take seemingly unrelated insights, dynamics, and data and turn them into new concepts. In my process, I like to dig into a space in order to fully understand it, so I usually have one or two things I’m really getting into for 12 to 18 months. After that, staying up to date requires 2-3% of that effort.”

Al Gergawi credits The New York Times bestseller, Atomic Habits, by James Clear for fueling his stamina to complete several of his deep dives on various topics over the years, including on Middle Eastern contemporary art and independent film (2008-2010), geopolitics of the Middle East and political Islam (2011-2013), Russian literature (2013-2014), modern history (2015-2016), energy (2017), enterprise software as a service (SaaS) and sci-fi (2018-2020). The summaries of these learnings can be found on his Medium profile, where he’s currently looking into topics relating to Web3, ranging from non-fungible tokens (NFTs) to decentralized finance (DeFi) and machine learning.

**Becoming a successful entrepreneur usually** requires a setback, if not a few, that one would have to overcome and start anew, and Al Gergawi went through a distressing experience of his own in 2012 before launching The Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi. “Through a failed business venture that I was involved in, I personally went into significant debt in 2008,” Al Gergawi says. “For several months, it felt like I would never get out of that situation. It changed me in various ways, including building my inner strength and patience, reorienting my perspective of time, and my relationship to money. It really sucked, but I don’t think I’d be here if it didn’t.”

**In his time leading The Delma Institute, Al Gergawi was at the helm of a company providing insights on West Asia and North Africa to governments and corporates. “I learned a lot about communication, recruiting and managing people, and fiscal discipline,” Al Gergawi recalls. “One of the most counterintuitive things is that more people equals more productivity. At Delma, we were consistently investing our resources into expanding the team, which meant we were always onboarding new people, which, in retrospect, was very time-consuming, and reduced productivity and momentum.” He took this lesson with him when building his next business, and as a result, Axis today maintains a small team and low burn rate, as the team continues to iterate the product in line with user feedback.**

Al Gergawi adds that The Delta Institute was a true precursor of Axis in a more literal sense as well. “In my banking days, I saw how the Bloomberg terminal was the go to place to get varied data on financial markets, e.g. bonds, derivatives, stocks, commodities, and so on, which are mostly quantitative data,” he explains. “At Delma, we advised governments and corporates on developments in the region, and this was a very qualitative type of work, i.e. reports and presentations. So, I had an epiphany that perhaps there was a technology-enabled version of what we did. Perhaps, we could build a Bloomberg terminal not for hedge funds but for companies. A terminal that would capture not just financials and news, but also other information, like bilateral relationships, government bodies, regulatory ecosystems, competitive landscape, and industry trends– all, in a single place, through a visual interface that mirrors how our mind thinks about these issues, and with tools, like search, filter, bookmark, export, chat, and many others, that we plan to launch this year.”

To further explain the premise of Axis, he adds that executives in companies today check their email inboxes to find out what happened inside their companies, but when it comes to anything outside of them, they don’t have an obvious and comprehensive place to look toward. “We want Axis to be that to them,” Al Gergawi says. “We want to be their operating system that allows them to consume the world according to them—with trust, delight, and agency.”

**In this time leading The Delta Institute, Al Gergawi was at the helm of a company providing insights on West Asia and North Africa to governments and corporates. “I learned a lot about communication, recruiting and managing people, and fiscal discipline,” Al Gergawi recalls. “One of the most counterintuitive things is that more people equals more productivity. At Delma, we were consistently investing our resources into expanding the team, which meant we were always onboarding new people, which, in retrospect, was very time-consuming, and reduced productivity and momentum.” He took this lesson with him when building his next business, and as a result, Axis today maintains a small team and low burn rate, as the team continues to iterate the product in line with user feedback.**
Having experienced building a business in the UAE and now in New York, he finds the two ecosystems very different. “Two specific juxtapositions are that New York City is chaotic, while Abu Dhabi and Dubai are orderly, and that New York City’s public sector plays a much smaller role in shaping the city than Abu Dhabi and Dubai’s public sectors do,” he says. At the end of the day though, Al Gergawi says that the UAE will forever remain “his home,” and therefore, he highlights his bias when sharing his thoughts on the UAE as a place to do business. “Everything that I am, and what I have brought to New York, was forged there,” he says. “My hustle, curiosity, ideas, and perspective comes from being a citizen of a young country that achieved so much in so little time with no preexisting credentials beyond hard work and clarity of vision. I carry that with me every day; I want to be like my country!” In the UAE, entrepreneurial opportunities are infinite, he notes. “At the very base of it is building incredible experiences for consumers in the region who grew up with the internet and understand what their peers in other markets are getting,” Al Gergawi says. “The MENASA region is so young and is so excited about the future. Specifically, markets like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan are very exciting due to their size and urbanism.”

In conclusion, when asked to share his advice for entrepreneurs keen on seizing those aforementioned opportunities, Al Gergawi replies that one thing that will work out in their favor is for them to always think of the user of their products or services, and define them in the narrowest way possible. “It will help you to understand how to really rock their world,” Al Gergawi explains. “You don’t want your product to be liked or considered interesting; you want it to be loved and needed.”
BOOK YOUR

Get our mobile app for an all-around smooth experience

fluidmeet
www.fluidmeet.com
Book Online & SAVE!*
Use this coupon "FMSBO2022" to get 10% off all bookings

*Terms & Conditions apply
Driven by Impact

RAED MASRI, MUNA ABUSULAYMAN, RAMA CHAKAKI

The co-founders of Transform VC are on a mission to help create 1,000 Middle Eastern billionaires in America by 2040 by TAMARA PUPIC

When creating Transform VC, a Silicon Valley-based venture capital (VC) investment and advisory firm, its co-founder Raed Masri utilized a goal-setting system developed by investor John Doerr called OKR, which stands for an objective, and a key result that is measurable and time-bound. “Our O is to be impactful and influential where it matters the most, in Silicon Valley,” Masri says, during our meeting at the Grand Plaza Mövenpick Media City in Dubai. “Our KR is to help create 1,000 Middle Eastern billionaires in America by 2040.”

Together with his two co-founders, Muna AbuSulayman and Rama Chakaki, Masri hopes that the work Transform VC that does will become a pillar of support for enterprising individuals with Middle Eastern roots looking to build businesses in the US. “We have always said that the maximum one can achieve is their ambition, so we had to put an ambition that is crazy enough that we might get laughed at, but then back it with a plan that we can actually execute on,” Masri says. “One thing that is true about Silicon Valley is that it’s a high velocity environment, so minorities by age, gender, race, pedigree, or anything else usually get filtered out very quickly. So, we have a special affinity towards those people who are generally overlooked and dismissed by others, especially the Middle Easterns in America.”

Besides Middle Eastern founders who are starting up in the US for the first time ever, the Transform VC team also aims to support entrepreneurs who have already passed
what Masri describes as “the Silicon Valley test.” “We call it the Silicon Valley test, because it means that they already have an Ivy League PhD or a multi-million dollar exit [in the US], and they gravitate towards us for different reasons, that whole sense of camaraderie, because most MENA entrepreneurs in America want to give back, and we are providing that platform,” Masri explains.

With this, Masri also aims to change a cultural narrative around entrepreneurship in Middle Eastern communities. “In our society, it’s very well accepted to go to the US or Canada, spend 5-15 years studying engineering or medicine, and come back, but it’s not accepted if you go there to build a business for the same amount of time,” he says. “That’s considered brain drain. I want to push back on that, and say that our entrepreneurs will go there and spend time with the best, which is better than going to school. The second thing is that our people can become really impactful, not only in the US, but also here. We all come back, because we all have that sense of camaraderie and we all want to help.” But this is not to say that Transform VC doesn’t have commercial objectives to fulfill as well. “All things being equal, we need to add value as much, if not more, as any other VC, but we don’t just invest in others, we also create ventures of our own, meaning that we found and co-found companies with smart people,” he explains. As such, entrepreneurs who are able to combine talk with action - with action being the most important element - are the kind of founders that Transform VC looks for, AbuSulayman says. “We look for opportunities that exhibit deep technology, network effects, and a 10x advantage over the next best product, and entrepreneurs who are willing and able to move to the USA without any guarantees of success or receiving funding,” she says. Masri adds, “We believe that if you have a theme, you are already too late. You should not have preconceived notion, because if you have it, guess what, others do too. We want to be vowed and mesmerized, and the three things that hold true are network effects, 10x advantage, and technology. We need to see at least two of the three.”

In an effort to support female entrepreneurs, Chakaki notes that Transform VC is, by its very design, structured to engage, evaluate, and invest in women-led ventures that are challenging biases in the tech sector.

“For the first time in my life, my bank account started going up, and I realized that telecoms were the way to go.”

RAMA CHAKAKI, co-founder, Transform VC

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, MY BANK ACCOUNT STARTED GOING UP, AND I REALIZED THAT TELECOMS WERE THE WAY TO GO.

With this, Masri also aims to change a cultural narrative around entrepreneurship in Middle Eastern communities. “In our society, it’s very well accepted to go to the US or Canada, spend 5-15 years studying engineering or medicine, and come back, but it’s not accepted if you go there to build a business for the same amount of time,” he says. “That’s considered brain drain. I want to push back on that, and say that our entrepreneurs will go there and spend time with the best, which is better than going to school. The second thing is that our people can become really impactful, not only in the US, but also here. We all come back, because we all have that sense of camaraderie and we all want to help.” But this is not to say that Transform VC doesn’t have commercial objectives to fulfill as well. “All things being equal, we need to add value as much, if not more, as any other VC, but we don’t just invest in others, we also create ventures of our own, meaning that we found and co-found companies with smart people,” he explains. As such, entrepreneurs who are able to combine talk with action - with action being the most important element - are the kind of founders that Transform VC looks for, AbuSulayman says. “We look for opportunities that exhibit deep technology, network effects, and a 10x advantage over the next best product, and entrepreneurs who are willing and able to move to the USA without any guarantees of success or receiving funding,” she says. Masri adds, “We believe that if you have a theme, you are already too late. You should not have preconceived notion, because if you have it, guess what, others do too. We want to be vowed and mesmerized, and the three things that hold true are network effects, 10x advantage, and technology. We need to see at least two of the three.”

In an effort to support female entrepreneurs, Chakaki notes that Transform VC is, by its very design, structured to engage, evaluate, and invest in women-led ventures that are challenging biases in the tech sector.

“For the first time in my life, my bank account started going up, and I realized that telecoms were the way to go.”

RAMA CHAKAKI, co-founder, Transform VC

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, MY BANK ACCOUNT STARTED GOING UP, AND I REALIZED THAT TELECOMS WERE THE WAY TO GO.

With this, Masri also aims to change a cultural narrative around entrepreneurship in Middle Eastern communities. “In our society, it’s very well accepted to go to the US or Canada, spend 5-15 years studying engineering or medicine, and come back, but it’s not accepted if you go there to build a business for the same amount of time,” he says. “That’s considered brain drain. I want to push back on that, and say that our entrepreneurs will go there and spend time with the best, which is better than going to school. The second thing is that our people can become really impactful, not only in the US, but also here. We all come back, because we all have that sense of camaraderie and we all want to help.” But this is not to say that Transform VC doesn’t have commercial objectives to fulfill as well. “All things being equal, we need to add value as much, if not more, as any other VC, but we don’t just invest in others, we also create ventures of our own, meaning that we found and co-found companies with smart people,” he explains. As such, entrepreneurs who are able to combine talk with action - with action being the most important element - are the kind of founders that Transform VC looks for, AbuSulayman says. “We look for opportunities that exhibit deep technology, network effects, and a 10x advantage over the next best product, and entrepreneurs who are willing and able to move to the USA without any guarantees of success or receiving funding,” she says. Masri adds, “We believe that if you have a theme, you are already too late. You should not have preconceived notion, because if you have it, guess what, others do too. We want to be vowed and mesmerized, and the three things that hold true are network effects, 10x advantage, and technology. We need to see at least two of the three.”

In an effort to support female entrepreneurs, Chakaki notes that Transform VC is, by its very design, structured to engage, evaluate, and invest in women-led ventures that are challenging biases in the tech sector. “There’s a lot to unpack, as women face challenges at large in the workplace, add to that the tech sector’s VC landscape that has been biased to male-led ventures and leadership styles,” Chakaki says. “We have senior female partners who lead the evaluation and selection of startups, and they are attuned to the unique insights in the problem-solving and value that female-led tech ventures may bring. Once selected, we are able to support them through training, networking, and mentorship with women in leadership positions they can learn from.”

Masri’s entrepreneurial journey is an interesting story in its own right—he is a Canadian of Palestinian and Jordanian descent, and he’s an electrical engineer and entrepreneur who’s founded five startups so far. “My first startup was basically a spin-out of my fourth year engineering project called The Nortel Case Competition, and I created a booking website for appointments for different service providers, from doctors to dentists to lawyers, but because I was self-funded, I decided to focus on what appeared to be the simplest industry—the hair salon industry,” Masri recalls. “But I learned very quickly that, in 2000, hair salons were very tech-phobic. That is a very important business lesson- no matter how good your product is, if you can’t distribute it, it’ll be hard. Despite all of this, we managed to sell a few hundred of these softwares, and I learned the second important business lesson, which is the importance of the recurring revenue. We had none of that. I would sell a software, and that was it.” But it was through this experience that Masri honed his sales skills, which served him well some years later when he approached a senior executive at Bell Canada, the country’s largest telecommunications operator, to offer a new service that eventually led him to conclude a multi-million dollar contract with the company. “For the first time in my life, my bank account started going up, and I realized that telecoms were the way to go.”
account started going up, and I realized that telecoms were the way to go,” Masri says. “I also learned that it’s actually easier to sell a multi-million dollar contract, which took me a few hours, than to sell US$85,000 software, which took me days and months. That was a lesson - an owner of a hair salon is giving you money out of his own pocket, whereas an executive is giving you a number out of a spreadsheet somewhere. He doesn’t really feel it.”

In 2005, Masri went to Florida in the United States, and, within the first three days, he discovered sim card options with no long-term contract obligations, and decided to bring that concept back to Canada. “Soon enough, I started lobbying with the Government of Canada, and in 2007, they issued a new public policy to put 90MHz of spectrum on auction for new internet providers. For that, my goal was to raise $800 million, and that is when I learned the lesson that if you have a good idea, everybody is reachable. There’s a billionaire out there who wants to hear it. Also, when you’re trying to raise $800 million, millionaires can’t help you, you need to talk to billionaires. I learned a lesson that it’s equally easy and equally hard to raise $1 million, as much as it is to raise $800 million. You just have to convince someone.” However, Masri’s bid at the action ended up not being high enough, which he today describes as “his most spectacular failure,” but that changed the following year. “I bid for inflight-internet successfully, and that’s how I became an exclusive provider of inflight internet in Canada, so any airline flying over Canada had to get its connectivity from me - by law,” Masri says.

After successfully exiting the company that offered inflight internet across Canada, Masri then became a part of the founding team of Mubadala Capital Ventures in Silicon Valley. “The intent initially was to launch Transform VC, with Mubadala being our anchor investor, but that turned into something else, and became Mubadala Capital Ventures. I learned though that experience, and a few years later, I left to start Transform VC.” Masri notes here that the entrepreneurial ventures that Transform VC is looking to support should be the tech equivalent of well-accomplished Middle Eastern individuals, such as Oscar-winning Egyptian American actor Rami Malek, Egyptian professional footballer Mohamed Salah, or the first Arab American woman to win Miss USA, Rima Fakhri Slaiiby. Keeping this in mind, Masri says that Transform VC is building a system that is expected to create entrepreneurial success stories in a more predictable fashion.

Masri proudly lists the Middle Eastern entrepreneurs who are already part of his portfolio, such as Noor Agha, founder of social commerce startup Flip, Aly Orady, founder of the artificial intelligence (AI)-powered smart home gym Tonal, and Hassan Sawaf, founder of Aixplain, a company that delivers AI solutions to businesses 2x faster and cheaper. To date, Transform VC has deployed $104 million through 44 investments, including in six unicorn companies. “We have done quite well,” Masri says, explaining that the fund’s big 2040 vision is chunked into shorter-term plans. “If we can help create 10 billionaires in seven years, and instill in them our values to pay it forward, help others, and strive for excellence, and then those 10 create new 10 in another seven years, and so on, that will be our thousand.”

Investors in the Transform VC fund, Masri explains, want exposure to cutting-edge technology, but they are patient enough to allow enough time for ventures to be built. “These things are not overnight,” he says. “If you are looking for a quick exit, this is not for you, but if you want to be a part of shaping the future and making a lot of money, patiently, then this is for you.” AbuSulayman adds that Transform VC investors look for extraordinary financial returns, but they also wish to economically empower Middle Eastern founders in Silicon Valley, “or those we can help bring to Silicon Valley, so they can crack the code in weeks instead of years on their own.” As such, the three co-founders of Transform VC say they will work to build up the confidence of the founders of its portfolio companies. “Be ready to risk it all - you need to push forward without guarantees of success or funding, so be creative to convince people (customers first) you are the next underdog that will create wonders,” says AbuSulayman. Chakaki adds that searching for the right product-market fit is crucial. “Obsess over finding the customer need, and focus on perfecting your communication skills by listening first, then speaking with the right messages to the right audience,” she notes.

In conclusion, Masri adds that hearing nos is an inevitable part of any entrepreneurial journey. As such, the two main facets entrepreneurs must have to ensure the success of their startups are determination and ambition. “I want people to know that anything is possible if you apply yourself,” he says. “If you are sufficiently determined, and you have a big enough ambition, you can accomplish anything you want. There’s no reason why we [MENA entrepreneurs] can’t have a global impact.” And Masri is betting on this to be a reality - as he put it: “I truly believe that the next Elon Musk will be one of us [MENA entrepreneurs], and our goal is to create one thousand of those by 2040.”
Bahrain-headquartered edtech platform Playbook has closed a pre-seed funding round of US$700,000 led by US-based venture capital firm 500 Global, Saudi Arabia-based sovereign wealth fund Sanabil Investments, Kuwait-based venture capital firm Faith Capital, Saudi-based angel investor network Women Spark, and other investors.

Conceptualized by three women—Wafa AlObaidat, Ismahan Al Saad, and Shreya Rammohan—Playbook is an annual subscription-based edutainment platform that offers educational masterclasses for women. “These masterclasses were curated with the intention to redefine career progression for women,” explains co-founder and CEO AlObaidat. “Users can set up custom profiles, identify their skills and career goals, engage with a multitude of classes on diverse categories of interest—especially emerging professions, network with a community to crowdsource solutions, and immerse themselves in a gamified experience with learning goals and progress trackers.”

The platform, which offers courses in both English and Arabic, generates revenue by engaging with individuals for annual memberships as well as partnerships with enterprises that include memberships for their female executives. “As part of a phased approach, we are focused on the MENA region primarily,” AlObaidat adds. The yet-to-launch platform also hopes to create a diverse online community of women called The Campus, whose members will be able to virtually network via artificial intelligence (AI) powered tools, and gain access to on-demand mentorship, live events, and job boards. “Our audience ranges from students exploring the career paths available to them, career transitioners identifying the right networks that helps them align with their goals, female entrepreneurs seeking a community of other founders that are navigating or have navigated similar challenges, as well as career professionals seeking to level up the corporate ladder into leadership roles meritously,” AlObaidat explains.

As of 2021, the global edtech industry has been valued at US$106.04 billion, and it is expected to grow at a stellar compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 19.9% till 2028. But this promising statistic isn’t all that prompted AlObaidat...
and her co-founders to create Playbook. “This is an exciting time for the region with millions of women entering the workforce in the MENA region,” says AIObaidat. “The region is seeing several job opportunities and leadership verticals opening up. Our experience indicated to us that there was a need for an authentic and value-driven content platform, like Playbook, for women to grow professionally and personally.” At the same time, with the discourse surrounding gender equality and women empowerment gaining more prominence among MENA businesses, AIObaidat says now is the perfect time to launch Playbook. “Governments in the MENA region have also been taking a proactive policy driven stance to strengthen economic growth and quality of life through gender balance mandates,” she adds. “All this indicates that the region is now ready to fast-track development in this direction through more well-defined policy-setting, career opportunities and training needs analysis.”

AIObaidat also believes that a women-oriented edtech platform like Playbook can lead to some much-needed shifts in societal perceptions as well. “It’s important that we all subscribe to the fact that women can get along, support each other, want the best for each other and can be champions and allies to work with,” she says. “It’s important to shift the narrative that is usually pushed about us not being allies. We must believe and welcome women leaders in positions of power and get behind them.” Finding investors who also believed in this vision was the most significant aspect of the fundraising process, adds the CEO. Commenting on her firm’s decision to fund Playbook, 500 Global MENA Partner Amal Dokhan says, “Playbook enters the market at the right time to present a solution to the public and private sector, as policymakers appear to increasingly institute SDG goals and more job opportunities open up for women.”

Meanwhile, Deemah AlYahya, founder of Women Spark, spoke of how Playbook’s vision for the MENA region aligned with those of her firm. “Playbook helps us further our mission to invest in accelerating the career growth cycle of the female talent pool, and build more prosperous economies,” AlYahya adds.

Given the fresh infusion of capital in Playbook, AIObaidat says there is much to look forward to in 2022. “We aim to close our seed round, record more than 20 masterclasses this year, launch our community platform and our AI-integrated networking tools in the community,” she says. “The future with Playbook is looking great, and it’s filled with opportunities for everyone to come together and create measurable and significant changes in the dynamics of the corporate world and entrepreneurship.”

» by AALIA MEHREEN AHMED
Dubai-based corporate spend management startup Pluto has raised a seed funding round of US$6 million, led by the US-based Global Founders Capital (GFC), with participation from fellow American investors Adapt VC, Soma Capital, Graph Ventures, and OldSlip Group. The round also saw participation from entrepreneurs-turned-angel investors, such as Plaid co-founder William Hockey, Ramp co-founders Karim Atiyeh and Eric Glyman, Airbase co-founder Thejo Kote, Tamara co-founders Abdulkareem Alsukhan and Turki bin Zarah, as well as Tabby co-founder Hosam Arab.

Founded by Nayeem Zen, Mo Aziz, and Mohammed Ridwan, Pluto provides expense management solutions for businesses by offering unlimited smart corporate cards with spend controls that can be used as an alternative to personal cards. Available for employees as both physical and virtual options, these smart cards can be connected to existing business bank accounts. In fact, Pluto’s virtual cards can be created almost instantly and can also be loaded onto digital wallets such as Apple Pay. The Pluto platform also directly syncs the cards’ transactional data to major accounting platforms. Elaborating on this particular point, Aziz, who is also the startup’s CEO, says, “Most businesses use multiple tools today to incur business payments, and to get paid. These include spreadsheets, invoicing tools, accounting tools, expense tracking software.” He then explains that addressing this issue forms the crux of Pluto’s services. “Our vision is to become the only platform that businesses will need to make payments and to get paid,” adds Aziz.

But before delving any further into how Pluto’s solutions work, it is perhaps necessary to gauge an understanding of the issues it’s aiming to solve. “Currently most businesses in the MENA region only have access to a single debit or credit card with no spend controls, which is extremely risky to share across the entire company,” explains Aziz. “As a result, businesses have to distribute cash to employees for business expenses as well as burden employees with an overwhelming amount of out-of-pocket spend.” The financial system Aziz alludes to here is one that has multi-fold disadvantages. For one, distribution of cash creates opportunity for malpractices within a given company, due to lack of immediate accountability. On the other hand, employees may lose spending power when they incur personal costs at the company’s expense, since any reimbursement is typically done along with their monthly remuneration at the end of the month. Here, Aziz raises another related pain point for a company’s spend control management. “Businesses also get no visibility on the expenses that are incurred, until the receipts are actually submitted by their employees, which could happen days or even weeks after the expense is incurred,” he says.

It is to solve these inefficiencies that the co-founding trio at Pluto has come up with a solution that aims to help businesses in the MENA region digitize cash spend. “With Pluto, businesses can be proactive instead of being reactive, and save money even before spending, by connecting their existing bank accounts and issuing unlimited virtual and physical cards with spend controls that eliminate the need to distribute cash or...
rely on personal cards,” explains Aziz. “Businesses also get real-time visibility on expenses that are incurred using Pluto cards, reducing fraudulent transactions dramatically. It also reduces the burden on employees, since they no longer have to incur business expenses and rely on monthly reimbursements.”

Through this operational set-up, there are two key sources of revenue for Pluto: a subscription fee charged to businesses, as well as an interchange fee charged to vendors. “While we have a freemium model, allowing any business to use the base version of Pluto’s platform for free, we charge a subscription fee for our premium tier that unlocks unlimited corporate cards as well as detailed insights on business spend data,” explains Aziz. The interchange fee, on the other hand, is borne by any vendor who accepts the Pluto smart card. “The vendor is charged a certain amount for accepting the card, which is distributed amongst various participants, with most of the fee going to the issuer of the card, usually a bank,” says Aziz. “Pluto cards will be powered by our partner bank, with whom we share a portion of this fee, known as interchange. Essentially, our customers do not pay any fees in this case.”

This second source of revenue is one that comes at a time when the digitization of payments has very quickly become mainstream for businesses across sectors. Within the MENA region itself, Aziz says there is now a 90% card-acceptance rate in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with the latter having seen 94% of all in-store transactions being contactless. And it is a trend that provides opportunities for Pluto’s further expansion, believes Aziz. “With the emergence of more B2B e-commerce marketplaces taking offline payments online, the bottleneck today is that businesses aren’t geared with the right tools, and purchases still go through long procurement cycles,” he adds. “With Pluto however, online purchases will become a breeze. We’re cutting down the time it takes from approving an online expense to paying vendors dramatically. We’re also seeing a strong push towards online and digital payments at various government departments which further expands Pluto’s use cases beyond just facilitating an employee’s daily expenses.”

With its latest infusion of capital, Aziz and his team are now looking to launch Pluto in the UAE very soon. And as the team looks to the journey ahead, they remain grateful for the help they’ve received in the UAE so far. “In 2022, we feel extremely fortunate to have the support of the Dubai International Financial Center and Fintech Hive, who subsidize licensing costs, office space, and give you a platform to connect with customers and partners enabling you to hit the ground faster than ever.” With plans to launch the product in Saudi Arabia in the latter part of the year as well, it will be interesting to keep an eye on how businesses in the region respond to Pluto’s offerings.

— by AALIA MEHREEN AHMED
Dubai-based social media networking app ASKWHO has successfully raised US$1 million in a seed funding round, from a number of undisclosed angel investors.

Founded in 2019 by Michael Askew and Matthew Gaziano, ASKWHO aims to help users form connections and make friends with like-minded individuals, as well as foster a sense of community. Designed to improve people's mental health and promote belonging within a local community, users can join localized group discussion pages catering to particular interests such as fitness, outdoors, art, lifestyle, travel, and wellness within a certain city.

Launching a new venture in the social media networking sector may be a challenge, but Askew, CEO of ASKWHO, is confident in his enterprise's distinct offering: “Our USP is meeting new people in the city we live. There’s no other dedicated platform focused on connecting like-minded people using localized groups and interests.” On regional and global competitors, Askew explains, “ASKWHO is a mixture of Meetup, Facebook Groups and a ‘people’s’ Instagram. We believe we are better than Meetup due to our unique algorithms, matching like-minded people within the app. This makes it easier to get along and [makes] meet ups more enjoyable. Facebook has millions of groups, so it’s not difficult to see how people get lost.”

He elaborates, “During our research, we found that people become overwhelmed when searching [for groups] so they give up. We’ve simplified the process and made the groups ourselves, so the user doesn’t have to waste time searching.” He also points out how the platform compares to Instagram: “For most people, Instagram represents an unobtainable lifestyle, we wanted to build a platform where everyone’s voice is welcomed and heard by our supportive community. There are no popularity algorithms if you post it will be seen. We feel this is so important due to the increasing pressures to be “Instagram perfect.” We just want you to be you!”

The app is available to download for free on Apple’s App Store, and it will soon be featured on Google Play. Premium account users can also unlock additional features for AED24.99 per month. According to Askew, the app’s traction has exceeded their expectations, with user base “tripling month on month” since launch. “We are also noticing a large growing number of organic installs through word-of-mouth, and we are excited to see how we can now focus and build on top of this success,” he adds.

As for the future, the team plans to use its latest capital to scale up the user base and continue to work with customers to improve their product. Askew reveals, “Looking ahead to the end of the year, we would like to close our Series A funding round, and launch in other markets at the beginning of 2023.”

- by PAMELLA DE LEON

Dubai-based social media networking app ASKWHO has successfully raised US$1 million in a seed funding round, from a number of undisclosed angel investors.

Founded in 2019 by Michael Askew and Matthew Gaziano, ASKWHO aims to help users form connections and make friends with like-minded individuals, as well as foster a sense of community. Designed to improve people's mental health and promote belonging within a local community, users can join localized group discussion pages catering to particular interests such as fitness, outdoors, art, lifestyle, travel, and wellness within a certain city.

Launching a new venture in the social media networking sector may be a challenge, but Askew, CEO of ASKWHO, is confident in his enterprise's distinct offering: “Our USP is meeting new people in the city we live. There’s no other dedicated platform focused on connecting like-minded people using localized groups and interests.” On regional and global competitors, Askew explains, “ASKWHO is a mixture of Meetup, Facebook Groups and a ‘people’s’ Instagram. We believe we are better than Meetup due to our unique algorithms, matching like-minded people within the app. This makes it easier to get along and [makes] meet ups more enjoyable. Facebook has millions of groups, so it’s not difficult to see how people get lost.”

He elaborates, “During our research, we found that people become overwhelmed when searching [for groups] so they give up. We’ve simplified the process and made the groups ourselves, so the user doesn’t have to waste time searching.” He also points out how the platform compares to Instagram: “For most people, Instagram represents an unobtainable lifestyle, we wanted to build a platform where everyone’s voice is welcomed and heard by our supportive community. There are no popularity algorithms if you post it will be seen. We feel this is so important due to the increasing pressures to be “Instagram perfect.” We just want you to be you!”

The app is available to download for free on Apple’s App Store, and it will soon be featured on Google Play. Premium account users can also unlock additional features for AED24.99 per month. According to Askew, the app’s traction has exceeded their expectations, with user base “tripling month on month” since launch. “We are also noticing a large growing number of organic installs through word-of-mouth, and we are excited to see how we can now focus and build on top of this success,” he adds.

As for the future, the team plans to use its latest capital to scale up the user base and continue to work with customers to improve their product. Askew reveals, “Looking ahead to the end of the year, we would like to close our Series A funding round, and launch in other markets at the beginning of 2023.”

- by PAMELLA DE LEON
Interested candidates can apply on the Be Bold website from February 28 to April 15, 2022, with the program scheduled to be run from May to August, 2022.

Staged in partnership with Entrepreneur Middle East’s Impact arm that creates programs to encourage innovation within private and public organizations, the three-month-long Be Bold course will include in-person masterclasses with leading experts in the field of design thinking, future foresight, policy design, and entrepreneurship, as well as a series of mentorship sessions.

Additionally, at the end of the program, the 25 participants will have the opportunity to pitch their national health programs and policy initiatives to win funds to implement their proposals.

Commenting on the launch of the 2022 edition of Be Bold, Saqr Al Hemeiri, Director of Strategy and the Future, MOHAP, said in a statement, “The Be Bold program will further elevate the UAE’s policy-making process in the healthcare sector by adopting an entrepreneurial approach that unleashes limitless possibilities to build innovative systems, programs, and plans that will shape the future of healthcare. As the first federal entity in the UAE to offer an innovative program that involves both UAE nationals and residents from the public and private healthcare sector, we are committed to helping realize our leadership’s vision of a world class healthcare system.”

The first-of-its kind federal initiative Be Bold is in alignment with the UAE Strategy for Talent Attraction and Retention to strengthen the nation’s leading position as a preferred destination for living, working, and investing.

The program also responds to the directives of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, to adopt a culture of design thinking in all fields of government work and to work in partnership with the community to design innovative solutions for future challenges, in line with the principles of the Fifty-Year Charter and the UAE Centennial Plan 2071.

To apply, visit bebolde.com

For additional queries, contact Sarah Saddouk, Head, Entrepreneur Middle East Impact
sarah@bnpublishing.net
Boulevard living in harmony with nature

Invest in upscale 1, 2 and 3 bedroom apartments featuring direct access to green parks with sports facilities and a busy boulevard with retail and dining experiences. Enjoy exclusive access to a residents’ only gym and swimming pool, and benefit from smart home features and premium white goods included as standard with every home.
ROLEX

THE DAY-DATE

Introduced in 1956, and chosen by visionaries and world leaders, the Day-Date, with its iconic day display, continues to be the symbol of prestige and achievement.

#Perpetual

OYSTER PERPETUAL DAY-DATE 40
IN 18 CT WHITE GOLD

أحمد صديقى وأولاده
AHMED SEDDIIQI & SONS
The Dubai Mall · Mall of the Emirates · Wafi
seddiqi.com