



Entrepreneurs: Emerging Role Models in Emerging Markets



Future high-tech entrepreneurs? Students browse the Web in Banda Aceh, Aceh province, Indonesia. © AP Images

They are ambitious, they have exciting ideas, they are anxious to implement them, and they are not discouraged by the risk involved.

A small but growing number of mostly young people in emerging-market countries shun careers in large companies or the public sector to start their own ventures. Among them are winners of business plan competitions in Muslim-majority countries. They often defy what they describe as their native countries' historical indifference to or distrust of entrepreneurship in order to not only earn a living but to foster a new, more entrepreneurial climate as well.

"Many young people are highly motivated to make it happen," said Shelly Porges, who runs the Global Entrepreneurship Program (GEP), a private-public partnership at the

U.S. Department of State. Through the competitions, the partners are trying to identify and elevate promising entrepreneurs. While nurturing their business success, they also nurture the local culture of entrepreneurship.

Managing Careers, Changing Business Climates

Donald Wihardja left a good job at a private equity fund in Indonesia and co-founded Indomog, an online payment system, when his employer refused to invest in the technology sector.

"I believe that the moment for Internet and high-tech investments in Indonesia is now," Wihardja said. "Not only to innovate and build, but also to help define the landscape of Indonesia's technology future."

In Egypt, Haytham ElFadeel, a software engineer, used to finish his

work at a large multinational firm so fast that he had plenty of time left to work on an innovative idea — a semantic Web search engine. Soon enough, the project was consuming so much of his time that he and his brother decided to leave their jobs and start a venture — Kngine — to bring the project to fruition.

"We want Kngine to become a platform for innovation because it would inspire more people."

Haytham ElFadeel
Co-Founder of Kngine

Haytham ElFadeel, right, founder of Kngine, with his brother and partner, Ashraf, left, and Ahmed Alfi, center, of Sawari Ventures, which invested in Kngine.

Courtesy of GEP



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“We feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves,” wrote Haytham ElFadeel in a blog on his company’s website.

It took Moroccan Yassine El Kachchani one and a half years of studying the entrepreneurial culture in California’s Silicon Valley, while working for a large multinational company, to realize his dream to strike out on his own. He launched La Carte Plz, a mobile application for the Moroccan restaurant industry, and calls it “my dear startup.”

“High-tech development in Indonesia is a one-time opportunity, and I am not about to miss that boat.”

Donald Wihardja
Co-Founder of Indomog

Other winning entrepreneurs view their own companies as the logical extensions of their careers. Nadja

The winners of the business plan competition in Indonesia: Donald Wihardja of Indomog, third from left, and Nadiem Makarim of Go-Jek, third from right. *Courtesy of GEP*



Nadja Mabrouk, founder of Salvema. *Courtesy of Nadja Mabrouk*



Youghourta Benali, founder of Walletix, an electronic payment system, with Ahmad Chebbani of Tech Town at Wayne State University, at an entrepreneurship event in Algiers, Algeria. *Courtesy of GEP*

Mabrouk, who started Salvema to produce Moroccan delicacies, has a background in the food industry. Souad Rouis, who came up with an idea for BiotechRDP to provide biological agents for veterinary diagnostic kits in Tunisia, has a doctoral degree in biotechnology.

Desire to Inspire

The business plan winners want to inspire others to become entrepreneurs. Rouis said she became an entrepreneur not only to earn profits, but also “to show that a Tunisian researcher could use her skills to further technology transfer” and to set an example for unemployed biotechnology workers.

“The desire to start my own venture didn’t just appear one day. It grew as I was accumulating experience and skills and encountered opportunities.”

Nadja Mabrouk
Founder of Salvema

Porges said many ventures that have won recognition are at an early stage or haven’t taken off yet. But in many countries in which entrepreneurs look up to Silicon Valley, Rouis and other promising entrepreneurs have the potential to become local role models and drivers of a cultural shift toward supporting startups, she said.

“After graduation I never thought about a regular job. Instead, I wanted to create a startup to solve a problem that I often encountered — electronic payments.”

Youghourta Benali
Co-Founder of Walletix