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Miamians forge bonds with Israel's tech innovators

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Outsized success can be achieved in places you never expected. That's why a group of leaders in Miami's budding start-up community recently packed up and flew to Israel.

Despite few natural resources and ongoing regional instability, Israel has become a hotbed of high-impact entrepreneurship. Cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa – home to Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology – are leading centers of innovation.

Israeli entrepreneurs have produced everything from the pioneering online messaging program ICQ to the popular traffic app, Waze. No foreign country save China has more tech companies listed on the NASDAQ than Israel, a nation of 8 million people.

Over the past two years, meanwhile, Miami has seen a sharp rise in its own innovative entrepreneurial activity. The recent eMerge Americas conference illustrated the new energy. The trip provided a unique opportunity for leaders in Miami's burgeoning entrepreneurial community to understand what's behind the success of the country dubbed "Startup Nation."

Our Miami group on the journey included leaders of organizations such as Endeavor Miami, which supports high-impact entrepreneurs poised to scale, The Idea Center at Miami Dade College, Venture Hive and Code Fever, which teaches tech skills to elementary and high-school students in underrepresented neighborhoods in South Florida.

So, too, the group represented the unique diversity that modern Miami has become – all are Miami residents, but with hometowns ranging from Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Port-au-Prince to Birmingham, Alabama and Boston.

The trip was led by Project Interchange, part of the American Jewish Committee and supported by Knight Foundation, which launched an effort more than two years ago focused on helping build Miami's entrepreneurial eco-system.

Over six days we crisscrossed Israel. Learning about venture capital in the West Bank with a leading Palestinian investor. Sitting with a Bedouin mayor in the Negev desert who is using entrepreneurship to drive social change. Visiting an incubator on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Dining with Yossi Vardi, perhaps Israel's foremost tech entrepreneur.

What did we learn?

- Have a can-do attitude. Entrepreneurs again and again talked confidently about “solving problems.” There was an unshakeable belief among entrepreneurs that any challenge could be met.
- Promote open doors. There was an unusual degree of accessibility, and also informality. It appeared that even the most successful entrepreneurs and investors would make time for others.
- Provide institutional support. Key institutions are training grounds for tech entrepreneurs there – in particular, both Technion, the technical university, and the Israeli military.
- Play the long game. A long-term commitment to investing in technology and education has enabled them to develop world-class, innovative companies. For instance, Technion opened its doors in 1924 – nearly a quarter century before Israel's founding.
- Build a network. Heavy emphasis was placed on building an entrepreneurial eco-system. Again and again, people referred to the “eco-system” – a varied, bottom-up, informal network that provides the access to funding, talent, mentorship, support and community.
- Find strength in diversity. Even in a region long encumbered by ethnic and religious strife, there was a broad embrace of entrepreneurship. Reem Younis, a female Arab Israeli entrepreneur from Nazareth, talked about how greater diversity of thought and background brings a greater diversity of ideas and, hopefully, more impact.
- Embrace failure. They have fostered a culture that motivates and recognizes the effort and ability to continue trying.

There is little doubt that “software is eating the world,” as venture capitalist Marc Andreessen famously wrote.

Industries that never anticipated being disrupted by technology – think taxi cabs, for instance – are now being turned upside down.

But it's important to remember, too, that building a robust center of entrepreneurship doesn't solve all problems.

Our week in Israel was equally notable for the fact we saw little optimism for solving the political conflicts.

As much as entrepreneurs talked with confidence about “solving problems,” when it came to discussions about political challenges, such as a two-state solution with the Palestinians, we found a constant recitation of problems, not solutions.

Still, cities are being changed around the world by innovation. As new technology lowers the costs to create, the ability for individuals and small groups to act in big, transformative ways continues to go up. As a result, new communities of innovative entrepreneurs are emerging. It’s a trend that presents a unique opportunity for cities to change, and change quickly.

In the United States, we often focus on leading centers of innovation such as Silicon Valley, New York City or Austin. But the map for hatching big ideas continues to widen. Israel’s success demonstrates that.

It demonstrates, too, that efforts focused on nurturing and propelling entrepreneurship and innovation over the long term can deliver big results.

And that such success can be realized in cities and regions not previously imagined.

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