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Tech Talk: What Miami startups can learn from Israel



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“Entrepreneurship is an experiment — if you know the results, it’s not entrepreneurship,” said Oren Simanian, who heads Tel Aviv University’s esteemed entrepreneurship center StarTau.

Entrepreneurship is ingrained in Israeli culture because people had to create — to establish the country and to defend it. But today, residents have other options, such as working for Apple or Google or another multinational with facilities in Israel,

Simanian said recently at Miami Dade College's Idea Center. The occasion was an event announcing a knowledge-sharing partnership between the two entrepreneurship centers.

But the thriving Israeli ecosystem continues to accelerate and is driven by niche needs such as cybersecurity. "Today, we are a brand. Ten years ago we weren't there. It takes time."

What's special in Israel is that academia, the private sector and government have been working together to build the ecosystem, said Simanian.

Israel, about the size of New Jersey, produced six Nobel Prize winners and 800 exits – companies that were acquired or went public – in the last 10 years. That included deals valued at \$15 billion in 2014 alone. Israel also is the globe's No. 1 nation in research-and-development per capita spending, thanks in large part to its top-ranked science and technology universities. It's consistently ranked as one of the top five entrepreneurship hubs in the world.

So what can Miami learn? We're about to find out.

The knowledge-sharing agreement between StarTau and The Idea Center @ MDC links Israel's high-tech and startup communities to resources and people in Miami.

As part of the arrangement, members of Israel's high-tech community will travel to Miami for an Innovation Nation conference designed to connect innovators and leaders from the two high-tech communities. Israeli startups also will meet Miami investors, designers and digital marketing firms through a series of programs arranged by The Idea Center, and Tel Aviv University faculty will serve as visiting professors at MDC.

These initiatives grew out of a recent Knight Foundation-supported knowledge exchange trip to Israel as part of Project Interchange, an educational institute of the American Jewish Committee. A delegation of 12 Miami entrepreneurs and leaders in the tech community, including MDC's Idea Center executive director, Leandro Finol, traveled to Israel in March to learn from the country's thriving tech and innovation sector and make connections.

Finol and the Miami delegation met Simanian at a gathering he hosted during that trip. "After 45 minutes, we knew we wanted to do something together," Finol said.

The partnership fits squarely with the John S. and James L Knight Foundation's Miami objectives, said Matt Haggman, the foundation's Miami program director. "This collaboration is testament to the type of synergy we want to see in Miami. By making more of these connections, we can create new opportunities and foster the type of knowledge sharing that is essential to building a strong innovation ecosystem in our city."

Simanian shared what he saw as South Florida's value proposition. Top of the list, in his view, is Miami's position as the gateway to Latin America. He also listed tourism, international banking/fintech, health and media. Many of the joint initiatives will be around these areas.

StarTau will create a special course for the Idea Center, and the partnership plans to create a fund designed to incentivize Israeli startups to launch their U.S. and Latin America operations from Miami.

"There is possibility and I see it here, because mentors exist, money exists, balance between work-hard and play-hard exists. So you need to give the deal flow here the ability to invest," said Simanian.

At the event, a panel of participants from the Project Interchange trip discussed their experience. It included Greenberg Traurig shareholder Jaret Davis, Ben Wirz of the Knight Foundation Enterprise Fund, Felecia Hatcher of Code Fever, Finol and Haggman.

"We need to do a better job of encouraging our kids to go into these research areas. We need more STEM charter schools and academies at the K-12 level to encourage this," said Davis. Hatcher added that extracurricular particular programs, like Code Fever and others, are also needed "to help develop a true pipeline into our universities, startups and corporations."

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