

Exclusive Interview



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Zouhair Khaliq

Co-Founder & Partner, Teamup Group

ICMA: What inspired you to co-found Teamup Group and later Teamup Ventures, and what sets them apart from other investment firms?

Zouhair Khaliq: Teamup was initially formed in 2016 when my business partner Parvez Abbasi and I felt that we wanted to give back to the country that has given us so much in our own careers and professional development over the years. We moved back from our homes in London, where we happened to be at the time, and envisioned a platform to support, mentor, and help technology-based startups grow successful businesses. Around the same time, the Government of Pakistan announced an RFP for establishing an incubation center. We were one of the bidders and won the license for the National Incubation Centre Pakistan, the first of its kind public-private partnership funded by the Ignite Technology Fund and established, managed, and run by Teamup@NIC. We have so far successfully incubated 295 startup companies, of which 70% are still thriving with successful businesses.

Sometime later, seeing the gap in the market, we also set up Teamup Advisory, which helps businesses in their journey to become more digital. In 2020, we established Teamup Angels, which brings together selected startups and very selective angel investors who invest in and mentor many startups. In late 2021, we established Teamup Ventures, a venture capital fund focused on investing in technology-based startups in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other GCC countries. We feel there is an enormous synergy and so much potential in the entire

region, with amazing human talent and the opportunity to digitize the economies of the region. This is the Teamup Group of companies, and I believe what sets us apart is the ethos of "giving back"!

ICMA: What are the most important qualities you look for in a startup before deciding to invest?

Zouhair Khaliq: The first thing that we look at in any startup is the people! No company or business can succeed without a sincere, honest, intelligent, talented, and dedicated team of people. We look at the competitive landscape, the feasibility of the business model, and how scalable the business can be before deciding to invest.

ICMA: How do you approach working with startups once you've invested in them and help them grow and succeed?

Zouhair Khaliq: Our approach is to work very closely with the startups, making sure they have access to the right business contacts in their respective markets, advising them on their human resources, ensuring that they adopt the most efficient financial and operational processes, and helping them become as investor-ready as possible. It is critical that startup businesses ensure that all of the above are in place so that as they grow, the systems and processes are in place to ensure smooth and uninterrupted growth. These elements also give great comfort to future investors who see that their money will be utilized in the most sensible and responsible manner.

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ICMA: Can you share any success stories or notable investments that you are particularly proud of?

Zouhair Khaliq: We have a number of very talented and potentially very successful startups in our portfolio, but I believe it is too early to list them at this time. The current economic and political climate across the world is particularly challenging, and everyone, whether established businesses or startups, has so many moving parts to deal with on a daily basis. I am optimistic that in the next 3 years or so, we will see some truly amazing success stories!

ICMA: What are your future plans for Teamup Ventures, and how do you see the firm evolving over time?

Zouhair Khaliq: As I mentioned earlier, we are very bullish and optimistic about the medium- to long-term as the world makes its way out of the current situation, businesses once again grow and flourish, and the region moves towards rapid digitization. Our plans are to continue to focus on the Pakistan and GCC regions and would like to include Turkey and Egypt in our portfolio of investments and leverage the synergies of similar demographics and cultures.

ICMA: How do you see the technology and startup landscape evolving in Pakistan in the next few years?

Zouhair Khaliq: Pakistan is at the cusp of rapid digitization, with over 195 million mobile connections, more than 125 million of which are 3G/4G enabled, and with that number growing at approximately 400,000 a month, I believe that we are ready for a very steep growth curve! 65% of our population is below the age of 30, and these are digital natives who are totally comfortable conducting their lives and business over a mobile device. With startups addressing Fintech, AgriTech, Healthtech, EdTech, E-Commerce, and E-Logistics, I see very rapid growth in our economy over the next 3-5 years, with technology as the main enabler.

ICMA: What are some of the biggest lessons you've learned in your career as an entrepreneur and investor?

Zouhair Khaliq: As one progresses through one's career, there are so many life lessons one learns. For me, the most significant experiences taught me that it is crucial to be able to embrace change and not be afraid of it! As they say, change is the only constant in life. It is also very important to never give up one's

integrity. Nothing in life is as important as one's integrity. When you look up the word, you realize it's a very big word with so much attached to it, such as honesty, uprightness, honour, sincerity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, ethics, and morality, to name a few. It is also so important to never accept defeat! The only people who succeed eventually are the ones who can fail, recover quickly, get up, and carry on. As an investor, I believe it is important to have a medium- to long-term view of things. There is no quick money to be made, and one has to be prepared to invest for the long haul. Many years ago, as an angel investor, I invested in six startups. I never saw much of the five of them, and it was only 9 years later that the founders of the sixth one approached me and told me that my investment was now 10X what I had initially invested. 9 years later! That's the point. One has to be patient and look at the longer term.

ICMA: What do you see as the biggest challenges facing startups today?

Zouhair Khaliq: I think the biggest challenges today are the volatility of the market place, the uncertainty, the political instability, and the slowdown of available funding. I would like to emphasize that this is not a Pakistani or regional situation but applies across the world as we go through an economic downturn and a political reset. This happens every few years, and eventually things normalize. It is so important to keep focused on the business and its people at this time, and founders need to ensure they take all the steps necessary to stabilize the business and keep it running. Like all previous such downturns, this too shall pass. Keep the faith!

ICMA: How important do you think it is for startups to have a social impact and contribute to the betterment of society?

Zouhair Khaliq: I believe very strongly that everything we do should have an aspect of significant social impact and contribute to the betterment of our fellow human beings. I believe that this is an essential part of the role that we have been assigned to perform on this earth. Businesses should build processes to ensure that the social impact created is significant and measureable. Many years ago, when we were building Mobilink into the largest and most successful private sector company in the country, our slogan and brand value was "reshaping lives," and we focused on how we could benefit not only the society around us but also reshape the lives of our own employees and their families.

ICMA: What advice would you give to early-stage startups looking to raise funding?

Zouhair Khaliq: My advice right now would be to ensure that the foundations of the startup are solid, a good team is in place, the product has market traction, and there is enough funding available from friends, family, angels, and bootstrapping to give the business at least a 12-15-month runway. Given the current economic and political climate, it will take longer to raise venture capital funds, and patience and consistency are required. I always say, Trust in God, believe in yourself, and dare to dream!

The Editorial Board thanks Mr. Zouhair Khaliq, Co-Founder & Partner, Teamup Group for sparing from his precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.