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Innovation in the Middle East: Still a long way to go

Not a single Middle Eastern company was ranked among Business Week's top 50, which means that they still have a long way to go to catch up with the world's innovation leaders.



This year's ranking, which added three financial data points to the judging criteria - revenue, margin growth and stock returns - ranked Apple as the world's most innovative company, followed by Internet search giant Google, Japanese auto major Toyota, industrial corporation General Electric (GE) and Microsoft in the top five.

'I believe that leaders in the Middle East should recognize that it is their responsibility to create and maintain a culture of innovation,' said Matt Kingdon, Chairman of What If! The Innovation Company, 'Innovation is about taking risks and challenging the norms.'

A nation can create a culture of innovation through visionary leadership and nurturing education systems, to create a culture that rewards risk taking and champions' entrepreneurial spirit. Dubai, for example, represents a true example of visionary lead innovation as exemplified by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum.'

Mr. Kingdon's may have a valid point. There are a number of success stories coming out of the region today. Recently, the United Arab Emirates was ranked 29th out of 127 countries in the Global Information Technology Readiness Index. The ranking is based on the sophistication of the country's knowledge economy and its capacity to innovate, absorb and adapt technology.

Adrian Hayes, Dubai-based British adventurer and corporate coach who recently became the 15th person in the world, and the fastest person in history, to walk to the North & South Poles and summit Mt Everest, does not totally agree with Mr. Kingdon, arguing that unless there is a platform for expressing ideas there is no use in talking about innovation.

'I believe that no Middle Eastern country has ever made the list because most of them, and many companies within them, still operate within an authoritarian and autocratic style of leadership, management and structure. This stifles innovation.'

Rowan Gibson, co-author of 'Innovation to the Core', who finds most of those lists very superficial, emphasizes that the Middle East does not actually lack innovation but it lacks a culture of entrepreneurship, opportunism and innovation at grass-roots level.

'If we think of American culture, for example, certain notions immediately come to mind like 'the

land of opportunity' or 'the American Dream'.

These notions are chiefly about individuals working hard and using their ingenuity to attain material prosperity and recognition. But what exactly is the 'the Middle Eastern Dream'? Do ordinary people at grass-roots level really believe it is possible or even desirable to 'make it to the top' through innovation and entrepreneurship?' Gibson asks.

'I am certainly not criticizing or questioning Middle-Eastern values here, nor am I saying that the American value system is ideal or perfect. Clearly, there is much more to human existence than material prosperity. But if you ask me why there is a lack of innovation in the Middle East compared to, say, America, I think this is part of the answer.'

Clive Grinyer, the European Director of Customer Experience at Cisco sees that Innovation comes from investment within the context of creative culture and a strong audience of people engaging with new services and technology.

'There is no underlying reason why the Middle East could not join the list of innovative areas, but I think it's only a matter of time. When Middle Eastern companies become able to establish the right links between investment, academia, science and creativity, innovation will flourish,' Clive concludes.

Kingdon, Hayes, Gibson and Grinyer are part of the expert speaker line up at this years Management Innovation Forum produced by the team behind Leaders in Dubai.

The four-day event will cover both regional and international perspectives on management innovation and the challenges and trends in the current economic climate.

Taking place from the 22 - 25 June in Dubai, the acclaimed event will delve into cutting-edge strategies and practical implementation. The event is sponsored by Etisalat and AIS BrandLab.

Notes and Media Contacts

About Leaders Presents - part of IIR

Leaders Presents is a new division designed to provide the IIR delegate a new level of conference experience. Born from the success of the Annual Leaders in Dubai Business Forum, Leaders events stand out from the rest with superior levels of speakers, up to date topics and an all round level of excellence within the execution of the events. The flagship event- Leaders in Dubai is a meeting of over 1,500 of the regions most eminent business leaders from across all industries who come together to network, learn and debate on the future of business and share experiences from some of the most popular business, economic and political leaders across the globe. Leaders Presents have launched a number of other highly successful events recently including the acclaimed Management Innovation Forum, which launched in 2007 and was met with rave reviews, and the Middle East Business Achievement Awards; honoring regional business leaders for their excellence and contribution to business. 2008 now sees the launch of a variety of new Leaders Presents event- all of which promise to evoke thought and creativity and give real value to the delegates who attend. Speakers- current and past at Leaders Presents events include Colin Powell, Jack Welch, Bill Clinton, Richard Branson, Kofi Annan, Michael Porter, Her Majesty Queen Noor, Tom Peters, Malcolm Gladwell and Thomas Friedman.

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