

# Growing TALENT

Najla Al Midfa is the founder of social enterprise Khayarat and General Manager of the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Centre (Sheraa), a foundation started by Her Excellency Sheikha Bodour Bint Sultan Al Qasimi. Here she explains the thinking behind these two platforms, and just why she believes Emirati youth are the leaders of tomorrow

**NAJLA AL MIDFA**

KHAYARAT FOUNDER AND SHERAA GM

**> What motivated you to set up Sheraa and Khayarat?**

Back in 2015, Sheikha Bodour and I were discussing the need to empower and support the region's youth. She spoke of her vision to create a platform to harness the massive talent in MENA, helping to build businesses that serve as engines for socio-economic development. This idea aligned with my own values so I joined Sheraa as general manager as soon as it officially launched in January 2016.

The Khayarat mission statement stems from my own experiences working in the private sector and witnessing first-hand the exciting career prospects it offers. During my time at the Khalifa Fund for Enterprise Development, I was part of a mentoring project for young Emiratis. Meeting and speaking with such ambitious, talented young men and women awakened a need to bridge the gap between Emiratis and the private sector, through one-to-one career guidance and job preparation. Thus Khayarat (Arabic for 'options'), was born, helping Emirati graduates find fulfilling jobs in the private sector.

**> What are the main challenges facing Emirati youth today?**

The same as youth around the world: a rapidly changing job market and lack of job preparation and guidance, and the need to learn 21st century skills. An Emirati-specific challenge is reluctance to enter the world of entrepreneurship, primarily due to the stigma attached to failure. Sharing the stories of fellow Emiratis – whether entrepreneurs or employees – will go a long way towards encouraging the younger generation to pursue their own ambitions and fulfil their potential.

**> What are your hopes for the Emirati generations to come? Do you see them as strengthening the local offering, or being perceived as more valuable in workplaces internationally?**

I hope to see them do both. Through the combined efforts of government initiatives, better education opportunities, and platforms like Sheraa and Khayarat, Emirati youth are already more engaged in doing their bit for society. Young Emiratis are now finding ways to

channel their ambitions, and with their vast potential, I am certain that they will become just as invaluable to workplaces abroad.

**> How do Khayarat and Sheraa equip Emirati youth to deal with these challenges?**

Khayarat does more than just help place Emiratis in private sector jobs. We work with each individual candidate to help them figure out what they are passionate about and what sector they wish to help shape the most. It is this guidance and emphasis on self-awareness - the core of Khayarat's offering - that teaches Emiratis to deal with both current and future challenges.

At Sheraa, our goal is to build a generation of job creators – entrepreneurs who have the skills and the know-how to solve local and global problems. We have programs that are tailored to every stage of the entrepreneurial journey, from the Ideathon that focuses on validating ideas, to the six-month Incubator program that helps young companies build their first product, get licensed, and start making sales. Our top three performers last year made more than



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Najla is committed to broadening and enriching the horizons of young Emiratis

80 thousand dollars in sales revenue.

The three-month Accelerator program is designed to grow existing start-ups to the next level. It includes benefits such as intensive mentorship, access to Sheraa's network of investors and industry experts, and access to the market through exclusive introductions.

Our supplier matchmaking day is one way that we provide this access, with resounding success thus far. We held our first event this April, under the Arab Supply Chain Impact Initiative, and had 16 MOUs signed between our start-ups and government and corporate entities.

We are also proud to have partnered with Sandooq Al Watan to launch an Emirati Innovators Track – a special grant awarded to Emiratis who have a unique, high-potential scalable business.

**> Is there a particular niche for Emirati youth in the UAE's crowded expat workforce?**

Emirati youth will flourish in any industry across the UAE. They are talented, ambitious, and highly skilled. As Emiratis continue to shift their focus from public sector to private sector jobs, showcasing that talent, the demand for an Emirati workforce will continue to rise.

Having met with hundreds of young Emiratis through my work with Khayarat, I have also noticed a rising interest in new and innovative domains, such as space, science, blockchain, and smart cities. Like their forefathers, the younger generation of Emiratis have an eye on the future, looking to stay ahead of cutting edge technology and develop the UAE's knowledge economy.

**> Where do you see Sheraa and Khayarat in 5-10 years? Is there room for further growth?**

I see Sheraa as being the go-to for all things entrepreneurial, helping achieve the UAE's 2021 mission of transitioning towards an innovation-based economy, with a community of entrepreneurs and investors, and a global network of entrepreneurship hubs.

As for Khayarat, all Emirati students should be able to access a platform that helps them realise their potential and encourages them to discover and pursue their passions. It is my hope that all young Emiratis will see us as the first stop after graduation for mentorship and career guidance.

**> What are the latest milestones of Khayarat and Sheraa, and what can we look forward to in the coming months?**

Since Sheraa's inception we have inspired a community of more than 6000 aspiring entrepreneurs through our workshops and speaker events, with around 300 local and international speakers. We graduated our third Accelerator cohort in May, bringing our total number of graduates to 30 start-ups. Applications for the fourth cohort open in August and we will be graduating our second Incubator cohort of more than 25 start-ups this summer.

Later this year, Sheraa will be opening a second location at the University of Sharjah. Additionally, we will soon begin building an entrepreneurship campus in the Sharjah Research, Technology, and Innovation Park that will not only be a co-working space for entrepreneurs, but also provide other facilities such as makers spaces, dormitories, and office space for other players in the ecosystem. Come November, we will host the second Sharjah Entrepreneurship Festival, bringing the ecosystem together under one roof to network and share ideas.

Khayarat has partnered with Sandooq Al Watan and Al Bayt Mitwahid for the Jusoor program, to help place high-potential Emiratis at summer internships in leading private sector companies. Last year, we placed more than 50 in companies such as McKinsey, Bain, SAP, and Emaar. This year we received more than 400 applications and look forward to placing even more students in private sector internships.

Khayarat is also beginning to expand its online platform, to provide further resources for students looking for additional career guidance and information on career options. 🔗