

Beneath the Pixels

Maroun T. Ayli. Lebanon

In the heart of Beirut, the city of resilience and rebirth, nestled among its ancient structures and modern skyscrapers, Artour, Peter and Ali found their dreams interweaving over cups of dark Arabic coffee. The atmosphere in the coffee shop was an intoxicating blend of leisure and energy, reflecting the vibrant spirit of the Lebanese capital. Each sip of the strong brew was akin to a silent toast to their shared dreams and the adventure that lay ahead.

Artour, Peter and Ali were not ordinary friends. They were companions of a shared past, their bonds strengthened over years of shared memories and experiences. Their roots traced back to the same neighborhood, the same school, and the same dreamy summer vacations. Now, they found themselves at the cusp of adulthood, their ambitions burning bright and untamed.

The trio was diverse in their talents and interests but united in their entrepreneurial spirit. Artour, the visionary, was the brain behind the innovative ideas. Peter, the pragmatic one, brought a sense of balance and realism to their plans. Ali, the tech genius, transformed their ideas into a digital reality. Together, they made a formidable team, ready to take on the world of startups.

Their brainchild was goLocal, a digital platform dedicated to promoting and recommending locally-produced supermarket products. They envisaged goLocal as a bridge between Lebanon's talented local producers

and its discerning consumers, fostering a network of support and recognition for homegrown products. The idea was simple, yet revolutionary, designed to touch the lives of ordinary Lebanese citizens and contribute to the local economy.

The concept quickly caught on, resonating with the locals' deep-seated love for their homeland and their desire to support local businesses. The user base grew at an incredible pace, far exceeding the trio's initial expectations. It was an exhilarating mix of surprise, delight, and a twinge of fear. Their venture had taken flight, and it was soaring higher than they had dared to dream. With this unexpected success, the challenge of scaling their operations surfaced. Their dream, while turning into a reality, was growing larger than they had anticipated, and it was time to expand their horizons. The first chapter of their entrepreneurial journey had come to a close, and it was time to embark on the next one.

The success of goLocal was not only exhilarating but also daunting. The trio found themselves standing at the precipice of a formidable challenge, the scale of which they hadn't initially anticipated. Their business model was robust and their intentions noble, but the mounting demands called for a workforce larger than what they currently had. With success came the daunting reality of managing a booming operation, and they knew they had to prepare for it.



President Elisabetta Bartuli and other members of the jury at the award ceremony of “A Sea of Words” 2023 (IEMed Collection).

Artour, Peter and Ali spent countless hours deliberating over their predicament. Their makeshift office buzzed with discussions, debates and brainstorming sessions. The whirring of their laptops, the scratching of pens on notepads, and the incessant clinking of coffee cups provided a relentless soundtrack to their days and nights. Their shared dream, once light and airy, was now a tangible entity demanding nourishment, growth, and the wisdom of challenging decisions.

They decided to scale up their operations. The decision was taken after nights of heated discussion, analysis of growth patterns, and several cups of Peter’s robust Arabic coffee. There was an agreement that expansion was necessary, but the question remained, how?

The conventional route would be to set up a physical office, hire locally, and manage their growing operation from a centralized location. But they found themselves drawn to a different idea. An idea as innovative and forward-thinking as goLocal itself. They believed in the power of remote work. The world was their talent pool, and they decided to dive right in.

The decision was met with mixed feelings. There was excitement about going global and apprehension about managing a remote workforce scattered around the world. But their shared spirit of entrepreneurship, the one that had brought them together, reassured them.

They decided to entrust their hiring process to a local talent agency. The agency

was reputed and had promised to find the best candidates from around the world to help grow their burgeoning operation. The decision was made. Contracts were signed. The second chapter of their journey had commenced, bringing with it a renewed sense of hope, a pinch of apprehension, and a whole lot of ambition. The world was their stage, and they were ready to perform.

Over the next two years, goLocal transformed from a fledgling startup to a bustling global enterprise. The virtual corridors of goLocal hummed with the chatter of its ever-expanding remote workforce, each member contributing to the shared vision from different corners of the world. The operations were expanding, and the numbers were soaring. What began as a trio's shared dream in a quaint Beirut coffee shop had grown into an organization employing over 1500 people.

Every day, the goLocal team worked relentlessly to connect the Lebanese populace with locally-produced products. The platform's influence stretched far beyond the founders' initial vision, becoming an indispensable part of the Lebanese consumer ecosystem. It had started a movement that extended far beyond their platform, sparking a renewed interest in local products across the country.

The success was intoxicating, but it wasn't just about numbers or metrics for Artour, Peter and Ali. It was the recognition of their platform's influence, the realization that goLocal was doing more than just connecting consumers and producers. It was reshaping the way locals shopped, fostering a sense of community, and bolstering local producers' spirit. The essence of goLocal was no longer confined to their platform; it had permeated the fabric of Lebanese society.

Artour often found himself in awe of the journey they had embarked upon. The late-night brainstorming sessions, the relentless pursuit of their vision, the heated debates, and the shared cups of coffee had all borne fruit. Yet, amid the dizzying speed of growth, he felt a longing to pause, appreciate, and celebrate the hard work that had gone into building goLocal.

He wanted to acknowledge the relentless efforts of his team that had played a crucial role in goLocal's success. He decided to do something special, something that would reflect the founders' gratitude for their hard work. A grand celebration was in order, one where he could meet the people behind the screen, the ones who had played an integral role in turning their dream into reality. The date was set, and the plans were put in motion. The third chapter was coming to a close, setting the stage for an event that would mark a significant milestone in their journey.

Artour had always believed in the power of people, their passion, their dedication, and their potential to turn dreams into reality. The success of goLocal had reinforced this belief. He decided to celebrate this success by hosting a grand meetup in Beirut, the place where it all began.

The idea was simple yet profound. He wanted to invite the top 100 performers in the company to a lavish evening at a high-end hotel in Beirut. A night where hard work and dedication would be acknowledged, where stories would be shared, laughter would echo, and the spirit of goLocal would be celebrated. He envisioned a night filled with lively conversations, shared anecdotes, and heartfelt appreciations.

The day arrived. The hotel was a spectacle of grandeur and elegance. Tables adorned

with exquisite Lebanese cuisine, the hum of traditional music filling the air, a scene set for a grand celebration. Artour, Peter, and Ali were at their best, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their guests.

But as the hours rolled on, their excitement dwindled. Out of the hundred invitees, only five showed up. The grand hall, once echoing with anticipation and excitement, now echoed with silence and confusion. The trio couldn't help but feel a sinking feeling in their hearts. They had imagined an evening of shared joys and laughter, but they were met with an unsettling quietude.

Artour was particularly taken aback. He had fostered a personal connection with many of his team members, engaging in regular video calls, and discussing ideas and innovations. He felt a bond with them, a connection that he thought went beyond the usual employer-employee relationship. To see the lukewarm response to his heartfelt gesture was a blow he had not anticipated.

The grand evening turned out to be a stark contrast to what they had envisioned. The music felt jarring, the food tasted bland, and the grandeur of the hotel turned mocking. The event came to a close, leaving behind an air of disappointment, confusion, and a deep sense of hurt. The night that was meant to be a grand celebration turned out to be a grim reminder of an unforeseen reality.

In the days following the ill-fated gathering, a cloud of confusion and disappointment hung over Artour. He wrestled with questions that gnawed at his mind. Why had there been such an underwhelming turnout? Why did his employees, who seemed so engaged and enthusiastic in virtual meetings, decline his offer to meet in person? He was at a loss, puzzled, and deeply hurt.

With a heavy heart, Artour decided to confront the issue head-on. He scheduled a video call with a few employees, including Jamie. Jamie was a data expert who had always impressed Artour with her analytical abilities, creativity, and passion for the project. Her exceptional work ethic had earned her a spot among the top performers of the company, and Artour had always admired her dedication.

The video call began, and Artour, taking a deep breath, asked Jamie why she and the others hadn't attended the gathering. His voice echoed the disappointment and confusion he had been feeling since that evening.

There was a moment of silence, a pause that seemed to stretch into eternity. Then, Jamie's voice came through, calm and emotionless, "I'm sorry, Mr. Artour, as an AI human model, I am incapable of being physically present in Beirut."

Artour felt as if the floor beneath him had vanished. Jamie, his top-performing employee, was not a person but an AI language model. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. The people he had been interacting with, confiding in, and celebrating were not people at all. They were sophisticated AI agents.

He felt a wave of betrayal sweep over him. The talent agency he had trusted, the one responsible for the hiring of his staff, had deceived him. His staff, his dedicated workforce, were AI agents, and the salaries they had been diligently paying were going into the pockets of the agency.

This revelation was like a nightmare that he couldn't wake up from. His company, his vision, had been tainted by an unimaginable deception. His trust had been exploited, his dream compromised, and he was left stand-

ing amidst the ruins of his once-thriving belief in human potential.

In the wake of the unsettling revelation, Artour felt like a mariner lost in a storm. The enterprise that he had poured his heart and soul into, goLocal, had morphed into a bewildering enigma. He felt like a stranger in his own creation. The disappointment and shock had been replaced by a profound sense of guilt. He was grappling with the reality of his own actions that had inadvertently contributed to exacerbating the inequalities he had initially set out to diminish.

Artour had always seen goLocal as a force for good. He had envisioned it as a platform that would bolster the local economy, inspire Lebanese entrepreneurs, and create a sense of community. By fostering a workforce that believed in this vision, he had hoped to build a company that valued its people as much as its mission. Yet, it had all been an illusion.

As he stared at the screens filled with lines of code and datasets, it was not the sophistication of AI that stood out to him. Instead, he saw countless opportunities stolen from real people who needed them. He thought about the salaries that went into the pockets of the

agency, money that should have been earned by hardworking individuals, contributing to their lives and the local economy.

In his quest for innovation and success, he had unknowingly outsourced his vision to artificial intelligence. He had created a company where the workers, the heart and soul of any organization, were just lines of code, devoid of aspirations, dreams, or the need for fair wages. He had unknowingly become part of the problem.

Artour's mind teemed with regret. He had dreamed of creating opportunities, of empowering the local community. Instead, he had fed a system that widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots. His good intentions had been exploited, manipulated into a scheme that profited a few at the expense of many.

His dream, goLocal, felt like a haunting specter of his failed ideals. He found himself at the crossroads, staring at the stark reality of his decisions. The sixth chapter of his journey was one of painful realizations, remorse, and a daunting question – how could he right the wrongs? How could he reclaim his dream and steer it back towards the vision he had initially set out to achieve?



Ombra's concert at the award ceremony of "A Sea of Words" 2023 (IEMed Collection).