

Investing In Tomorrow's World

Hisham Itani, Chairman and CEO of Resource Group Holding (RGH), reveals how the new technologies built and invested in by RGH are changing lives in Lebanon.



Can you tell us a bit about your journey and how you turned a small family printing company into a global digital solutions provider and technology investment group?

I got involved in the family business, Inkript, while still at university. I saw untapped potential in the firm and looked for ways to expand the company, by giving more prominence to technology adoption. Starting in 1993, we introduced several technologies, such as personalization solutions, which allowed us to offer services that are digitally customized, including checkbooks and bonds.

These were existing technologies, of course, but it became obvious that technology can drive the business. In 2003, the full potential of secure smartcards became

clear to us, and we started introducing it into the region. Consequently, Inkript became one of the leading smartcard manufacturers in the Middle East and Africa.

Seeing the impact of new technologies made it evident that research and development is an essential aspect of moving a business forward. We started investing significantly in R&D in 2005, which helped us rapidly unlock new markets and opportunities.

We soon had a growing portfolio of ventures. We needed to consolidate these businesses to harness the rising momentum to incubate new ideas and startups. As a result, we established RGH in 2008.

In recent years, RGH's portfolio of businesses has continued to evolve, now including digital security,

telecoms infrastructure, secure communications and cyber security, among others.

It has been quite a journey, and I think the key to making it this far is trusting our instincts and aiming for markets where we have a competitive advantage. At the same time, you need to think about how you can make a difference in people's daily lives as you build a technology group.

How do you consistently stay ahead of trends in technology?

Our R&D center is what keeps us ahead of trends in technology. It allows us to pro-actively adapt new technologies and to develop these into our own proprietary solutions. We are determined to push new technologies before the demand is even visible.

To achieve that objective, we conduct research and analyze opportunities across our markets and engage our in-house development team where we see gaps. That said, it is also important to have the right overall vision to guide R&D activities.

We innovate around people's lives, in other words we want to enhance their day-to-day lives by developing and customizing technologies. It is all about security, fast processes and convenience. With our multicultural team, we can accentuate diversity and spark creativity, which promotes rapid innovation.

Do you feel that Lebanon is fully embracing digital transformation?

I can see Lebanon's digital transformation in action. As we all know, digital transformation is inevitable for societies, the benefits are inarguable. We are glad to see Lebanon's public sector taking advantage of automation, and we can see the resulting convenience every day.

The availability of high-speed internet access is, of course, central to digital transformation. Serta, an RGH subsidiary, was awarded a major part in the tender aimed at rolling out fiber optic internet across Lebanon. This was the first time that an infrastructure project of this size was initiated in Lebanon since at least 2004.

We are also helping the Lebanese government to enable citizen automation through Inkript, by providing e-vehicle solutions (including biometric driving licenses, electronic vehicle registration cards, secure vehicle plates and RFID tags), biometric passports, e-residency permits and e-work permits. All these digital security programs are intended to make the lives of Lebanon's citizens hassle free.

What new technologies do you think are going to have the most impact on your businesses in the coming year?

Cybersecurity will have a major impact in the Middle East because it is an ongoing concern worldwide and particular

to this region. In fact, RGH is developing a cybersecurity bundle that will protect governments and private enterprises against threats.

Additionally, there is a lot of hype around blockchain and the internet of things (IoT), and for a good reason. We think both of these technologies will have a significant impact, with IoT technology driving smart cities in Lebanon in the future. Of course, AI is another area we are actively pursuing, especially in relation to biometrics, one of our core businesses.

RGH is implementing a national fiber optics deployment project that will help secure fast internet broadband in Lebanon—what will the potential impact of this be on the country?

Fiber optic internet is a game changer for the Lebanese economy because it enables affordable low-latency, high-speed internet for everyday use. It creates opportunities for Lebanese businesses that will now be able to better compete with companies across the world, at a lower cost.

Fast internet also stimulates the creative economy, and we look forward to seeing that happen in Lebanon. Fiber optics impacts citizens too, by giving them easier access to education and more efficient ways to communicate.

What more do you think needs to be done to foster tech-startups and entrepreneurship in Lebanon?

I think that fostering entrepreneurship requires active support and guidance, helping young entrepreneurs acquire the tools they need to move their business ideas forward. We need to actively grow a culture of entrepreneurship in Lebanon.

Starting a business requires a certain type of mindset and successful business people should lead the way, showing prospective entrepreneurs what they stand to achieve by building businesses. Only by growing this culture will the country step into its potential to emerge as a tech hub.

What are your top pieces of advice for up-and-coming entrepreneurs?

You must be determined to succeed in business. There is an old proverb, "obstacles do not block the path, they are the path". Entrepreneurs must navigate the road to success by steadfastly overcoming obstacles. Only by believing in your business will you have the energy to overcome these hurdles time and time again.

Time management is important too because as an entrepreneur, time constraints can become extreme. Finally, I think that building solid teams and meaningful relationships are key because ultimately those people will carry your success in the long run.