



Step Dubai Conference's 13-year impact: A leading platform for start-up breakthroughs and investment

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We firmly believe that the future belongs to those who make it today, not tomorrow, and the momentum of progress waits for no one.

H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister, and Chairman of the Higher Committee for Future Technology and Digital Economy,



The latest GEM 2023/2024 Global Report indicates that the UAE leads in the [National Entrepreneurship Context Index](#) for the fourth year in a row. This finding ascertains the nation's business-friendly regulations, proactive R&D initiatives, and business support systems.

Dubai is among the progress-driven emirates that help drive this development, given its dynamic start-up ecosystem valued at approximately AED84 billion. The availability of events geared at uniting entrepreneurs and investors for discussions and networking has been an important aspect of this growth. One such event, [Step Dubai 2025](#), offers over AED10 billion (\$9 billion) in funding and serves as a major platform for linking aspiring entrepreneurs and start-ups with government leaders, VCs, and MNCs.

This e-book goes through the strategic role of Step in shaping the local business field, offering key insights for those interested in doing business in Dubai and accelerating company success. It covers the event's history, the latest technological innovations showcased, and its benefits to innovative companies.



Part I

Everything you need to know about Step Dubai Conference





Step Conference is the leading technology and start-up event in the MENA region, bringing together over 8,000 attendees, 400 showcasing start-ups, 200 speakers, and 100 participating businesses from 50 countries globally. Since its founding, the conference has been crucial in promoting discussions around creative, innovative, and high-performing sectors. It is an avenue where entrepreneurs, VCs, and industry leaders engage in discussions around emerging developments, foster alliances, and stimulate digital transformation in the region.

A brief history of Step

The Step Conference is the [brainchild of Ray Dargham](#), conceived during his final year at the

American University of Beirut in 2011. With a vision to enhance customer engagement through media and technology, Dargham launched a company that swiftly attracted clients such as Rotana.

space. This event covered various topics, including entrepreneurship, women in business, and the impact of social media, and drew in over 100 attendees with just two volunteers and a small line up that featured radio host [Kris Fade](#). Encouraged by positive feedback, he expanded the conference in 2013, drawing 250 attendees despite financial challenges.

To foster growth, Dargham looked to successful global events like the Web Summit in Dublin for

inspiration, and so, in 2014, he introduced start-up exhibitions to STEP. By 2015, the conference had gained significant momentum, attracting 90 startups, hosting a pitch competition, and moving to a larger venue, which skyrocketed attendance from 700 to 2,500.

In 2018, STEP Group, a Dubai-based media and technology company, announced having successfully closed its Series A funding round with a \$2 million (approximately AED7 million) investment from regional investors, including Wamda Capital, Equitrust, Dubai Silicon Oasis Authority, and international VC firm North Base Media.

Currently, the Step Conference stands out as one of the key events that has enhanced the way of doing business in Dubai. It offers entrepreneurs and companies direct access to funding opportunities, insights into regulations, and the latest market trends.

Step Dubai 2025 to mark 13th year of empowering start-ups and innovators in the MENA Region



Read the accompanying article for more information.



Part II

Key developments at the 2025 tech conference





During its 13th edition, last 19-20 February, Step has once more established itself as the leading technology conference in the MENA region. It introduced many exciting innovations and announced global expansions. A defining moment of the opening day was the announcement of Step's continued global footprint, with Step Istanbul launching in May and Step San Francisco returning in August. This expansion shows Dubai's growing force in the global technology scene and emphasises its importance as a centre for digital transformation and entrepreneurship.

Moreover, emerging technologies were a major focus at Step Dubai 2025, with artificial intelligence, fintech, proptech, and adtech among the central themes. The conference also addressed global tech challenges, with expert panels tackling issues such as digital regulation, cybersecurity threats, and ethical AI deployment.

Similarly, the Start-up Basecamp allowed new firms to showcase their products and services, while pitch competitions provided an opportunity to present their ideas to leading investors and

industry experts. The Mentor's Corner facilitated personalised guidance from experienced entrepreneurs and leaders, and Investor Meetings enabled one-on-one sessions with pre-seed to growth-stage investors.

The decision-makers and influential leaders from major global entities such as Microsoft, Meta, 500 Global, SVC, du, and Emirates NBD also took part in discussions and networking sessions during Step Dubai 2025. A notable highlight was the Silicon Valley Delegation, led by Blitzscaling Ventures VC Jeremiah Owyang, who engaged with Dubai's growing innovation ecosystem. The VIP Pass, which granted full access to the conference and the VIP lounge, offered attendees premium networking opportunities.

The innumerable business incentives and activities featured at the event further fortify the city's appeal as an ideal destination for international entrepreneurs looking to start a business in Dubai.

Dynamic agenda at Step Dubai 2025

The five innovation tracks at Step Dubai 2025 provided a deep plunge into the most essential sectors moulding future technology and highlighted global trends and investment opportunities. Each track featured industry leaders, start-up showcases, and investment-focused discussions that reinforced Dubai's position as a global tech hub.

1. Funders and Founders

During its [first day](#), the event saw an inspiring keynote from Her Excellency Alia bint Abdulla Al Mazrouei, Minister of State for Entrepreneurship. This track is primarily aimed at venture capitalists and global investors, providing them with key insights on funding and providing strategic support towards high-performing start-ups. A main feature was the Flagship Pitch Competition, where 30 start-ups competed for over two days. Additionally, the AngelSpark Competition gave early-stage companies a chance to present their ideas to angel investors.

2. AI, LLMs, and Cloud

This track emphasised how AI can help with decision-making, improve logistics, and create stronger supply chains. The session titled 'Agentic Infrastructure: Empowering the Next Generation of Autonomy and Innovation' provided valuable insights into how AI-driven systems and decentralised frameworks are transforming automation. This enables businesses to scale operations effectively and encourages innovation across industries.

3. Fintech

Focused on advancing financial technology, this

track emphasises the scaling of solutions in emerging markets. The session titled 'Six Learnings from Scaling a Business in the Region' discussed important topics like market entry strategies, overcoming regulatory challenges, securing investment, and adapting to cultural nuances.

4. Adtech 2.0

This track centred on how digital campaigns have changed, highlighting the roles of automation, analytics, and optimising ROI. The session 'The Future of Digital Campaigns: Optimizing ROI with Programmatic' shared data-powered insights for creating effective campaigns.

5. PropTech

Newly introduced this year, the PropTech track — organised in collaboration with the Dubai Land Department — covered the latest innovations in real estate. The conferences encompassed topics such as AI-enhanced property management, blockchain-based transactions, and sustainable urban development.

How Step Conference enhances the way of doing business in Dubai: A look into AI, Fintech, PropTech, and Adtech sectors



Read the accompanying article for more information.

Part III

How robust is Dubai's start-up ecosystem?



The MENA region's tech start-up ecosystem is experiencing an uptrend rise, as highlighted by the [MENA Tech Start-ups Funding Report 2024](#) — developed by Multiples together with Falak Angels and other leading industry entities. The report reveals that the region secured AED10 billion (\$2.78 billion) across 602 rounds, with the UAE leading the market at AED10 billion (\$1.53 billion) in 253 rounds.

Dubai remains at the forefront of this development, home to 86% of the UAE's start-ups, with 40% classified as scale-ups — having successfully raised over \$1 million in funding. This surge is driven by a diverse investor base of over 1,300 and the emirate's continued position as a magnet for venture capital.

The emirate's start-up landscape is further strengthened by government-led initiatives and strategic support systems. As such, the Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy has introduced the [Dubai Startup Guide 2024](#). It is a comprehensive resource designed to help entrepreneurs navigate company setup, legal frameworks, and funding opportunities.

The guide provides sector-specific insights into ten key areas of the digital economy, including AI, cybersecurity, fintech, edtech, and Web3, while offering information on economic free zones, accelerators, incubators, and regulatory sandboxes. This structured approach ensures that international founders understand how to start a business in Dubai and leverage its dynamic ecosystem for rapid growth.

The government's leadership has also spearheaded the launch of the [Dubai International Growth Initiative](#) to accelerate the global expansion of its homegrown start-ups. In close collaboration with Emirates NBD,

the program offers financing solutions based on the Emirates Interbank Offered Rate (EIBOR) without additional margins. This first-of-its-kind initiative targets SMEs in key sectors such as e-commerce, F&B, FMCG, manufacturing, and retail, further reinforcing Dubai's position as a global business hub.

Dubai's AED 84 billion start-up ecosystem and Step's huge role

Dubai's start-up ecosystem, valued at AED 84 billion (\$23 billion), continues to flourish and key corporate events are inarguably playing an immense part. The Step Conference has significantly impacted the start-up landscape, serving as a catalyst for networking, investment, and global reach.

The Dubai Technology Entrepreneur Campus (DTEC) highlights the conference's unique value, describing it as 'made by start-ups for start-ups' and praising its festival-style atmosphere that facilitates business connections. As a prominent co-working space and start-up hub, DTEC leverages Step to enhance brand visibility and create new business opportunities.

Step Dubai Conference has also facilitated the launch and expansion of numerous innovative, high-growth ventures. Notable examples include Drowzy, an Egyptian e-commerce platform that secured [six-figure seed funding](#) after connecting with UAE-based investors at Step 2020. Similarly, [Dubai-based EAT App](#) raised \$5 million in Series B funding, while Vezeeta — the Middle East's leading digital healthcare platform — secured \$40 million in Series D funding.

Indeed, the presence of prominent venture capitalists, incubators, and accelerators, such as

[‘in5’](#) and [Seed Group](#), is vital to the success of the tech festival. They improve the way of doing business in Dubai and consequently raise the success rates of start-ups. For example, the incubator platform in5 has been showcasing promising start-ups under its umbrella at Step Dubai. The entity has enabled these young companies to take advantage of training, funding, and strategic partnerships available at the event.

Since its launch in 2013, in5 has supported 1,000 start-ups, thereby contributing to a total funding pool exceeding AED 7.8 billion. The incubator has supported leading unicorns such as Tabby (a buy-now-pay-later platform) and ‘eyewa’ (a leading eyewear retailer).

In 2022, the food operations services start-up of in5 called ‘MUNCH:ON’ was successfully acquired by Careem. This move made Careem the Middle East’s first unicorn, having reached a valuation of over AED 3.7 billion. The platform gained significant attention when US-headquartered Uber purchased it in 2019 for AED 11.4 billion.

Moreover, Seed Group has been a longstanding participant in the Step Dubai Conference and has contributed through high-level representatives and discussions on investment trends.

At Step Dubai 2025, Naala Oleynikova, Senior Manager for International Ventures at Seed Group, participated in a session titled “MENA VCs Not Missing the AI Opportunity.” The panel explored AI start-up strategies, shifting investor priorities, and the evolving AI landscape in the Middle East. A company of The Private Office of Sheikh Saeed bin Ahmed Al Maktoum, Seed Group streamlines the expansion and growth of high-performing global firms.

The technology conference also welcomed distinguished investors from companies such as e& capital, Techstars, Flat6Labs, and BY Venture Partners. Particularly, their involvement allowed start-ups and entrepreneurs to pre-arrange one-on-one sessions across various stages, from pre-seed to growth.

Such accounts truly highlight Dubai’s strategic business incentives and the city’s role in fostering cross-border entrepreneurial growth. Its start-up ecosystem continues to attract young, albeit high-growth firms, thereby reinforcing the emirate’s reputation as a premier destination for [business setups](#).

The lasting impact of Step Conference on promising start-ups in MENA



Read the accompanying article for more information.



Part IV

Maximising Step Dubai Conference: Tips for start-ups and investors





Hosting the 13th edition of Step Dubai at Dubai Internet City (DIC) highlights its important role in supporting the emirate’s innovation ecosystem. As a hub that has contributed AED 100 billion to Dubai’s GDP over the past 15 years — according to an impact study by Accenture — DIC is central to the growth of start-ups, scale-ups, and venture-backed enterprises. Its worth noting as well that in5, as part of TECOM Group’s portfolio, plays a vital part within this context providing incubation, mentorship, and funding opportunities to emerging businesses.

While Step Dubai 2025 officially concluded in February, start-ups can still maximise the connections and funding opportunities established at the event to accelerate their ventures within the Dubai business environment. To achieve long-term success, entrepreneurs should focus on these post-event strategies:

- Follow up with investors and potential partners to reinforce key discussions made during the conference;
- Leverage esteemed entities, such as in5, Seed Group, and DTEC, to find more mentorship and business incentives;
- Research the regulatory frameworks for

setting up a business in Dubai to ensure proper compliance with free zone and mainland requirements;

- Strengthen digital presence by updating pitch decks, updating websites, and sharing Step-related engagements on professional networking social channels;
- Look into government-backed programs, such as the Dubai International Growth Initiative, for funding and market entry support;
- Stay active in local and regional start-up communities by attending networking events and investor meetups; and
- Consider expansion strategies that take advantage of Dubai SMEs’ access to global markets through trade partnerships and digital transformation initiatives.

For investors, identifying high-impact ventures requires diligence beyond Step Dubai’s pitch competitions. It’s important to analyse a start-up’s market traction, leadership team, and potential for growth. Also, investing in Dubai’s emerging sectors can lead to better long-term returns, especially given the emirate’s ongoing push for digital economy leadership.



As Step Dubai concluded its 13th annual edition, its impact on the technology arena was undeniable. The event's success reaffirms the region's potential for innovation-driven growth and Dubai's proactive approach to cultivating a passionate business world. With supportive government initiatives and active international engagement, the emirate's business environment remains an incubator for cutting-edge technologies and high-growth enterprises. Additionally, its commitment to backing start-ups, coupled with attractive business incentives, ensures that its role as a global tech powerhouse will only strengthen in the years ahead.

Additional information and resources



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Become a Royalty Partner

Having a local partner like the Seed Group allows you to gain access to key stakeholders in the public and private sectors, as well as experience accelerated business development through strategic alliances. Working with the royal family office fosters strategic relationships at the highest level, providing our partners with access to otherwise inaccessible right decision-makers.

A screenshot of a web application form titled "Become a Royalty Partner". The form is white and centered on a background of desert dunes. It contains several input fields and a dropdown menu. The fields are arranged in a grid-like fashion. The form includes the following fields:

- Company Name *
- Type of Business (B2B/B2C/B2G) *
- Company Website *
- Company Location *
- Company Industry *
- Product/Service *
- Company Phone No.
- Year of Establishment

A small note below the website field reads: "If not applicable, please type N/A". The form is set against a background image of desert dunes, with the left side showing a white dune and the right side showing a red dune with a camel caravan.

[Apply now](#)



Over the past 20 years, Seed Group has formed strategic alliances with leading global companies from a variety of regions and industries. These companies have propelled their business interests and goals in the Middle East and North Africa region through the support and strong base of regional connections of the Seed Group. The Group's goal is to create mutually beneficial partnerships with multinational organisations and to accelerate their sustainable market entry and presence within the MENA region.

We would welcome your feedback on this eBook – please email marketing@seedgroup.com.

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