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# Startup Nation Conference considered a success



Danny Weissberg and Sara Smolley provided a presentation for Voiceltt during the inaugural Startup Nation Conference hosted by Miami-Dade College in collaboration with Tel Aviv University. (Staff photo/Beth Black)



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**T**he inaugural Startup Nation Conference recently hosted by The Idea Center at Miami-Dade College in collaboration with Tel Aviv University in Israel was considered a success.

This conference, which took place at **MDC's** Wolfson Campus, was intended to serve as an opportunity for people to understand Israel's tech entrepreneurial ecosystem while connecting Miami's tech and innovation community with that of Tel Aviv's. It featured more than 20 speakers, including some of Israel's most successful entrepreneurs.

This conference was born from a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation-supported educational trip and seminar to Israel organized by Project Interchange, an educational institute of the American Jewish Committee, in March 2015. The trip's delegation, which included The Idea Center's executive director Leandro Finol, learned from the country's thriving tech and innovation sector while sharing best practices and making connections. As a result of this trip, MDC signed a Memorandum of Understanding in August 2015. This agreement, between Tel Aviv University's Entrepreneurship Center (StarTau) and The Idea Center, is intended to help enhance Miami's entrepreneurship ecosystem and link Israel's high-tech and start-up communities to resources and people in Miami.

Finol, who said there were 300 people who attended the conference, said the turnout and reception was "amazing."

"It's been a great learning experience for both sides," he added. "We have learned from them and they have learned from us and it's really a great opportunity to have them [Israeli startups] here. This is just the beginning of a deeper and deeper collaboration."

When asked about the goals for the conference, Finol responded: "We're connecting the two ecosystems with a combination of education, networking and investments and this is the correct platform to do so."

Matt Haggman, program director of the Knight Foundation, noted that the conference far exceeded his expectations and mentioned two things that stood out to him.

"I would say that No. 1, the entrepreneurs featured here are pursuing such big consequential ideas and No. 2 is the energy and the connections that are being made," he explained. "There are new relationships being built between Miami and Tel Aviv and you're seeing that played out. And this is just the beginning."

Brian Siegal, director of AJC's Miami and Broward Regional Office, said: "The event itself was a great opportunity for Miami to connect to Israel's high-tech accomplishments and really make it a tangible connection. We had brought high-tech entrepreneurs from Miami to Israel [for March, 2015 Project Interchange seminar] so to have high-tech entrepreneurs from Israel come here sort of completes the circle and builds upon the relationships."

Oren Simanian, founder of StarTau, said this was one of the best conferences.

"The people who attended are eager to be open and to hear [what Israeli entrepreneurs have to say]," he noted.

Eduardo Padron, MDC's president, said: "I think this is a great beginning of a potentially strong

partnership between Israeli and Miami entrepreneur ecosystems. I think we've had a very strong two days of conversations, sharing of ideas and identifying potential opportunities to grow our ecosystems together."

Revital Malca, the deputy consul general of Israel to Florida and Puerto Rico, said about the conference: "For me, it's a dream come true. The way I see it, this is a part of the movement that started a few years ago."

Joshua Levinberg, who represented Israeli companies Gilat Satellite and JAL Ventures at the conference, was impressed with the conference and its high attendance.

"I'm happy and to some extent flattered as a representative of Israel's high-tech industry to see how much of an interest there is in the Miami community to Israel's high-tech industry," Levinberg noted.

Yaniv Levi, who represented the Israeli startup Change App, thought his presentation was nicely received at the conference and noted that it sounds like the Miami-Israel high-tech relationship has a promising future.

Karen Krugliak, a Miami resident who attended the conference, said: "Israel is a very unique place that develops exceptional entrepreneurs who are not afraid to take chances and to explore things that have not been explored before."

Jenny Lannon, a Miami resident who also attended the conference, said: "There are lots of really quality companies here giving us a glimpse of what they've done to date and how they've been successful in the Israeli ecosystem."

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