

ISSUE N° 02

OCTOBER MMXXVI

IBTI

a magazine for builders

THE COVER INTERVIEW

PAUL DAWALIBI

Building the Innovation Economy

AN OPENING REFLECTION

*Technology is an accelerator.
Innovation has always
started with people.*

PAUL DAWALIBI

CEO, Innovation City · Ras Al Khaimah

I THE FEATURE

Building an Innovation *Ecosystem* for the AI Era.

As CEO of Innovation City in Ras Al Khaimah, Paul Dawalibi believes the world's most successful innovation hubs are built on people, culture and leadership. In an exclusive interview with IBTI Magazine, he explains why AI will transform business — but not the human qualities that define great organisations.

Words by **IBTISSEM MANNAI**

FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF · IBTI MAGAZINE



PORTRAIT · IBTI STUDIO

Artificial intelligence has become one of the defining business conversations of our time. Governments are introducing national AI strategies, businesses are redesigning operating models around automation, and investors channel billions into technologies expected to transform the global economy.

Across the Gulf, countries are competing to position themselves as destinations for innovation, entrepreneurship and advanced technology. For Paul Dawalibi, however, the conversation often starts in the wrong place. As CEO of Innovation City, he leads an initiative designed to attract companies across AI, Web3, blockchain, gaming and robotics.

II ON CULTURE

Culture Before *Technology*.

Although Innovation City operates at the frontier of emerging technology, one of the most striking aspects of Dawalibi's leadership philosophy has little to do with AI. It centres, instead, on organisational culture.

"Culture is probably the single greatest competitive advantage I can bring to a business as a CEO," he says. "Strategies can change. Markets change. Technology evolves. Culture is what determines whether people can adapt to those changes together."

The statement is more than a principle. It has shaped the most consequential decisions Dawalibi has made since taking over Innovation City. One of his first was to consolidate the organisation in Ras Al Khaimah — closing its Dubai office and asking employees to work together from the emirate where Innovation City is headquartered.



PORTRAIT · IBTI STUDIO

It was not a decision driven by operational efficiency. Nor was it intended to challenge the growing acceptance of flexible work. Dawalibi believed that if Innovation City expected entrepreneurs to commit to Ras Al Khaimah, its own leadership had to demonstrate the same commitment.

"If I'm asking founders to build here, then I have to build here myself," he says. ***Leadership starts with credibility.***

§ A PULL QUOTE

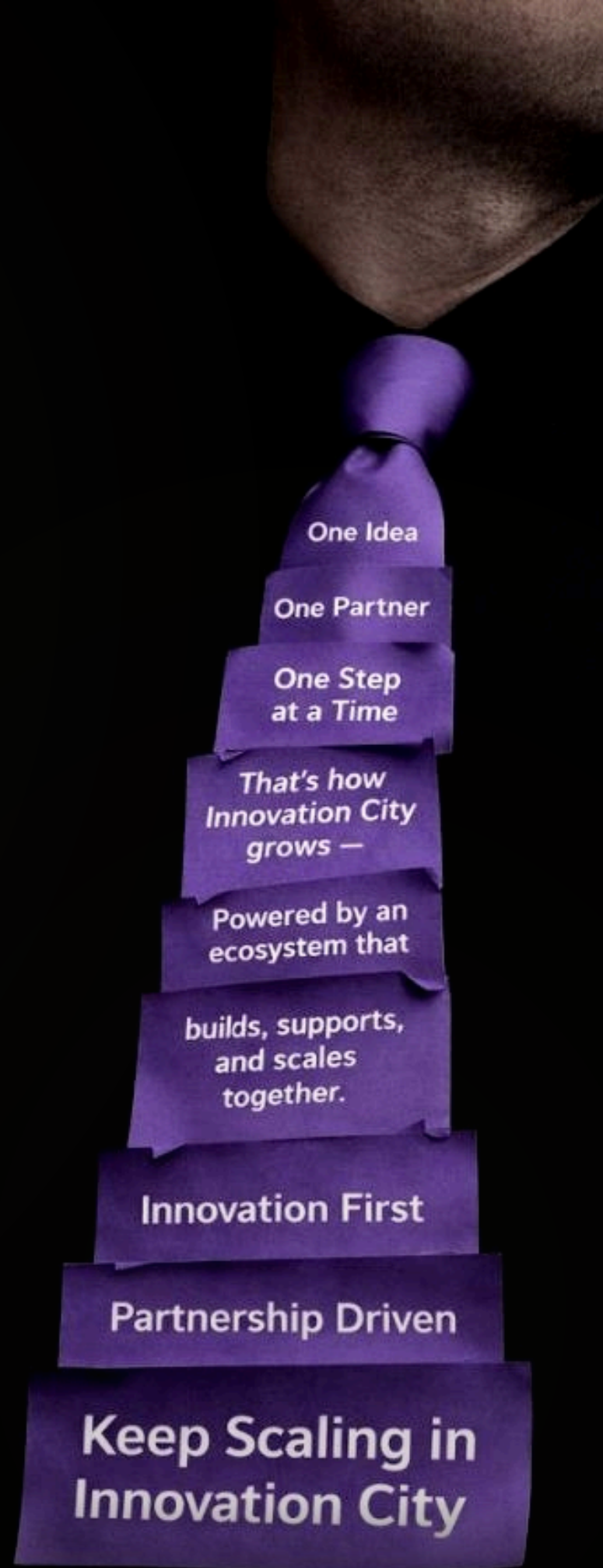
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Technology
is an *accelerator*.

Innovation has
always started
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PAUL DAWALIBI

CEO, Innovation City · Ras Al Khaimah



INNOVATION CITY

One idea. One partner.
One step at a time.

II ON CULTURE · CONTINUED

Productivity is one thing. *Innovation* is another.

Throughout our conversation, Dawalibi draws a distinction between productivity and innovation. Technology has made it easier than ever for distributed teams to communicate, share information and deliver across time zones. He readily acknowledges those advantages.

His concern lies elsewhere. "The question isn't whether people can work remotely," he explains. "Of course they can. The question is whether you can build an extraordinary company that way."

Some of the most valuable interactions inside an organisation, he argues, are also the least structured — informal conversations, chance encounters, the moments that never appear on a calendar.

Those moments rarely appear in performance metrics, yet they play a significant role in building trust, mentoring younger talent and generating ideas that eventually become products, partnerships, or entirely new businesses.

"The best ideas don't always come out of scheduled meetings," he says. "They often come from conversations you never planned to have."

Dawalibi sees the CEO's role not simply as setting strategic priorities, but as creating an environment where talented people can challenge one another and improve the organisation around them.

— PROFILE



Paul Dawalibi

CEO, Innovation City · Ras Al Khaimah

Two decades as entrepreneur, investor and technology executive.

FOCUS SECTORS

Artificial Intelligence · Web3
Blockchain · Gaming
Robotics · Emerging Tech

III ON CREDIBILITY

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If I'm asking founders
to *build here*,
then I have to build
here **myself**.

Leadership starts with credibility. People need to see that you believe in the vision you're asking them to support.

PAUL DAWALIBI

CEO, Innovation City · Ras Al Khaimah

IV THE AI DEBATE

A Conversation on *Technology*, Humanity and the Future.

Given his role, we expected talk of investment opportunities and adoption curves. What emerged instead was a debate about where technology ends — and where human capability begins.

Unlike many executives, Dawalibi neither exaggerates AI's potential nor dismisses its risks. He approaches the subject with the perspective of someone who has watched successive waves of innovation reshape entire industries.

Artificial intelligence, he argues, represents one of the most significant technological shifts in modern history — not because it will replace human beings, but because it will fundamentally change how people work.

Throughout the interview, he returned to the idea that AI should be viewed as infrastructure rather than as a product.



DETAIL • INNOVATION CITY

To explain his thinking, Dawalibi offered an analogy that changed the direction of our conversation:

When you woke up this morning, you used water. You brushed your teeth. Does that make you a slave to the desalination plant?

His point was not that people would become dependent on AI. Societies already rely on countless systems they rarely think about — electricity, telecommunications, payments, internet.

V THE EXCHANGE

Can AI eventually replace *human leadership*?

QUESTION · IBTI

How do you see AI changing the way organisations operate?

RESPONSE · PAUL DAWALIBI

AI is going to make every knowledge worker more productive. The question isn't whether it's coming — it's already here. What matters is whether leaders can redesign work so people spend more time on decisions that actually create value, and less on repetition.

PORTRAIT · THE
EXCHANGE

QUESTION · IBTI

Will AI replace jobs?

RESPONSE · PAUL DAWALIBI

It will replace repetitive tasks. It will not replace creativity, judgment, or trust. That is the wrong question. AI will make leaders better — it will not replace leaders.

QUESTION · IBTI

So what does AI free leaders to do?

RESPONSE · PAUL DAWALIBI

The work that actually creates value — judgment under uncertainty, building teams, earning trust. That is what leadership has always been about.

VI ON LEADERSHIP

On the question of whether artificial intelligence will one day replace the CEO, Dawalibi offers a distinction — precise, unhurried, and quietly definitive.

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Leadership is *influence*.

AI can *analyse* information.

It cannot *inspire* people.

PAUL DAWALIBI

CEO, Innovation City · Ras Al Khaimah

JUDGMENT · TRUST

The Human Layer

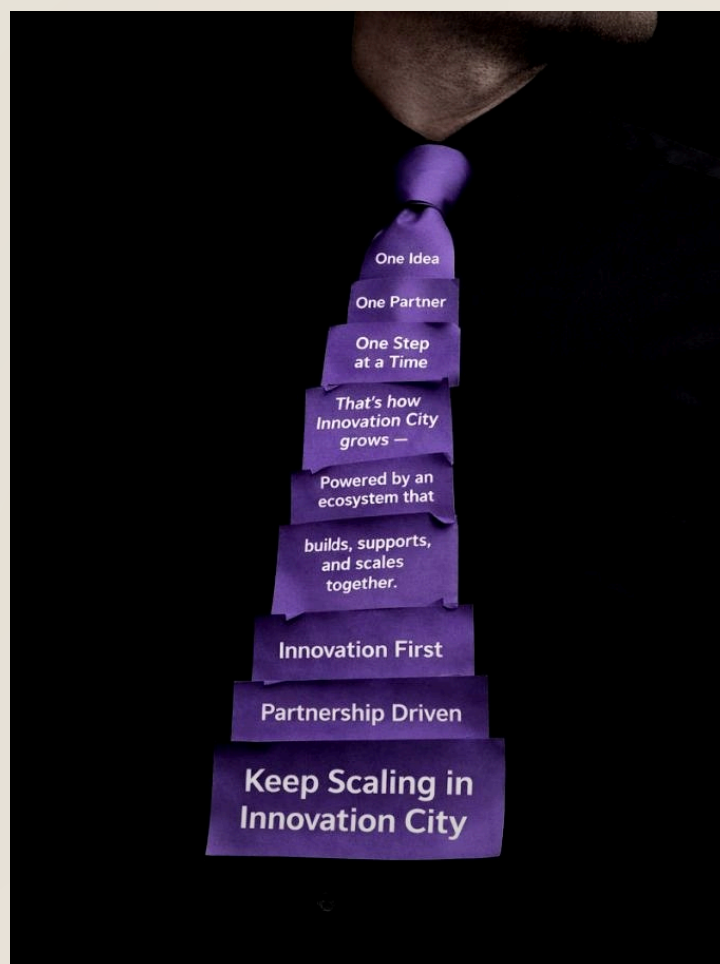
VII WHAT'S NEXT

The Future We Choose *to Build*.

For Dawalibi, Innovation City is more than a business destination. It is a long-term bet on people and possibility. His vision is clear: to build a globally connected innovation ecosystem that attracts talent, enables entrepreneurs and creates companies that compete on the world stage.

"The Middle East has everything it needs to lead," he says. "Capital, ambition, geography. What we need now is the courage to build together."

For him, the future belongs not to the companies with the most sophisticated algorithms, but to those led by people who understand how technology and human potential work best together.



A GROWTH LADDER

One idea. One partner. One step at a time — the discipline behind how Innovation City grows.

IDEAS THAT SHAPED THE FEATURE

Culture • Credibility • Presence • Judgment • Ecosystem • Trust

END OF THE FEATURE

Fin COLOPHON

Innovation starts
with *people*.
It scales
with *culture*.
It lasts with
leadership.

INTERVIEW

Paul Dawalibi in conversation with Ibtissem Mannai.

RECORDED

Ras Al Khaimah · September 2026

ISSUE

N° 02 · October Edition 2026

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