

World Knowledge Forum 2013

Saul Singer, Start-up Nation

Businesses start and fail every day, and many are left wondering what the secret to success is. What differentiates one business from another? What sets the Apples and Microsofts of the world apart from the failures? There is no instruction manual for the prosperity of a startup company, but best-selling author and journalist, Saul Singer, thinks the atmosphere in one country sets it apart from others.

Entrepreneurs, pack your bags and head to Israel.

At the 2013 World Knowledge Forum, Mr. Singer spoke at length about the success of startups in Israel, as chronicled in his book *Startup Nation*. "Why do we call it Startup Nation?" posed Mr. Singer. "Because Israel has more startups than anywhere outside of Silicon Valley."

Outlining the triumph of startups in the small country of 7.1 million people, Mr. Singer attributed Israel's success to three factors. "First, Israel itself is a startup when you think about it. Israel started with an idea, and it was a crazy idea." Drive, determination, and a willingness to take risks were inherent in the culture, stemming from the unique way the country was formed.

A handful of commonalities between Israel and Korea were cited, with compulsory military service as a standout similarity. Mr. Singer saw the military as a driving factor behind startups, but not as a result of the development of high-tech weaponry.

"I would argue that the impact of the military is mainly cultural. Israelis learn things like leadership, teamwork, and sacrifice for something larger than yourself," he said. "The most important thing is what I call 'mission orientation,' and a startup is just one big mission."

"The last big factor is immigration. Now, this has been very important for us, because immigrants are naturally driven, they're natural risk-takers," he insisted. Israel may not be in line with the US or Canada in terms of being an immigration destination, but it has accepted over 33,000 immigrants through its border as recently as 2011 and 2012.

A rise in innovation was a major result of the three factors responsible for Israel's prosperous startup industry. But Mr. Singer was unsure people correctly understood what innovation means. "I would argue that innovation is ideas plus technology, and then two additional ingredients: the first is a lot of drive and determination, and the second is a willingness to take risks."

Innovation was not necessarily in access to resources or investment capital, traits commonly associated with the US, stated Mr. Singer. Even a small country in a "bad neighborhood" like Israel could find its own niche in an ever-changing global marketplace.

Even though Israel may prove itself a model country in terms of how to handle startups, Mr. Singer was quick to caution against copying Israel's formula. "Every country has their own path that's based on their own strengths, their own history, their own culture, just like people are different. And we combine people into great teams to combine their strength," he said.

Mr. Singer further elaborated on the need for people and countries to find their own way, stating, "It's okay to think about how we can be like each other, but we don't spend enough time thinking about how we can work with each other."