

ABDULLO KURBANOV &
ZUHURSHO RAHMATULLOEV

Tajikistan



Company: ALIF BANK

alif.tj/

Company Overview: Alif was founded as a micro-credit organization and has transformed into an ecosystem of technological and financial solutions for its clients. Today, Alif is a market leader in POS financing through installment-based club-card, commission-free overdrafts, has the largest online B2C platform (alif.shop), and has the most widely used mobile wallet (alif.mobi) in Tajikistan. These services are facilitated by various internally developed software: Core Banking System, CRM, mobile wallet and card processing built by Alif's team of 60+ software engineers. Building from this core platform, Alif began its international expansion, with its first international office in Uzbekistan.

What was your inspiration for starting your company?

The main inspiration came from our love for our country (Tajikistan) and our dedication to contribute to its prosperity. We observed that we could make an impact through the financial sector - over 70% of money was outside of the banking sector, showcasing a lack of people's trust in the banking sector and limited banking intermediation. Additionally, interest rates were among the highest in the world and the sector was ripe for technological disruption. Thus, we decided to establish a company that is dedicated to ethics, innovation, transparency and world-class customer service experience.

Where do you hope to see your company in the next 5 years?

In five years, we hope Alif will be a regional fin-tech company that has brought world-class financial solutions to the region, with offices and teams strategically scattered across the region. It will boast over 700 top professionals in IT and finance, most of whom went through rigorous training and talent development programs within the company. We hope Alif will be recognized as one of the best employers in the region and the employer of choice for top graduates from prestigious regional universities. It would be ideal for Alif to have established its own IT university in Tajikistan, with one of the most sophisticated campuses and exchange programs with other leading universities in the region. In five years, we hope Alif's ecosystem, infrastructure and projects in the region are serving well over 10 million clients.

What is the entrepreneurship climate like in your country?

The business climate has been improving more or less. We have been able to use tax preferences for our fin-tech company in Uzbekistan and we also managed to obtain a banking license in Tajikistan. Getting listed on the recently opened stock exchange in Dushanbe also made it easier to trade our shares and structure the last two rounds of investments into Alif. Our persistence and dedication to a transparent business model proved to be a boon in the countries of presence. We are delighted that the business climate in our new destination, Uzbekistan, has been rapidly improving over the last few years and we are reaping the benefits of a conducive business environment.



**OMAID
SHARIFI**

Afghanistan



Organization: ArtLords

www.artlords.co

Organization Overview: ArtLords was established in 2014 in Afghanistan. ArtLords is a grassroots movement led by artists, activists and volunteers motivated to pave the way for social transformation and behavioral change through employing the soft power of art and culture as a non-intrusive approach to solving global problems. The group sees the potential and desire for change in youth populations around the world to address global concerns and create solutions inspired by alternative ways of thinking.

What was your inspiration for starting your company?

We realized that we had an opportunity to transform the negative psychological impact caused by viewing damaged walls and the destruction of buildings throughout Kabul into a positive visual experience by creating a platform where social issues could be expressed in a visual manner and discussed in the street, creating a space for open art workshops. We provide a platform for dialogue among ordinary people on the streets of Kabul. We give a visual voice to the voiceless, which is the core motivating dynamic behind the very existence of the movement. Essentially, we wished to portray a visual representation of the communities' desire to move from war towards peace. Creating a relationship between people and art by bringing art to the people allows for a much-needed psychological shift that opens up people's minds to new prospects.

What is a top highlight of your entrepreneurship journey with your company thus far?

The highlight of my entrepreneurship journey is the ability and opportunity to share a positive story from the war-torn country of Afghanistan, where the term "lord" carries negative associations such as warlords, drug-lords, corrupt-lords — now we are the ArtLords, peace-lords, positive-lords.

What is the entrepreneurship climate like in your country?

Afghanistan is a challenging environment. This country encounters evil terrorists, corrupt government officials, warlords and many other negative people in a single day. At the same time, poverty is the elephant in the room — we are living and working in one of the poorest countries in the world. However, there is still hope. We are doing our part. Many young Afghans are not giving up.



**MIRBEK
ASANGARIEV**
Kyrgyzstan



Company: **HOTEL BRIDGES BISHKEK**

www.bridges.kg

Company Overview: Hotel Bridges is a four-star business and, most importantly, the first inclusive hotel in Kyrgyzstan, fully accessible for guests with disabilities. The hotel is also eco-friendly as the hot water supply is based on solar energy, thanks to Czech-made solar panels installed in the hotel's roof. In 2018, Hotel Bridget received the Precedent of the Year Award for its concept regarding full accessibility. The hotel also received the Laureate of the HoReCa Club prize in the nomination category for the best 4-star hotel. Hotel Bridget clients include tourists, businesspeople and international and non-governmental representatives.

What was the inspiration for starting your company?

Actively working in civil society, I was a member of the movement for equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities. I saw that few places and facilities are available for people with disabilities in Bishkek city. So, I decided to create an inclusive venue in my hotel model, which is fit for all disability needs. As a result, people with disabilities can move around the hotel without barriers.

Where do you hope to see your company in the next 5 years?

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has been included in the top ratings of world travel destination agencies. For example, *Business Insider*, *National Geographic* and other prominent publications have deemed Kyrgyzstan a promising and interesting place to visit. My vision is to build a chain of the Hotel Bridges throughout Kyrgyzstan. Regional expansion of hotel services will strengthen us as a strong actor in the tourist and MICE market of the country. With regional expansion, we will cover at least one or two additional popular destinations. Moreover, we must implement a vertical integration into our business: to create inclusive logistical and tourist services that increase our guest flow to Bridges Hotels. Today, tourism in the Kyrgyz Republic is a hidden gem. It is necessary to develop a customer-oriented service, segment and target a marketing strategy and create product value on the principle of a one-stop-shop.

What is the entrepreneurship climate like in your country?

There are two strong factors that boosted the entrepreneurship sector last year. First, a visa-free regime for more than 50 countries was implemented, enabling tourists to travel to the country easily. As a result, we saw a significant increase in the number of tourists. Second, the availability of credits and loans with lower interest rates motivated SMEs to launch and expand new projects in the region.



HILOLA SULEYMANOVA

Uzbekistan



Company: **DAVINCI MANAGEMENT CONSULTING**

www.davinci.uz

Company Overview: DaVinci Management Consulting is a boutique consulting company founded in 2014. The company's primary focuses are Human Capital Development, Strategic Management and Transformation. Currently, DaVinci Management Consulting has three main streams including: 1. Management Consulting with a focus on Business Analysis, Business Process Development and Strategy Design. 2. Research with a focus on Market Research and Salary Surveys. 3. Executive Search. The majority of our management consulting clients are local companies that need to implement new business processes, design missions, values and strategic goals as they face growing crises. The profile of our executive search clients tends to be international companies and large retail companies.

What was your inspiration for starting your company?

DaVinci is not my first company. I have previously founded other companies as well. However, in 2004 when I returned from Germany, I found that there weren't any strong management consulting companies in existence in Uzbekistan that could help other companies grow and become large, Fortune 500, or Forbes-rated organizations. So, I decided to start my own company with a particular focus on human capital, which could help other companies to grow and develop.

What is a top highlight from your entrepreneurship journey with your company thus far?

The top highlight of my journey has been developing transformation projects for local companies. Some of our projects have helped our client base grow by 400%. For example, we have a contest we hold annually among all companies in Uzbekistan called "The Best Employer of the Year" — given the inclusive nature of such a project and that it highlights individuals, I believe we will begin enhancing the value of human capital in our country.

What is the entrepreneurship climate like in your country?

We have a lot of blue ocean opportunities and competition is still very low.



**EMIN
VALI**

Azerbaijan

keepface

Company: KEEPFACE INFLUENCER MARKETING PLATFORM

www.keepface.com

Company Overview: Keepface is a platform for brands to create a social buzz through social media influencers. Our edge-to-edge automated platform allows brands to run campaigns with influencers at scale, orchestrating content creation and measuring real-time performance. We have developed a technology for vetting influencers based on deep analytics and fake follower detection.

What was your inspiration for starting your company?

I had always dreamed of creating a tech company in the marketing field and was searching for the right direction and starting place. With the growth of social media, we spotted the trend that various people tended to stand out on social media and leave an impression on an audience, quickly gathering followers via sharing appealing content and thereby influencing their audience on purchase and consumption decisions and activity. My partners and I decided to invest in this trend and to collect all social media influencers onto one platform to open their services to various brands.

Where do you hope to see your company in the next 5 years?

I am envisioning my company to grow to a global scale and become a social media network. We plan to exit within 5 years with a minimum \$100M valuation.

What is a top highlight from your entrepreneurship journey with your company thus far?

Success depends on the vision and the winning spirit of the founders. The higher we aim, the more we receive in turn. The CAMCA countries are ideal for testing the product-market of any startup. We tested our platform in Azerbaijan before going to other regions.



**KHULAN
DAVAADORJ**
Mongolia



Company: **LHAMOUR**

www.lhamour.com

Company Overview: LHAMOUR was founded in 2014 and is Mongolia's first ever natural skincare brand. We want to be positive change-makers through our brand. LHAMOUR gives value to people by providing natural skincare products that are freshly handmade like warm bread in the morning, complete with unique Mongolian ingredients for the health-conscious person who wants to create social impact. We produce more than 70 products, have two flagship stores in Mongolia and now export to seven countries. We are also proud to say that we have been featured on international media such as Forbes, Harper's Bazaar, NHK WORLD, Deutsche Welle and Channel News Asia.

What is the entrepreneurship climate like in your country?

When I first started, there was no such thing as even the *word* entrepreneurship and thinking about simple things such as a lip balm was not the norm of daily life. The country was focusing - and is still heavily focused today - on mining, natural resources and mega projects. Many people doubted that my company would take off. Thus, the climate is tough as there is no differentiation between corporations and start-ups - they both pay the same taxes and have the same obligations. Since my company LHAMOUR is the first natural skincare company, there was no precedent or model we could reflect upon - we had to create and establish standards within the sector, which took a lot of hard work with the government. My work did create a wave of new start-ups, and within the last five years, a lot has changed within Mongolia's entrepreneurship climate.

Where do you hope to see your company in the next 5 years?

Due to COVID-19, many of our goals for this year have been cancelled or put on pause as we have been facing many challenges due to quarantine measures. Nevertheless, we are still full of hope and are working hard to remain in business to fulfill our goals for the coming years. We hope to enhance and expand our product range, including our highly functioning face and hair care products and we aim to incorporate additional unique ingredients from Mongolia into the company's ingredient list. We also hope to expand our export market to include at least 10 more countries. We truly hope to become one of Mongolia's leading exporters and to be a role model for all young people that dream to start their own businesses.



**AZIM
AZIMOV**

Kyrgyzstan

media kitchen

Company: MEDIA KITCHEN

www.kitchen.kg

Company Overview: Media Kitchen is an award-winning communications and film company based in Kyrgyzstan. The company has always operated in two seemingly different worlds: filmmaking and politics. However, our mission is where those two align — to utilize storytelling and visual communications to promote positive social and political change. Since 2010, Media Kitchen has developed strategies and narratives for Kyrgyzstan's key political figures — including presidents, prime ministers and MPs — and managed their election and communications campaigns. As a film company, Media Kitchen has won multiple awards at international contests in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2018 and 2019 the company was ranked #1 in Kyrgyzstan and in the top-10 in the region by AdAsia.ORG's *Creativity and Craft Index of Central Asia* (yes, there is such a thing as a creativity index).

What was your inspiration for starting your company?

In 2010, a second revolution rocked Kyrgyzstan, which brought bloodshed, a humanitarian crisis and civil instability to my country. Seeing how the government struggled to effectively communicate with its citizens and the international community made me realize there is a great need for advanced modern-day communications strategies. At the age of 23 I established a consulting company focusing on political communications in social media and the internet — a rather innovative approach a decade ago. I found myself in an unusual situation when fresh off the college bench I began consulting MPs, then the Prime Minister, and eventually the presidential administration. For the last 10 years, my company has been involved in every major election in Kyrgyzstan — developing strategies, as well as managing campaigns and communications. However, my main inspiration comes not from conventional political consulting, but from shaping winning political narratives. Developing captivating stories is a key to every campaign and is a backbone of many consequential decisions in a competitive political environment.

Where do you hope to see your company in the next 5 years?

For almost a decade my company's vision was to help the political leaders whose values and beliefs we shared get elected — so that eventually we could all be a part of the change essential for Kyrgyzstan to succeed. In recent years, our role has grown to becoming one of the most crucial elements in every political organization. In many regards, content and storytelling have become bigger than national politics. Media has never been as impactful in shaping culture and decision-making worldwide. I am planning to focus more on creating digital video content that knows no state boundaries. The films my company has produced have contributed to supporting many important issues — whether it's fighting corruption, foreign propaganda, religious extremism or gender-based violence — and we are planning to follow the same path, but on a broader scale.

