

## Exclusive Interview



“ The most common reasons why we see startups fail, not just in Pakistan but globally, are that either the market is not ready for the solution or the founding team is not very suited to the startup. Interestingly, people think that most startups run out of money, but that's not the case with most startups that fail ”



**Parvez Abbasi**  
Project Director  
National Incubation Center (NIC)

**ICMA:** What inspired you to come up with the idea of setting up National Incubation Center in Pakistan?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Zouhair and I were living a retired life in London and got together for a coffee. We talked about how Pakistan had given us money, fame, respect, and everything we have, and that it was time we started giving back to Pakistan. The best thing both of us knew was raising businesses, and therefore, we wanted to start something where we could help young people from Pakistan start and grow their businesses. As we had these conversations, the stars lined up and Ignite floated an RFP for a public-private partnership for the National Incubation Centre. We bid for it, and the rest is history.

**ICMA:** What kinds of resources and support does the NIC provide to startups?

**Parvez Abbasi:** We provide the full stack of services that a first-time founder would require to grow their startup. It includes free working space at the NIC, mentorship from the team and other founders, help from domain experts, networking, business development, investment readiness, and connections.

**ICMA:** Many startups fail in the early stages. What are the reasons, especially in context of Pakistan?

**Parvez Abbasi:** The most common reasons why we see startups fail, not just in Pakistan but globally, are that either the market is not ready for the solution or the founding team is not very suited to the startup. Interestingly, people think that most startups run out of money, but that's not the case with most startups that fail.

**ICMA:** Can you share any success stories of startups that have gone through the NIC program?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Having been in operation for over six years, there are multiple success stories that have come out of the NIC Program. Our most recent one is called Algorithm, which is a startup in wind energy. They have their own patented solutions called JetWash and APM software. They have a 35% share of the wind farm market in Pakistan and have expanded to Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Turkey. They are in the process of expanding to their sixth market in China. They have also earned around \$700,000 in revenue and raised \$1.7 million in investments.

“

We are very fortunate to have seasoned entrepreneurs, investors, business leaders, and corporate heads in our mentorship network who regularly engage with our startups and founders

”

**ICMA:** How important is access to funding for startups, and how is the NIC helping to connect startups with investors?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Access to funding is crucial for startup growth, and interestingly, most founders view it as the most important service any incubator or accelerator can offer them. NIC maintains cordial relations with the leading investors, not just in Pakistan but in the region and globally. We engage these investors through different events: demo days, roundtables, and summits. Our startups get to network with these investors at these events, and the ones that stand out often get picked for investment.

**ICMA:** Can you talk about the role of mentorship and networking in the National Incubation Center program?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Mentorship is one of the most valuable things that an individual or organization can have. One hour with an experienced mentor in any field is like reading tens of books on the topic. It accelerates your growth and helps you navigate through challenges, which you can't do on your own. We are very fortunate to have seasoned entrepreneurs, investors, business leaders, and corporate heads in our mentorship network who regularly engage with our startups and founders. These mentors donate their time without any charges, and their time and contributions are therefore invaluable to us and to the startups in our program.

**ICMA:** How does the NIC work with other organizations and institutions to support the startup ecosystem in Pakistan?

**Parvez Abbasi:** NIC is managed by a company called Teamup, and the name is intentional since we want to work together in building the ecosystem. We firmly believe in the Japanese proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." We believe that the Pakistani startup ecosystem has a long way to go, so we have to work with other likeminded organisations and individuals. This also helps us avoid duplication of effort and, on the contrary, complement each other's work.

**ICMA:** What are some of the regulatory issues that are hindering growth of startups in Pakistan?

**Parvez Abbasi:** The first thing that comes to mind when we talk about the regulatory issues that startups are facing today is the lack of policy continuity. Startups operate in a lot of uncertainty as it is; having policies that change every other day only adds to that uncertainty. This forces good startups to opt out of Pakistan and move to markets that offer more certainty. Secondly, investment opportunities in Pakistan are scarce. Add to that the regulatory requirement that prevents the investors from taking their money out of Pakistan, and you have investors who do not want to put a dime in Pakistan. This further fuels the founders and motivates them to set up shop elsewhere.

**ICMA:** Can you highlight few emerging sectors for investment in Pakistani startups?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Pakistan's innovation sector is ripe with opportunities for investment. We have 220 million people in Pakistan, 70% of whom do not yet have access to financial or banking services. This leaves a huge opportunity for startups to disrupt the space and capture large chunks of the market, thus making it very appealing to investors. Similarly, all of us have to eat, and with challenges like climate change, floods, unpredictable weather, and the energy crisis, Pakistan's food production is on the decline. Startups that make agriculture more efficient or work towards food security are going to have huge appeal and, therefore, will be music to the investor's ears. These are only two areas, but wherever you look, Pakistan is full of opportunities that are ripe to be taken.

“

Startups that make agriculture more efficient or work towards food security are going to have huge appeal and, therefore, will be music to the investor's ears

”

**ICMA:** What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs and startup founders in Pakistan?

**Parvez Abbasi:** Most of us keep waiting for the perfect time and opportunity to start something. That perfect moment never comes. I would encourage everyone to take that first step regardless. Whether you are studying at the university or working on a job, start a side hustle. Something small and turn that into something big. The NIC and other institutions like us are here to help you do that. Talk to us, and we'll figure out a way together.

*The Editorial Board thanks Mr. Parvez Abbasi, Project Director, National Incubation Center (NIC) for sparing from his precious time to give exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.*