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Pandata principal data scientist Cal Al-Dhubaib: "Keeping our graduating students here is important to keep successfully growing our workforce."

BY NEIL COTIAUX
PHOTO BY DOUG KHRENOVSKY

Khalid ("Cal") Al-Dhubaib's secret weapon may not be so much his formidable intellect as his engaging personality. Or just the opposite.

As Case Western Reserve University's first graduate in data science and as head of Pandata LLC, his own data analytics company, the rising high-tech star is using both brains and charm in his quest to get community leaders to embrace a critical, cutting-edge discipline.

According to Al-Dhubaib, data science is "the key to the most successful business."

"The failure rate of small businesses is extraordinary," says the Saudi Arabian native, now 25, who came to Cleveland at age 18 to study at Case. "Basically, without data, you fly blind."

As the principal data scientist at his consultancy, Al-Dhubaib analyzes a client's raw data through the lens of mathematics, statistics, and computer science.

When combined with public data sources, he explains, proprietary data helps develop and strengthen business assumptions that allow organizations to fine-tune strategies and engage their clients with more precision.

"Cal," as he is known, is exactly the kind of expert that startups and growing companies should learn from, says Katie Van Dyke, the director of Cleveland State University's Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

Alternately describing Al-Dhubaib as "friendly and easygoing" and "really driven," she cites her colleague's personality as the reason why businesses are so willing to share their private data with him.

Al-Dhubaib will explain how businesses can become more successful using data analytics in a series of free SBDC workshops this fall.

Starting this month, the Case graduate will also be leading a series of "boot camps" for DigitalC (an outgrowth of OneCommunity), the civic group promoting greater use of technology as a catalyst for area economic advancement. Al-Dhubaib will discuss analytics with representatives of a medical institution at the first camp. Three more camps are expected to be held by the end of the year.

"Most small businesses don't have the time or knowledge to understand or analyze their data," Van Dyke of SBDC says. "Data analytics is where it's going."

For his own inspiration, Al-Dhubaib looks to Robert Herbold, the Case alumnus and former COO of Microsoft who has called for more

data science programs at Case and other universities.

"He has a huge interest in developing the next generation of talent," Al-Dhubaib says, noting that the United States has a projected demand for 500,000 data scientists by 2020.

When he first came to Case, Al-Dhubaib reflects, it was "extraordinarily difficult" to translate specific scientific words into his native language because all of his education back home had been completed in Arabic. But over time, things became easier and, despite a challenging academic workload, he found time to return home.

There, still in his teens, Al-Dhubaib was instrumental in developing models for studying and improving health in the workplace at Saudi Aramco, where his father, a petroleum engineer, and his American-born mother, an educator and human resources manager, had worked. Both are now retired.

"Cleveland is home for me now," Al-Dhubaib says. He recently bought a condo on the North Coast and says he enjoys "one of the best food scenes in the country."

Al-Dhubaib has his sights set on growing Pandata over the next five years as he continues to work out of the Offices at the Agora, part of Cleveland's burgeoning Health-Tech Corridor located between downtown and University Circle.

While he views the zone as a hotbed of high-tech entrepreneurship that can feed off university-based talent and local investment, he would also like to see increasing diversity among the thinkers and creators who populate the corridor.

"We have students coming to universities like Case from all over the country and world. When these students see more professionals like them empowered, they will find opportunities here relatable and more will choose to stay," Al-Dhubaib says. "Keeping our graduating students here is important to keep successfully growing our workforce."

But for now, from his perch at Pandata, he's happy to help make small and emerging businesses in the region the best that they can be using data science.

"I love the joy of 'Yes, I solved another problem,'" the bright-eyed change agent says. ■

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