

## **The Networked Entrepreneur: A Working Model of Homo Nexus**

**Bringing glamor to the world of meat.** Emre Mermer is an entrepreneur who is literally on the cutting edge of his market. He is bringing twenty-first century innovation to one of the world's oldest professions: butchering.

A third-generation Turkish stockbreeder, Mermer founded the Dükkan Butchershop in Istanbul in 1998. As the first butcher to bring gourmet specialties like milk-fed veal, dry aged beef, and fresh sausages to the Turkish marketplace, Mermer met with initial skepticism, especially when he sought to attract a high-class clientele to his operation in the scruffy neighborhood of Armutlu. (One local paper ran the headline, "Society Butchers in a Shantytown.")

This contrast of rich and poor reflects Turkey's national status. A founding member of the G20, a group that includes the European Union plus 19 of the world's largest economies, Turkey itself has yet to be accepted into the European Union. The country shares borders with eight other nations and has a rich culture that has borrowed the best from all of its neighbors. Unfortunately, its food culture has not blossomed quite as vibrantly.

Mermer aims to help change all that. Now Dükkan has become the local go-to source for high-quality dry-aged steaks, veal, and sausages, serving many of the city's most prestigious restaurants, including the one at the Four Seasons Hotel and the trendy Ulus 29 and Kantin. Dükkan's meat is also the focus at Dükkan steak house, which Emre and his business partner Defne Koryürek opened last fall two storefronts away from the butcher shop.

A classic tale of entrepreneurial persistence leading to success? Yes—and something more. The story of Emre Mermer is also an illustration of a new phenomenon: the emergence of *networked entrepreneurship*, in which people form cooperative alliances that unlock individual potential, spur creativity, and enable levels of growth and innovation that might otherwise be impossible. Creation of such networks and active participation in them is a key characteristic of the new

form of human life I've dubbed Homo nexus.

Mermer has achieved his success with the help of Endeavor, the global organization I co-founded with Linda Rottenberg in 1997. In the years since then, Endeavor has helped over 1,000 entrepreneurs build more than 600 companies in 22 countries. Collectively, Endeavor Entrepreneurs have created more than 400,000 jobs and generated close to seven billion dollars in revenue.

Endeavor Turkey has assisted Mermer in the area of financing and developed an advisory board to counsel him on developing options for growth. Endeavor also sent Sakura Takano, an MBA student from Columbia University in New York, to Turkey to help scale Mermer's business for growth. Takano developed strategies to help take Mermer's entrepreneurship to the next level utilizing her past experience with financing and starts-up as well as the experience she gained from Columbia's Social Enterprise Program.

Since being selected as an entrepreneurial fellow by Endeavor, Mermer's company revenues have grown by 391 percent. What's more, Dükkan's success has spurred a wave of international restaurant growth. Since it has opened, three new competitive steakhouses have arisen—including one founded and managed by Dükkan's former grill chef. So the success of Dükkan is producing benefits not just for Mermer, his employees, and his suppliers, but for a burgeoning community of food suppliers and workers in Turkey.

That's the power of Homo nexus in action.

**Teaching computers to see.** Sira Pérez de la Coba became the 1,000th entrepreneur to join the Endeavor network in 2014. Born in Spain and trained as an electrical engineer, Pérez de la Coba spent thirteen years working in the defense and security sectors on the problem of computer vision technology. Although any normal human finds it easy to recognize the objects in a picture and match them to similar objects in a matter of seconds, it's a remarkably difficult skill for computers to master. Reducing the complexities of vision to a set of algorithms is a challenge that many of the world's brightest I.T. experts have wrestled with for years. It's also vitally important in many ways, some of them matters of life and death. For example, a computer program that could instantly recognize a possible bomb—and

distinguish it accurately from a harmless clock or electronic gadget—would represent an enormous step forward in the war against terror.

In 2011, Pérez de la Coba achieved what may turn out to be the crucial breakthrough in this vitally important field. Her inspiration was not a security threat or military application but a more mundane problem that millions of fashion lovers can identify with. On the street one day, Pérez de la Coba spotted a pair of shoes that she loved and managed to snap a photo of them. But when she tried to use Google's then state-of-the-art image comparison tool to find a similar pair of shoes on the Internet, no matches were generated.

Frustrated, Pérez de la Coba crafted a new algorithm for analyzing and comparing images. It involves separating a particular item from the rest of a photographic image—a pair of shoes from a full-length picture of a model, or a suspicious vehicle from a crowded street scene—and converting that portion of the image into a complex “numeric signature.” The algorithm then compares this formula to other images in a vast database, swiftly sorting them based on their similarity to the key picture. Because Pérez de la Coba's system doesn't rely on keyword tags or if-then protocols the way older image analysis techniques do, it is faster and uses less computing power—crucial considerations in a world where trillions of images are being created that could be grist for computerized analysis.

Pérez de la Coba's system has become the platform for a ten-person company, based in Madrid, named Shazura, which is now licensing the technology to clothing manufacturers and retailers. Endeavor has helped Pérez de la Coba raise \$1.1 million in investment money and connected her with mentors who are experienced in the IT and software arenas. With Endeavor's help, she has expanded her network to California's Silicon Valley, where she is working with local experts to refine her technology further. One day, Shazura may end up dominating the vision recognition space—transforming not just online shopping but security, military strategy, traffic control, and many other complex activities.

**Turning garbage into gold.** Nate Morris's company Rubicon Global is bringing high-tech know-how and a commitment to eco-friendly sustainability to one of the world's dirtiest yet most essential industries—waste management.

Perceiving a major efficiency gap and the opportunity to make a positive environmental impact while saving corporate customers millions of dollars, Morris and his team applied high-tech platforms and innovative solutions to a stubbornly antiquated industry.

The result is a stand-alone, technology-based service that provides huge cost savings for companies with large waste streams. Rubicon saves its clients 20 to 30 percent on waste and recycling fees through a multipronged approach, finding ways to streamline efficiency and reduce waste, sometimes even discovering or inventing new uses for otherwise end-of-life products, from repurposing shredded uniforms as filler for pet beds to transforming unused pizza dough into ethanol. To save customers even more—and to escape the corrupt atmosphere that has long permeated the waste management industry—Rubicon Global has also developed a virtual marketplace where local waste haulers and recycling companies compete against national chains to win hauling jobs with large and nationally franchised retailers, construction companies, hospitals, restaurants, and manufacturers. At the same time, socially-conscious clients who would like to award a certain percentage of their contracts to small or minority-owned vendors are able to do so.

The Rubicon formula is so attractive that major companies like 7-11, Home Depot, and Walmart have become customers. In the words of consultant David Ayres, “One of the things that is really exciting to me about the company is the level of talent they are attracting—a lot of young people who are very committed to sustainability and a lot of industry veterans who are very excited about this new approach. . . . It has the feeling to me of more of a cause than a business,” says Ayres.

Unlike Dükkan and Shazura, Rubicon is *not* an Endeavor company. Instead, it’s a business I discovered and supported through Richmond Global, the investment fund I created to back early-stage entrepreneurs—particularly those whose companies have the potential to revolutionize the world. Richmond Global’s operating model is quite different from that of Endeavor. But both reflect the same underlying dream that has driven my life: the desire to be a catalyst, helping to create transformative organizations that apply their creativity to some of the greatest social, economic, environmental, and technological challenges faced by

humankind.

Emre Mermer, Sira Pérez de la Coba, and Nate Morris are in three very different industries, operating in vastly different markets in wildly divergent economic settings. Yet all three share a common spirit. It's the spirit of Homo nexus, driven by teamwork, technological empowerment, and collective creativity, focused on the challenges of creating economic growth, stimulating innovation, and addressing social needs.

The achievements of these three entrepreneurs would not have been possible five hundred, one hundred, or even thirty years ago. Today they are flourishing, inspiring and setting an example for thousands of others like them in countries all around the globe. And it is entrepreneurial leaders like these that will help solve the most serious problems facing our species in the twenty-first century—problems that demand an outpouring of creativity and innovation unlike anything we've ever seen.

Amazingly enough, just such an outpouring is already beginning to happen, in cities, towns, and villages on every continent and in almost every country, from the world's most highly developed nations to regions that are still struggling to overcome millennia of poverty, hunger, disease, and oppression. Entrepreneurs in the mold of Mermer, Pérez de la Coba, and Morris are springing up everywhere, finding ways to forge connections to marketplaces that stretch from the local to the global. In the process, they are lifting countless families and entire communities out of poverty.

In this new environment, the role of the entrepreneur is more important than ever. But entrepreneurship is no longer quite as simple as it seems to those who cling to the over-simplified interpretation of Adam Smith's vision. As we've already suggested, in today's environment, the most valuable gift any entrepreneur can bring to his tasks is the gift of empathy.

And this truth helps to explain why networked entrepreneurs like Emre Mermer, Sira Pérez de la Coba, and Nate Morris represent the key to the future of human societies. They are the prototypes for Homo nexus, illustrating where

human evolution needs to take us as a species if we are to survive and thrive in the millennia to come.