

STARTUP GUIDE SWITZERLAND

ZÜRICH

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LAUSANNE

Ramzi Bouzerda

Founder and CEO
/ Droople



Ramzi Bouzerda was working a stable job in finance before he stumbled across an idea that could revolutionize the way companies manage their water consumption. The former computer scientist, auditor and startup founder decided to turn his attention once again to entrepreneurship, a vocation he felt could help him make a tangible difference to problems facing the environment. In addition to being a dedicated father of four, Ramzi is now the CEO of Droople, a company he founded in 2018 to develop a smart grid for water. As the manager of a small startup team, Ramzi centers his company's ethos around steady growth and powerful ideas.

ABOUT THE COMPANY

Droople provides businesses with a retrofit solution to increase the efficiency of their water-management processes by at least 20 percent. In addition to driving down costs, Droople's technology enables businesses to monitor their environmental impact. In alignment with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, Droople is committed to reducing plastic waste and CO2 emissions and improving the quality of drinking water for everyone.

WEB droople.io

Can you please start by giving me a bit of background about yourself and what your career has looked like so far?

I started my career as a computer science engineer after studying my master's at EPFL. During my studies, I launched my first startup called Virtua Informatique alongside my cofounder in 1998. We successfully exited in 2002. After that, I started a career in ebusiness consulting and then joined the financial sector, where I worked for more than fifteen years in private banking and retail banking. Then, about two years ago, I had a sudden, rather spontaneous, vision about how we could improve water management, and I started Droople.

What's the story behind Droople? Did you have a "eureka" moment where you came up with the idea?

Yes! It was 3 AM and I was trying to fill my son's baby bottle with a precise amount of water, and I wondered why the faucet of my tap couldn't help me do that easily. Following that realization, I tried to design a device that I could plug into my tap that could tell me exactly how much water I was using. This became the core of the idea for Droople.

Basically, what we're aiming to do is develop a smart grid for water management. Engineers have already developed a very powerful solution to balance supply and demand for electricity and deliver it from producers to consumers, whereas water is still being managed as if it were twenty or thirty years ago.

Doing things just for money isn't enough for me today. I needed to do something more relevant, something that could make a difference.

So, the idea is to bring cutting edge technology to water management, help companies monitor their consumption and identify potential savings.

Droople helps businesses reduce water and energy costs. Do you think the companies you work with are also motivated by the positive environmental impact that saving water and energy can have?

To be honest, we have some businesses that are more concerned with saving costs while other businesses are more focused on sustainability. Either way, any company that works with Droople is still able to make a positive impact on the environment and save resources, no matter what their motivation is.

As of now, we are actively working on how we can estimate the impact of our solution for our clients. I'm convinced that we have to provide a full picture of the benefits of our technology so that companies don't just focus on cost and efficiency but also on the potential social and environmental impact they can have by working with us. I think that disclosing the sustainability aspect of our mission and our solution to companies also gives us a better idea of how we can improve their practices and their commitment to the world. Right now, we are contributing to three of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which we hope will inspire our clients to participate in the movement.

Were there any challenges in launching Droople and, if so, how did you overcome them?

I think what is most challenging about working with businesses in Switzerland is that many of them take water for granted. Water is seen as a commodity and not a precious resource, so it's very difficult to raise awareness about how important it is to conserve it. In the coming years, our world will be faced with more problems, especially when it comes to having sufficient supplies of clean water. Part of our mission at Droople is to not only provide a solution to sustainably manage water but to ensure that everyone has access to it. We also want to help businesses recognize their role in this too.

A big personal challenge I've had to face was managing Droople in parallel with my daily work at the bank. I spent two years switching my focus between both jobs and, to be honest, it was tough. Now I'm one hundred percent dedicated to Droople so things are a little more straightforward.

Was it hard to leave a comfortable career in finance to embark upon this unstable, entrepreneurial path?

I have a very clear answer to this question. When you work in a corporate, in banking, or in any other sector, you have what I call a dog life. You don't have freedom, but you have stability. Whereas, if you're an entrepreneur, you have a wolf life, which means you don't know if you're going to eat or not tomorrow, but



you're free to make your own decisions. I've managed to combine these two roles in my current career, but, honestly, the wolf life is in my DNA.

Having a stable income is important, of course, especially when you have a family, but being an entrepreneur – learning the patience and the commitment of doing your own thing and having that freedom – is priceless. I have a wife and four children, so it's difficult for me to jump at every opportunity, but I hope that I continue to make good choices for myself, my family and for Droople.

What spurred you on to quit the financial world? Were you entirely motivated by the idea you had or were you also looking to leave this career behind?

I think it's both. I had this idea for Droople in the back of my mind and I wanted to challenge myself and spend time making it a reality. On the other hand, the banking sector at the moment is experiencing huge upheaval and many institutions are having to consider how they're going to manage digital disruption and the emergence of fintechs, among other things. While banks are getting bigger and bigger – but also slower in their movements – you, as an employee, feel like you and your personal mission are getting smaller and smaller. It feels like you're stuck in a box with little opportunity to increase your competencies. I think launching my own startup was a clear response to that situation.

How would you say Droople's company culture compares to the corporate world you experienced before?

I think it's very different when you have your own venture. As a startup, you have to admit that you don't know everything; you have to ask for help a lot more often. Running a startup involves leveraging your network and connections within the local startup ecosystem. In contrast, the banking sector is a lot more competitive. As an employee, you're up against so many other people that you have to be the best or you can't compete at all. Startups, of course, compete, but I think the competition is more collaborative. I've found that in Lausanne, there has always been someone in the local startup ecosystem with different skills and competencies that has been able to help me.

When it comes to Droople's company culture, sustainability, transparency and performance are our three core values. When we hire a new employee, I tell him or her three things: One, our ultimate goal is not money; it is achieving our vision. Two, be comfortable being uncomfortable. And three, you are here to take initiative, not to take instructions.

“Learning the patience and commitment of being an entrepreneur and having complete freedom over your ideas is priceless.”

Why did you choose to launch Droople in Lausanne?
Is the city quite accommodating for impact-focused businesses?

Well, the primary reason we stayed in Lausanne is because we have strong links to EPFL. When we were just starting out with Droople, the university helped us to implement our first pilot project on campus. We also benefited from being part of the incubator La Forge, where we were able to access services like free coworking space. We've since kept in touch with EPFL. In 2020, they will collaborate with us to implement a research and development project that will really disrupt our market.

Lausanne was also a great place to launch Droople as we were able to access economic support quite easily. The SPEI [Soutien à la Promotion Économique et à l'Innovation du Canton de Vaud] granted us one hundred thousand francs, which, combined with my savings, helped us to create a prototype of our iFlow device and also submit a patent to the World Intellectual Property Organization.

What professional advice would you give to younger, less-experienced entrepreneurs?

I'm balanced between saying “take the plunge” – meaning that if you think you have a good idea, just do it – and “take time over your idea.” I took a long time to evaluate the concept behind Droople and discuss it with friends, experts and my network to make sure I had a strong business case that was worthy enough to spend time on. I think another crucial thing is to start your project with a strong team, where each member works well together and has a complementary skill set.

Finally, I made mistakes; you will too. But that's what startups are about. The most important thing is that you learn from them. •



At what age did you found your first company?

Twenty-five. I founded Droople at forty-five.

What's the most valuable piece of advice you've been given?

Focus on one opportunity at a time; don't be in a rush.

What's your greatest skill?

Managing people.

What do you do every morning to prepare for the day ahead?

I look at the famous baby bottle that inspired Droople to remind myself to trust in my ideas.

Have there been any books, podcasts or even people that have influenced your career?

Read Tiziano Terzani:

The End Is My Beginning.

It's a must-read for any human being.