

Sense for

OPPORTUNITIES

DR. SERHAN ILI // Founder & CEO of ILI.DIGITAL

I keep realizing how narrow the limits of opportunities are in which we live. We're seldom aware how close we are to opportunities. Hence, for years now, I've been practicing my opportunity intelligence.

Even though making clear decisions sounds simple, remember that it is the core competency of successful entrepreneurs. But this doesn't mean to just take action. Each decision requires equal portions of emotionality and rationality. Each yes or no is a long-term investment in your future, and simultaneously a new opportunity.



Together with Dr. Serhan Ili we drove to the Parkhotel 1970 near Michelstadt in Hessen. In the vibrant retro hotel the time seemed to have turned back and we dived into the past. A perfect environment to reflect the past 10 years of Dr. Serhan Ili's entrepreneurship and talk about his values and pattern of success.

ILL.DIGITAL was established a decade ago. Can you recall the day you set up your own business?

Of course. The moment when I decided to start my own business is still crystal clear. Everyone strongly advised me against doing it. The times were rough then. The Lehman Brothers crisis. Besides, I had

completed a great education. I studied at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, gained a lot of practical experience, got my engineering doctorate while working at Porsche, and even did a stint abroad.

How could one take such a risk and simply throw away all this education out of the window? Why was I so naive to

think that I could earn money as a start-up? What would I produce? I should have thought more about my family. My wife had just given birth to our daughter. I had an incredible number of naysayers around me. But not my family, which was totally at ease, saying I could do it.

I'd like to add that I did try to get a

secure job: I sent out 98 applications, and got 98 rejections. One company even sent me to a psychologist, who confirmed that I had an entrepreneurial mindset. That was great, but he said I was too entrepreneurial. That didn't fit well into the corporate world. Hence, no offer.

As an engineer in Germany, you don't need a business license. You can just go for it. And that's precisely what I did. A website. Business cards. Car. Phone. Laptop. Brain. With my daughter on my arms, I sat on a gymnastic ball to lull her to sleep. On a one square meter space, under the attic. A phone in the hand. Special acquisitions. Grand times. In retrospect!

Who was the first paying customer?

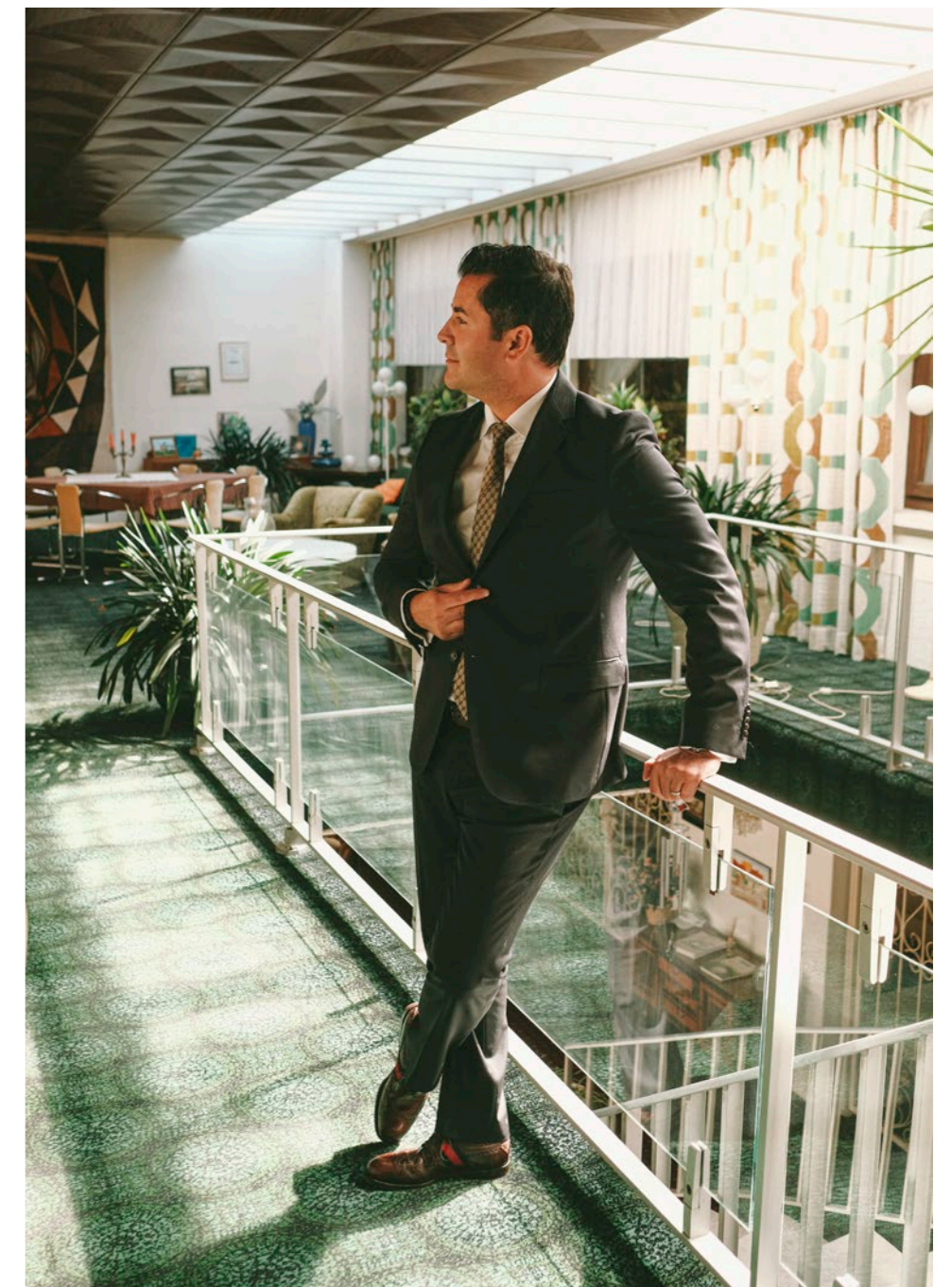
A distant acquaintance took pity on me and introduced me to the CEO of a mid-sized enterprise. That really wasn't my target group, but I had bills to pay. We met in a tennis club. I wore a pinstripe suit, cufflinks, and a tie. As I entered the room, it reeked of pot roasts and French fries. And the CEO was in sports clothing, sweating. I'll never forget that moment, which sent a shiver down my spine. Suddenly all the naysayers and worriers reappeared in my mind. And I asked myself, what the hell I was doing there? He asked me what I charged per day, saying he didn't really understand what I did. But he thought he might have a marketing strategy job for me. He would pay me € 500 for that, if I could develop something. And I did. His enterprise benefits from that, even today. And I still treasure the first bank statement from my business account of € 500 plus 19% VAT, or € 595.

Do you have many similar memories?

A few. The second document that I keep is the floor plan of our current office. In year one, my monthly revenues were around € 1,500. Nonetheless, I leased office space for €12,000/month. A 10-year contract, for almost € 1.5 million. No idea at all how I managed to convince the bank to finance the deposit for the lease. However, the building was still under construction, and it wouldn't be finished in one-and-a-half years. I had time until then to muster the lease. I worked day and night on scenarios of how I could possibly sublease parts to other start-ups. At the time, in a public library I took an envelope and sketched my final concept of how I was going to pay for the office space, and showed it to my wife. She just brought this envelope back to me recently. I had no idea that she'd saved it all along. It evoked wonderful memories.

"EACH NO, AND EACH REJECTION HURT A LOT.

AT FIRST, I TOOK IT PERSONAL."





**"SENSE FOR
OPPORTUNITIES,
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AND THE ABILITY
TO EXECUTE. THIS IS
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- Dr. Serhan Ili-

"AVOID ANY LACK OF AMBITION, BECAUSE YOU MUST BE HUNGRY FOR SOMETHING"

What advice would you have given Serhan Ili of 2009?

None, whatsoever.

Quitting a secure job in the middle of an economic crisis at a great company like Porsche, where I'd worked for seven years in a row, was more than foolish. And there are a lot of myths around the fact that only one in a hundred start-ups survives the first decade. To be honest, I didn't care. You can probably imagine that my response to all naysayers was always very rude and offensive (and there are tons of them in the world – we should get rid of them). I won't forget that friends of mine never stopped showing me job ads, trying to say – hey, it's time for you to come to your senses. Sure, I faced some hard challenges and a few bad experiences. I also made a lot of mistakes, and I'll make some more. But, in the end, overcoming obstacles and handling mistakes always means achieving a quantum leap in success.

So, my advice to Serhan in 2009 would have been: "Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine!" Basically, it's quite simple. As long as you generate rational and emotional added value, success will follow. On the other hand, I think Serhan of 2009 could give me some advice:

Avoid any lack of ambition, because you must be hungry for something.

Avoid self-satisfaction, because that's the opium for managing things.

Avoid safety concerns, because the future belongs to the courageous.

One must develop some enthusiasm for these points and uphold them down the road. Enthusiasm is the true secret for success. Technical knowledge, great communications, and stamina, are all great ideas. Obviously, they are success factors. But without enthusiasm, they're worthless. The ardent desire that Serhan of 2009 had, and to strive accordingly with all of one's might, is the advice that Serhan of 2009 could pass on to Serhan of 2020. That helps overcome resistance.

And now ILI CONSULTING will be ILLDIGITAL AG. What does this transformation involve?

We help enterprises to break away from their business model, to gain more advantages through a new perspective. We apply the same yardstick to ourselves. That's why we keep growing steadily. You see, we're a leading force in digital business model transformation. With our unique approach and our experts in strategy and design, we helped our clients to transform their business model. That's what ILI CONSULTING was all about.

It's crazy how all that occurred. I can still recall the early days, when a gourmet foods trader hired me to help boost his olive oil sales. He handed me a basket-full of analyses on his casual customers, their origin, demography, and buying behavior. He had one product for € 7, another for € 18. He was very keen to drive sales of the more expensive oil. Well, regardless of all the analytics, I simply placed € 49 olive oil bottles next to the others. The customers started choosing the one in the middle, and that achieved his goal. We've always managed to retain such pragmatism.

Now, we also provide technology and entrepreneurial driven execution to turn our clients' assets into miracles. We create new digital businesses for them. This approach to business model enhancement is now reflected in the new name.

In essence: "Sense for opportunities, entrepreneurship, and the ability to execute. This is what ILI.DIGITAL is all about."

Was your early approach also similar? Can you define it?

After over 300 projects conducted over a decade, we have combined our entire experience with outside experts, and have identified a pattern of success for us that we always pursue for our customers.

3 — 6 — 12 — 24 — 48

In 3 days, a portfolio of new value propositions, strategically evaluated. Immediately feasible.

In 6 weeks, up to 5 new and disruptive business models. With all details. Ready to be implemented.

In 12 weeks, a proof of concept as the hardest hit against your own business model. Tangible. Validated.

In 24 weeks, minimum lovable products that are feasible. With a proven willingness to pay.

In 48 weeks, acting as a company builder. Running your new digital business. With positive profit margin.

"AVOID SAFETY CONCERNS, BECAUSE THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE COURAGEOUS"

"AVOID SELF-SATISFACTION, BECAUSE THAT'S THE OPIUM FOR MANAGING THINGS"

How crucial were failures along the path to success?

My pain is my motivation. Each no, and each rejection hurt a lot. At first, I took it personal. Until I realized that I had to eliminate my ego from the overall equation. It has to do with understanding humans. Their needs. Their mindsets. And only then to offer them a solution. At this point I swap solutions against money. That's a fairer deal that keeps both parties happy.

How come many entrepreneurs seem to lose their entrepreneurial spirit over the years?

The experiences of a successful entrepreneurial career inevitably lead us to the realization that one can master any conceivable crisis. This generates a level of confidence that at times may be flawed. A type of deceptive confidence that favors compromise-driven, concessional decisions to secure one's existence, instead of gutsy, rebellious entrepreneurship of the founding years that certainly led to early successes. Our maxim should be to regain our imagination and let it steer us in times of increasingly complex challenges ahead. We often tend to overestimate what all we can achieve in a year, or in a decade. I'm speaking from personal experiences.

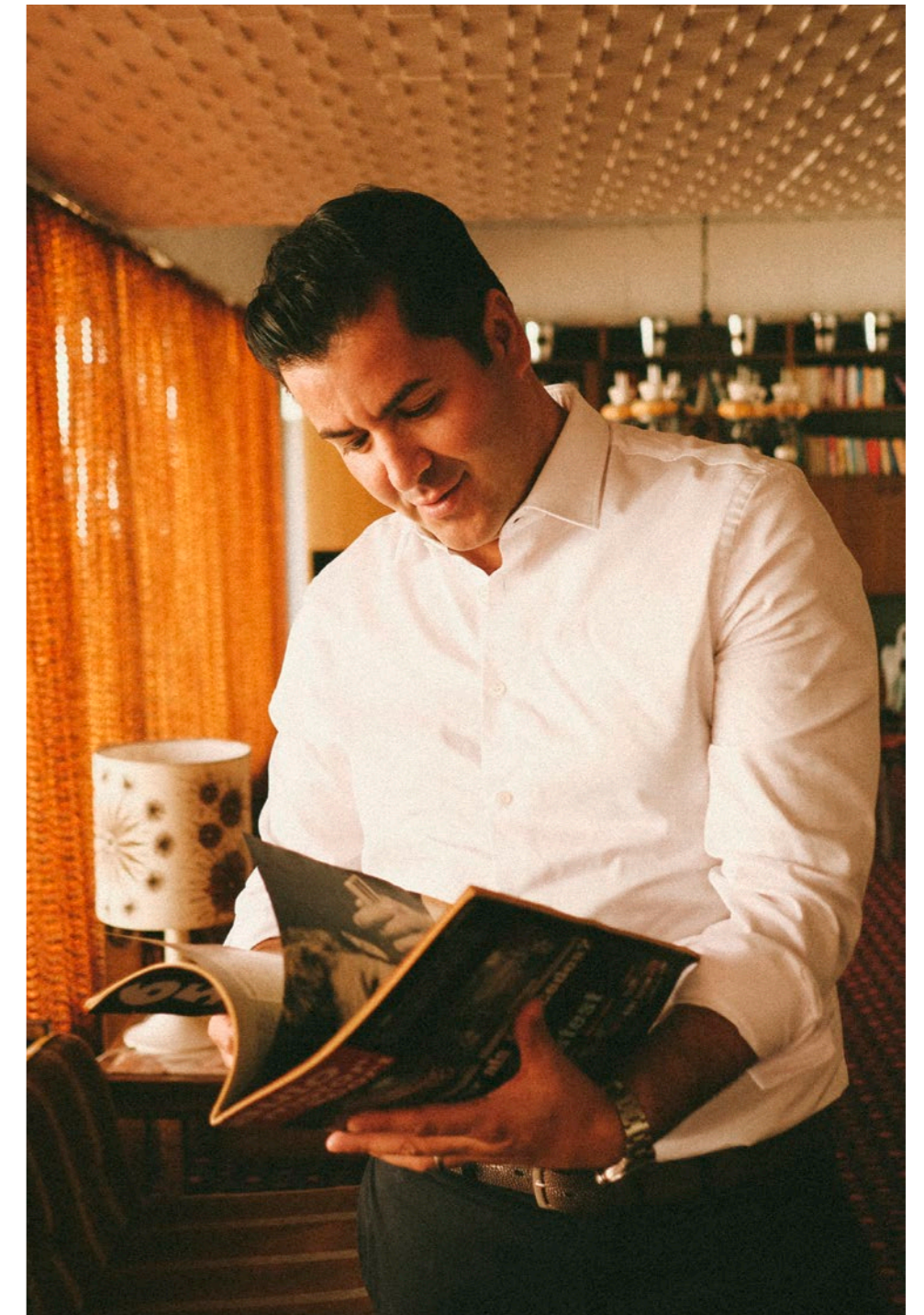
I keep realizing how narrow the limits of opportunities are in which we live. We're seldom aware how close we are to opportunities. Once, I was pushed over a boundary, and at first did not even comprehend what a gigantic opportunity fell in front of my feet. Hence, for years now I've been practicing my opportunity intelligence.

What must be an inherent part of opportunity intelligence?

In trusting your powers of imagination, you must also promote the ability to make decisions. You must let your own will, which is no more than the capability to say yes or no, do the steering. Even though the need to make clear decisions sounds simple, remember that is the core

competency of successful entrepreneurs. But this doesn't mean just taking actions. Each decision requires equal portions of emotions and comprehension. We're not

talking about short-term effects, because each yes or no is a long-term investment in your future, and simultaneously a new opportunity.





**DO WE STILL
HAVE DREAMS?**

ARE WE HAPPY?

**DO WE FEEL
LOVE AND TRUST?**

How do you execute this within your team?
We unconsciously work harder on goals that extend beyond projects and annual plans. For new generations, the main driver is the awareness that with your own actions, you can not only keep a well-oiled machine running, but also contribute to something bigger. This does not concern a higher calling, but instead the assurance that in our daily lives we come stepwise closer to furthering a bigger goal. Perhaps the perfect applicant is not always the best one to immediately enrich your enterprise.

What do you look for when selecting an employee?
You must also hire employees who are cognitively quite far away from the core business! The mix of experts from the core business opens totally new doors and perspectives on future tasks. Few enterprises are ready to address such ventures. If enterprises look critically at how they recruit personnel, they will see that the wealth of experience of most candidates they select matches that of their enterprise. Or, even if they go for applicants from other fields, they focus on dedicating the new hires to their own corporate culture to the extent that external experiences can't even unfold. As such, enterprises miss out on great opportunities.

To offset new capabilities, perspectives, ideas, and viewpoints, you must retain a stable core. Hence, I believe it is crucial to remember that tradition evokes fervor, not ashes.

And how does this work daily?

Recently, I observed a conversation: "Our customer called me today. He informed us of some mini-changes. We executed these in just 10 minutes, and reported back immediately. I hope he appreciates that." How often have you found yourself in such a situation? You walked the extra mile, or delivered a super job, and expect praise and approval for that. Such an expectation is human and normal. And I think the customer did appreciate that. Or he would no longer be our customer.

I just want to digress and express some thoughts here, ones I discovered for myself only after having worked a few years

as an entrepreneur. Walking the extra mile is what you do for yourself! Because your own expectation is to deliver the best work possible. Not just because you seek praise from your customer. Otherwise you'd become dependent on outside influences. Perhaps the customer is fully aware of this, but just doesn't express herself/himself accordingly. That would be quite a sad state of affairs. However, if you can reach your own bar, you will be happier, stronger, and the right people will automatically seek you out. One becomes more generous and turns into a magnet for success. Nobody would try to manipulate her/his fever thermometer – because that would require a strong will for self-deception. But in many other ways, people simply deceive themselves.

Therefore, you should regularly review your demands, and set the bar a bit higher each day. It can be a fatal mistake to depend solely on praise from others!

What are your goals for 2025?

Our team defined its goals collectively. We strive to reflect regularly on the following dimensions: Do we still have dreams? Are we happy? Do we feel love and trust? Are we any closer to becoming financially independent? Do we treat our colleagues and fellow humans with respect? Do we accept responsibility? Are we continuing to educate ourselves? Have we developed our personalities? Have we done something for our health?

We surely won't get full points in all dimensions. But it's a good compass for our daily tasks.