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# Silicon Valley's Solution to Spain's Unemployment Problem

By [Nick Leiber](#) January 15, 2014

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Even though Spain's two-year recession ended in the third quarter, [about 27 percent of its workforce is unemployed](#). The best way to tackle the problem? Encourage and train the country's best and brightest to launch ambitious tech startups. The ventures that succeed will eventually hire lots of Spaniards and teach them skills the euro area's fourth-largest economy needs to bounce back and get ahead.

That's the message from Salim Ismail, a serial entrepreneur and the global ambassador of Silicon Valley's Singularity University. Ismail, whose last company was sold to Google ([GOOG](#)) in 2010, this week visited Madrid and Barcelona to promote the school and encourage Spanish brainiacs to apply to [Call to Innovation](#), a competition for Spanish citizens that will award two scholarships worth \$30,000 each to attend Singularity's 10-week program this summer at NASA Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif.

Job markets are being transformed by fast-moving technologies, Ismail explained at a kickoff event in Madrid: "The only thing that can solve unemployment is crazy entrepreneurs."

Juan Martínez Barea, the founder and chief executive officer of cancer detection startup Universal Diagnostics in Seville, is one of them. About 12 years after earning his MBA from MIT, he did the Singularity program in the summer of 2010 and worked with Ismail to launch the contest in Spain the following year. (Martínez Barea wanted to increase the number of Spaniards among the stars plucked from around the world to participate in the program; Ismail noted the program now has more Spanish alumni than almost anywhere else.)

Long-term improvement to Spanish hiring, says Martínez Barea, who also serves as Singularity's ambassador to Spain, won't happen by encouraging Spaniards to open lifestyle businesses like bars or beauty parlors. They need to create new ventures with the potential to expand rapidly, or make established companies more innovative and better at exporting.

A few big Spanish companies, including Telefónica ([TEF:SM](#)) and Repsol ([REP:SM](#)), as well as private foundations like Fundación Rafael del Pino, also support high-growth entrepreneurship in Spain, but Martínez Barea says the Singularity competition's emphasis on harnessing disruptive technology helps set it apart. "What we need in Spain are more innovative, high-potential startups," he says. "There are plenty of highly educated engineers and scientists in Spain; what's lacking is ambition and confidence."



[Leiber](#) is Small Business editor for Businessweek.com, Entrepreneurs editor for Bloomberg.com, and covers small business for *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

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