



WMF 2026 Startup Competition is back, offering global exposure and \$1M Startup World Cup access

One of Europe's largest startup competitions returns for its 14th edition, bringing top global startups to the WMF Mainstage in Bologna before international investors and VCs. The winning startup will advance to the Startup World Cup Grand Finale (\$1M prize). Applications are open until March 12, 2026

17/02/2026 - Bologna, Italy

Applications are open for the **14th edition of [the International Startup Competition](#)** at WMF - We Make Future, one of the largest global startup competitions organized in Europe.

From **June 24-26, 2026**, selected startups from around the world will take the stage at **BolognaFiere (Italy)**, presenting their projects before an audience of **international venture capital firms, corporate investors, innovation leaders, and global stakeholders**. To date, the competition has received **over 5,300 international applications** and awarded more than **€5.3 million in total prizes**, establishing itself as a major gateway to visibility, funding, and international business connections for high-potential startups.

A global platform within the World Startup Fest

The Startup Competition takes place within the [World Startup Fest](#), WMF's dedicated international event for startups, scaleups, and investors.

In its latest edition, WMF welcomed **over 73,000 attendees from 90 countries**, with participating investors, VCs, corporates, incubators, and accelerators representing a combined **\$1.5 trillion in portfolio value, \$304 billion in assets under management (AUM), \$72.8 billion in funded transactions**, and more than **17,000 investment rounds**. This positions WMF as one of Europe's leading hubs connecting **innovation and capital at scale**.

The competition is open to **Italian and international startups and innovative projects operating in technology and digital sectors**, aligned with WMF's **14 Challenges of the Future**, which correspond to the event's 14 strategic sectors. These include also: Artificial Intelligence & Digital Business, Advanced Industry & Manufacturing, Space Economy, Energy & Sustainability, Finance & Trust Infrastructure, HealthTech, Education & Future of Work, Digital Rights & Security, Smart Cities & Mobility.

"The Startup Competition has been one of WMF's founding initiatives and, over fourteen editions, it has served as a launchpad for projects that went on to secure funding, enter new markets, and scale internationally," said **Cosmano Lombardo**, Founder and CEO of Search On Media Group and creator of WMF. *"In 2026, we will once again bring selected startups from across the globe together with venture capital firms, investors, and corporate partners, to create concrete business opportunities. The strength of the competition lies in its ecosystem:*



Mainstage visibility, access to capital, and long-term connections that extend well beyond the three days of the event.”

The Mainstage Final: 6 startups in the spotlight

Six finalist startups will be selected from the global call to compete in the **WMF Mainstage Final**. They will pitch live before an audience of **venture capitalists, investors, corporate executives, innovation stakeholders, and the global WMF audience both on-site and online.**

Awards will include:

- **Jury Prize**
- **Audience Award**, voted via the official WMF web app
- Additional **special prizes** granted by competition partners

Thanks to the renewed partnership with **Pegasus Tech Ventures**, the first-place startup will gain direct access to the **Startup World Cup Grand Finale**, taking place in **San Francisco on November 20, 2026**, where a **\$1 million investment prize** is at stake.

Beyond the Final: 140 additional selected startups

In addition to the six finalists, **140 selected startups** - ten for each of the 14 Future Challenges - will pitch on the dedicated **Startup Stage**, engaging directly with International investment funds, Corporate innovation teams, Incubators and accelerators, Open innovation operators.

Selected startups will also gain access to:

- The **Startup District**, WMF's international exhibition area
- Curated **B2B meetings** with the WMF business community
- Evening networking events such as **Innovation Night** and official side events

Beyond visibility, startups will compete for additional awards, financial resources, acceleration programs, and strategic partnerships. In the previous edition, the **Total Value Prize exceeded €2.6 million.**

From the European AI ecosystem to MENA markets

Among the opportunities available to selected startups is access to **Land in BO – Connect, Compute, Create**, an initiative promoted by the City and Metropolitan Area of Bologna in collaboration with BolognaFiere and the Emilia-Romagna Region, with support from IFAB (International Foundation Big Data). The program offers entry into the **European AI ecosystem**, facilitating startup settlement and development within the **Bologna Technopole**



(DAMA) and access to major AI and high-performance computing infrastructures, including the **IT4LIA AI Factory**, a strategic asset supporting next-generation deep-tech ventures.

Selected startups will also have the opportunity to join [Saudi Makes Future](#), the Saudi edition of WMF and the largest AI-focused exhibition in the Middle East, scheduled for **December 14–16, 2026 in Riyadh**.

A joint initiative by **Search On Media Group**, **WMF – We Make Future**, and **PNG Saudi**, the event is strategically aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. It serves as a definitive gateway to the **MENA market**, offering startups and investors a concrete platform for growth, strategic partnerships, and global expansion.

A global partner network

The international credibility of the WMF Startup Competition is reinforced by its network of confirmed partners, including: **Pegasus Tech Ventures, OVHcloud, CDP Venture Capital, Invitalia, Italian Tech Alliance, InnovUp, Roma Startup, Zest, 28 DGTL, and IAG**, among others. With the support of **ICE – Italian Trade Agency**, the competition engages stakeholders across key strategic regions:

- **Central and Eastern Europe:** Vitosha Venture Partners, Fund of Funds (Bulgaria), Montis Capital (Poland)
- **Germany & Tech Ecosystems:** Silicon Allee, Sansar Ventures
- **North America & Tier-One VC Networks:** LG NOVA, Alchemist Accelerator, Waterman Ventures
- **Asia & High-Growth Markets:** Blue Hill Capital, MITO Tech Ventures

Investors may request to join the ecosystem through the [Call for Investors](#).

Useful Links

- [Startup Competition](#)
- [World Startup Fest](#)
- [AI For Future Competition](#)

WMF - We Make Future is the largest International Trade Fair and Festival dedicated to Artificial Intelligence, Technology, and Digital Innovation.

From June 24 to 26, 2026, WMF returns to BolognaFiere (Italy) as a certified international event fully focused on the future of innovation. A global hub for the AI and tech ecosystem, WMF brings together each year the most advanced developments in artificial intelligence, digital and social innovation, alongside leading international companies, startups, scaleups, investors, institutions, universities, and non-profit organizations. With over 73,000 attendees from 90 countries in 2025, more than 700 exhibitors, 1,000+ speakers and guests from around the world, 2,800+ organized B2B meetings, and 3,000 startups and investors involved, WMF represents a unique convergence point for innovation-driven business and policy dialogue.

Its partner network includes organizations managing a combined €1.5 trillion investment portfolio, €304+ billion in assets under management (AUM), \$72.8+ billion in funded transactions, and over 17,000 investment rounds, positioning WMF as a global benchmark event for the innovation economy.

Saudi Makes Future – The Largest AI Exhibition in the Middle East

Saudi Makes Future is the Saudi edition of WMF – We Make Future, a certified international trade fair and global platform for innovation, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies. Developed through the collaboration between Search On Media Group, WMF – We Make Future, and PNG Saudi, the event will take place December 14–16, 2026, in Riyadh at the Riyadh International Convention & Exhibition Center. Building on WMF's vision, experience, and thematic architecture, Saudi Makes

Future adapts the format to a strong AI-driven focus, structured across 14 strategic sectors exploring the impact of artificial intelligence on business, industry, society, and institutions. Aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, the event positions itself as an international platform for dialogue, cooperation, and development, designed for companies, startups, investors, and stakeholders seeking new opportunities for growth, training, and innovation in the Middle East and on a global scale.

Search On Media Group - Humans Leading Innovation Founded in 2004, Search On Media Group works to advance digital culture and innovation by managing professional communities, supporting knowledge-sharing initiatives, and delivering strategic and operational consulting through its Search On Consulting division, specializing in Digital Marketing and Digital Transformation for large organizations. From the expertise of Search On Media Group stem both the Event Agency Business Unit—responsible for organizing WMF and other proprietary and client events—and Hybrid.io, a flexible and customizable platform designed to manage online, hybrid, and on-site events.

Per informazioni e materiale

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#WMF2026 | International Trade Fair and Festival on Innovation: AI, Tech and Digital.

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