

31 August 2015

European Innovation Academy Experience

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A surprise, that is how I describe European Innovation Academy (EIA). My participation in EIA was not planned at all. Becoming the winning team in Dale Carnegie program phase two, I expected nothing but a certificate. My whole EIA experience has been an unforgettable roller coaster ride. The academy took place in Nice, France from 6th to 23rd of July 2015. Nice is a beautiful vacation city with great view, great people and awesome atmosphere. People were wondering why I was doing a summer school in a place renowned as a top vacation destination. I think it is related to the startup culture. The EIA organisers were trying to make this program a rewarding but fun experience and also, Nice is the world's 4th smartest city. As EIA is all about technology, being in a tech-forefront environment was definitely a must.

The Nice Sophia Antipolis University was a sponsor and the dedicated venue for the program. Unlike other summer schools, the program was packed from ten in the morning to eight at night. The whole day was divided into two parts, the seminars/lectures and team work. Everyday, the teams were assigned specific task related to the weekly theme. The first week was about group formation, business planning and idea validation. The second week was fully dedicated for the hackathon where the software developers were working very hard. The last week was to prepare the financial, marketing and legal aspects of the company. Did I just say company? Yes, I did. Each team was treated like a real company. At the end of the program we had to present in front of other teams and judges. Finally, top ten teams were selected and they had a chance to pitch in front of venture capitalists. Also, we had a session where all teams had the chance to play the venture capitalist role.

Let me talk about my whole experience throughout this three weeks program. Honestly, I found that this program mimicked the real startup world. So many ups and downs, like what I have said it was a roller coaster. Even from the first week I had experienced some challenges. Preliminary teams were formed before the program started. People started to communicate via email and facebook. Idea owners were looking for team members and the others are looking for teams. The problem was, I did not do that. My situation was a bit troublesome as I had just got my visa a day before my departure. I did not want to join a team and did not show up in the program if my visa application was rejected. With this problem, I have decided to find my team once the program had started. Actually, I was not alone. There were many teams that broke apart once they have met their team members in reality. I joined a team called Markezion, the team's idea was about a marketing dashboard made easy for small to medium enterprises that are located in Europe. I met so many great people there. However, one week working with the team, I realised that the idea owner did not want to pivot at all even though there were obvious signs that there was no market validation of our idea. Also, as a biomedical engineering student, I would like to contribute my passion and understanding about healthcare technology in these three weeks. Finally, I relocated myself into another team called OuiSmile. OuiSmile team had an idea to create a platform application that will be a medium for Alzheimer's disease patients and their family members to reconnect through interactive games and other features. 'Oui' is a French word that means yes and together, the name indicates yes smile!

With my Business minor background, I was in charge of the Marketing for OuiSmile. My title in the team is Chief Marketing Officer or CMO. Everyone in the team should be assigned a role, the other roles were CEO (Chief Executive Officer), CTO (Chief Technology Officer), CBO(Chief Business Officer), and CDO (Chief Design Officer). Being the CMO of the team allowed me to tap into the digital marketing world. I believe that digital marketing will have a big role in the future. However, I had not gotten the chance to learn about it, but in EIA, I do. Social Media Marketing, Search Engine Optimisation, and Public Relations are some of the things that I was mainly involved in. Most of us had no idea what a startup was about but as the program goes, I feel like I had experienced the startup life that most people are really into in the Silicon Valley.

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During the hackathon, we were developing our applications. Ouismile platform had been designed to include image gallery, music library, Alzheimer's disease advices for caretakers and interactive games. However, due to the complexity of the Ouismile platform, we were only able to develop the games part as we only had two full days of hackathon. The game was functional and received many good inputs from our design and technical mentors. With this limited amount of time, we just made the prototype of features other than the games. At the end of second week, some teams were selected to present their product based on their technical quality. Unfortunately, our teams were not selected to present. But we were still motivated to do our best in terms of our business plan for the financing and marketing strategy, which were the main topics for the last week. In the last week, we have decided that our business plan was based on in-app purchase of our games in the platform application. Also, to assure the customers that our games and advices are clinically valid, we had established a connection with Institut Claude Pompidou, the largest Alzheimer's disease center in Nice. They provide care, education and research for Alzheimer's disease patients and their families. They have a project called MeMo that stands for Memory Motivation. They would like to collaborate with us to make a more interesting game that will attract the patients and their families. In return, we would get the clinical validation of the games and advices that we included in the platform.

In the final presentation day, we could not make into the top ten teams but we were glad that we had done our best in this project. We had learned about so many things that we could not get inside the class or in any different projects. One of the most important thing that I learned in the team is that, with limited people, startup will require their team members to work on a lot of things that they were unfamiliar with. Startup is a very steep learning curve. The CDO worked on the financial projection instead of the CBO in the team when the CBO was too busy working on the business plan. I realised that startup life is a good ground where we can train ourselves as a T-type person—an in-depth knowledge in one area and also good general understanding of many other fields. Working in a startup is a very good way to train yourself to be a future entrepreneur as we need to know a bit of everything to run our business smoothly.

The Ouismile team had decided to discontinue this project as most of us are continents apart and we still have education responsibilities to do. We did not want to do this half-heartedly but we are open to future cooperation among us. This is true for the designer and me as we both are very passionate about solutions for stroke disease. She will do her master final year project to design rehabilitation equipments for stroke patients and I am doing my MPhil research on stroke subjects in CUHK. There is a high possibility of cooperation among us in the future. Also, we are ready to start our own start-ups in the future and to apply the things that we have learned in EIA.

Let's talk about the vacation part. There were so many nice things to do in Nice. Especially in the summer, they had so many festivals and concerts. Some of them were even free! EIA also offered social programs to Monaco, Cannes and Corsica for a fee. I joined the Monaco and Corsica trip and arranged my own trip to Cannes. These trips were not solely for travelling and trying new things in different places, they were good opportunities to know other EIA participants and expand your network. As during the weekdays, we were so busy on our projects that our social circle is limited to our teammates. Many other participants have established more than one startups before and they have so many stories to tell. I believe that learning from others' experience is the most fun way to learn.

I am truly grateful for the knowledge, experience and networks that I have gained from the European Innovation Academy. I would like to thank Faculty of Engineering for making this experience possible for me and my Dale Carnegie project team, FoodCourier for doing all our best during the Dale Carnegie training program that resulted in this golden opportunity.

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My last day in EIA. A compulsory shot with the EIA name board



The first day was a thrill, I did not know how exciting and demanding this program was

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Took my first picture in Nice at Place Masséna in front of the Apollo statue



First picture of OuiSmile Team

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At the end of our hackathon week, it was time to say goodbye to our design and technical mentors



This is how the 10 AM - 3 PM lectures looked like. The speakers are incredibly experienced and they are startup entrepreneurs themselves or work in startup-related fields.

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Our presentation session



Happy smiles after our presentation session ended