

Enterprising Academic Creates Jobs



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Some people find it hard to manage one job. Professor Barry Smyth juggles three - teacher, researcher and entrepreneur. Smyth holds the Digital Chair of Computer Science at UCD and he loves the lecturing and research aspects of this role. However, he also has a knack for spotting ideas with strong commercial potential. Smyth has been the driving force behind two UCD spin-out companies, ChangingWorlds founded in 1999 and HeyStaks established in 2008.

Smyth rarely stands still. UCD has filed more patents (eight) for inventions resulting from Smyth's research than any other researcher at UCD in the last 10 years. He has published in excess of 400 research papers, has led research projects worth in excess of €57 million and is the Director of the Science Foundation Ireland-funded CLARITY: Centre for Sensor Web Technologies and the recently established INSIGHT Centre. Smyth is also an experienced industry collaborator having partnered with companies such as Vodafone, Givaudan, Amdocs and SkillPages.

Clever ideas are central to what makes Smyth the researcher tick. But Smyth the entrepreneur is careful not to let his enthusiasm for an idea cloud his commercial judgment. “I think I have a decent instinct for these things but I'm a firm believer in filtering ideas, not the good from the bad, but the ones that are commercially relevant from the ones that are not,” he says.

“Since NovaUCD was established it has always been my first port of call to bounce an idea or pursue IP protection. There is a huge amount of complexity around getting companies off the ground. Anything that helps make it easier is much appreciated. We still do the heavy lifting but at NovaUCD, training, guidance and great facilities such as easy access to office space on campus are provided. Life would be much more difficult if I was trying to commute between College and an office in town for example.”

With Smyth's involvement, ChangingWorlds became a leading global provider of mobile content discovery systems employing some 150 people. Its advanced research centre was based at NovaUCD until 2008 when the company was acquired by Amdocs, a global leader in unified communications and network services solutions. A significant number of Smyth's former senior research students found employment with ChangingWorlds. This was a good outcome for the UCD graduates, but also for the company as it was heavily populated with experienced PhDs as a result.

Smyth loves building solutions and says the best way of seeing them come to fruition is through developing products that people use. “ChangingWorlds is a mature example of this process as the technology ultimately found its way into the hands of millions of people,” he says. “It predates App stores so anyone using the mobile Internet on a smart phone a few years ago was probably using ChangingWorlds software.”

“By comparison HeyStaks is at an early-stage in its development. We have just finished a product development cycle and currently employ just under 10 people. In about a year's time we will be looking to recruit between 30 and 40 people as we move to the next phase of our development.”

Smyth says he learnt a lot from participating in the NovaUCD Campus Company Development Programme. “I did it in 1999 and have sent numerous students on it since. It's a great way of broadening the mindset of someone doing a PhD whose head is deep in their research. It makes them think more commercially about what they're doing,” he says.

“For me setting up ChangingWorlds was about getting the technology into the hands of real people and seeing how it worked. As a researcher you develop ideas and then try to evaluate them. But lab conditions are often unsatisfactory because they are small scale and an artificial evaluation environment - especially for the type of software we were building. The second reason for spinning-out is to create a business that brings jobs. I have a view of research that includes patenting, protection and commercialisation. As funded academics I think we have an obligation to try to develop something beyond the research bench where that's possible.”

Smyth says that as a busy academic, the support and services at NovaUCD have played a big part in helping him express his entrepreneurial spirit.

“This may sound like a strange thing to say, but when you're involved in really exciting research as I am, there is huge competition for your head. There are often more interesting things I could be working on instead of company development stuff. If there hadn't been support provided through NovaUCD it would have been all too easy to have focused on something else and maybe let the projects fall by the wayside.”