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Degree engineers success stories

Homework is real-life business startups

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Until recently, entrepreneurs who dreamed of successfully funding, developing and commercializing an innovation had few options than to jump into the sink-or-swim school of hard knocks.

But three years ago McMaster University unveiled a new concept in post-graduate business education: the Xerox Centre for Engineering Entrepreneurship and Innovation, which offers a Master of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. The curriculum consists of every step an entrepreneur needs to take to successfully launch a new business, except the classroom is real life, and the homework is the creation of a real startup, with help from the centre in everything from mentoring, to raising funds, product development and testing. Students graduate with a degree -- and an actual startup ready to take on the market.

"Doing it on your own is the MBA of hard knocks. Going through this program picks you up and puts you on the 50-yard line," says Kelly Curry, who is enrolled in the program.

Mr. Curry already had not just one but two startups under his belt, including his current company, ZeroedIn Technologies Inc., which specializes in customer relations management software. But he had never commercialized an invention.

And that is what his new startup, KR Golf Solutions, is set to do: commercialize a golf-training aid Mr. Curry, an avid golfer, invented in 2004.

Called Swingnature, this revolutionary driver-lookalike uses a removable weight-system in the grip to help the golfer improve his speed and has software that notifies him in real-time if he is swinging incorrectly. With the help of the program, Mr. Curry has already raised \$50,000 for the company and is currently conducting a focus group with the Royal Canadian Golf Association's exercise consultant.

Nimesh Bahl, who graduated last December, didn't have an invention when he enrolled. Instead, the then new mechanical engineering graduate was looking for a post-graduate degree to help him pursue his entrepreneurial aspirations.

The program, says Rafik Loutfy, director of the centre, is designed for scientists and engineers like Mr. Bahl who have entrepreneurship running through their veins.

"Do they have the passion, the drive, the perseverance? Do they have that entrepreneurial spirit? Because I cannot make them entrepreneurs, that's almost coded in their DNA. All we can do is provide them the tools and methodology to make them successful," he says. When students don't have an invention, "we match them up with professors from across the nation," Mr. Loutfy says.

Mr. Bahl was matched with McMaster professor Adrian Kitai and fellow student Cristian Nunez. The three founded Liquid Fiber Display, which won this year's TiEQuest 2008 Business Venture Competition in Toronto, taking home \$50,000, the Ontario Entrepreneurship Trophy, and the opportunity to receive a \$1-million investment from sponsoring funds. Their product? Hybrid LED indoor and outdoor signs with "one of the highest resolution LED screens on the market at a fraction of the cost offering better reliability, all at the same time," Mr. Bahl says.

The company is receiving funding support from the Ontario Centres of Excellence and Bell Canada.

Mo Shahin, founder of Blujino -- a high-tech media services company set to transform cellphones into a hot new advertising medium using Bluetooth and Wi-Fi technology -- was matched with mentor Stephen Elop, president of Microsoft Business Division.

"Having someone with such knowledge and experience is a real push for a startup," says Mr. Shahin, whose company was conceived as a global one and has one co-founder in Germany and another in Egypt.

In fact, it is in Egypt where Blujino has already had pilot customers. They decided to launch their company there because the ubiquitous use of cellphones in the

Middle East presents a huge market. Blujino has the technology to create new networks that can both access and be accessed on a permission basis by cellphones.

"It can be used for location-based advertising, so when you enter a mall, you can receive coupons for stores in that mall, for example," Mr. Shahin says. "We're building different layers, which will allow various services such as file sharing, or network gaming over the cell phone, or breaking news, without the use of the mobile network," he says.

And when he graduates at the end of this year, he'll have a master's degree -- and a full-fledged company that is already in the process of hiring employees.

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