Managing and working in a own company

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Learnings Report

Abstract—Vitrine Digital is a startup company that creates mobile and web-based applications to small and medium sized businesses to better their marketing and communication. The company was founded by three fellow Information Networks students at Aalto University School of Science. The company was created on the summer of 2014 due to a concept that was fined through Digital Service Design course held at Aalto University of Science and Technology on spring of 2014. This paper discusses the lessons and skills learned from the process of starting and managing an own company.

Index Terms—(Entrepreneurship, start-up, teamwork).

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1 INTRODUCTION

FOR me managing and working in a own company has been a huge learning experience. Apart from the technical and technological experience such as coding there has been many lessons to be learnt. This paper outlines the motivation behind why I wanted to start working for my own company as well as some lessons I have learned about myself in the context of work and my workflow.

2 MOTIVATION FOR ENTREPRENEURIALISM

2.1 Changing line of studies

For a couple of years now I've seen myself starting a company. There are many reasons behind this desire. The awakening dates back to the year 2012. At the time I was studying Bio-product technology which I quickly realised not to be the right line of studies for me. Partly it was because of the subjects that were being

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taught but what really got to me was the career that I was facing at that point. The industry was structured in a way that would have required me years of working in big companies in order to rise to positions were I considered the work to be interesting. I realised I wanted to apply myself much faster and more concretely. I didn't really like the idea of working at a big company as a part of a bigger machinery as a figure of speech. I wanted to have a bigger impact on things.

So I changed my studies to Information Technology which I knew had interesting subjects that would teach me concrete skills which I would be able to apply immediately. And I was not disappointed. In the beginning what really excited me was learning programming. It really offered me an outlet with which I could be creative and productive at the same time. Writing small programs and websites really showed me that learning could be fun and it could teach me skills that I could apply immediately. But what really convinced that I had chosen the right path was group assignments.

2.2 Atmosphere for entrepreneurship

We have a really good atmosphere amongst students studying Infromation Technology. We have a friendly and open environment where

		LEARNINGS					DOCUMENT						
(1.0) Excellent													
(0.8) Very Good	Context×2	Skills×1	Reflect×4	Summ×.5	Concl×.5	SCORE	Struct ×.25	Ortog×.25	Exec×4	Form ×.25	Titles ×.5	File ×.5	SCORE
(0.6) Good													
(0.4) Fair	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0		0.6	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	
(0.2) Weak													

you feel like everyone around you is there to support and help you. It is a perfect base for group assignments which for us usually involves building concepts and coming up with innovative ideas for imaginary or real companies. Some of the courses require groups to build programs or websites to support their solutions. And the work what a small group of freshmen could come up with in relatively short time period was really impressing to me.

This was the part where the pieces began to align for me. I learned a lot from the process of coming up with ideas, enhancing them within a group and coming up with the right technological approach. I quickly realized that getting to the place where I wanted to be work-wise was not a matter of years of working at a big company but rather the skill set I could learn from my school courses and from online resources. This meant that I could start my own company while I was studying. I quickly decided that I wanted to work for myself and started my own trading name with which I did websites and website maintenance. I knew that that was small but still it felt nice to get to apply myself and my skills in a concrete way.

2.3   Problem-solving and brainstorming

I also learned that any idea is essentially a problem that consists of many intervened parts. And as an engineer I knew that cracking a complex problem requires breaking it to smaller pieces. But often tackling these kinds of problems alone is difficult and usually you become blind to your own way-of-thinking. Building and producing real products and services could not be done alone. Teamwork is key.

I often found myself talking and brainstorming with a couple of colleagues of mine. We would throw ideas to the air and tried to play with them to come up with interesting product or concept opportunities. This was something that was really engaging and fun. Problem-solving this way was a breeze and we also got good feedback from our professors, teachers and fellow students. From the feedback and the mutual ambitions of my colleagues it was not a long way to the founding of Vitrine Digital.

2.4   A business case from school courses

A really important factor of the founding of Vitrine Digital was a combination of two courses held by Docent Risto Sarvas. They were both about coming up with a digital service concept and working with it through the different topics of the courses. The first course had more to do with evaluating the social and ethical impacts that a product/service might have.

The second course, Digital Service Design, was based on the popular Lean startup philosophy. There a service would be evaluated through a business model canvas which had nine different areas which had to be taken into account. The process was iterative meaning that every week we had to re-evaluate and refine our concept and ideas from feedback and research. At the end of that course we had a pretty well-defined and carefully thought-out plan for a business. Us not having any good ideas for summer jobs we decided to try and create our concept to a real business. And with that Vitrine Digital was born in the early-summer of 2014.

The principles learned from Digital Service Design course govern a lot of the ways and dynamics of how our company runs today. The next chapters will specify the key learnings that I have gotten from running a company.

3   TIME MANAGEMENT AND TEAMWORK

3.1   Creative flow vs careful planning

One of the difficulties I've faced while working at an own company is time management. There are multiple factors that have played a role in making things problematic at times. Having an large scale project with so many simultaneous things to do, allocating resources to the right things is difficult. Usually I have found that it is a battle between spontaneous creativity and careful planning.

When a project is big with many problems to solve it is easy to find yourself doing not so important things that don't need immediate attention. It is easy to have an creative flow but the problem is that it might throw you off focus. Then you start to conventrate on not so urgent problems. This can be partly prevented by careful planning and scheduling of different

DO NOT USE CONTRACTIONS!

tasks. Planning and scheduling requires for the whole team to sit down and discuss the matters at hand.

Regular meetings are also a good way of keeping up with the work of others. In a small start-up it is essential to have an idea of the things currently at hand. Especially in a knowledge-based company it is important to have a holistic image of the problems and challenges because it helps in dividing responsibilities and building synergy. Allocating resources this way helps to keep the focus and attention on the tasks that drive the company forward and towards a bigger goal.

3.2 Focusing on the right things

I would describe myself as a perfectionist as I tend to pursue perfection in the smallest of details. I feel like it is a double-edged sword. I consider chasing perfection and good quality in the work I do as a good trait and a good driver for doing work but at the same time there are disadvantages. One disadvantage has to do with time/productivity ratio. In mobile application design for example a significant amount of work is put into the minor details. Having little previous experience I learned that getting things to feel just right is time-consuming. Too many times I have found myself in implementing features and tweaking them to perfection. In the context of the company as a whole it is important to focus on the right things not on the things that feel cool. Spending too much time on matters that don't really drive the project forward is detrimental. This is connected to the problems discussed in the previous paragraph because time is scarce in a project with many things to do and few people to do them.

3.3 Learning to delegate

Another disadvantage that striving for perfection has is the problem of letting others do work for you. I consider my partners level of workmanship at least equal (likely better) than mine but it is still hard to delegate certain things to others. Sometimes there is a clear image of what needs to be done and you can see the implementation working in your head

but there are three other tasks that have a higher priority so the work needs to be done by others. I've had to learn to trust in my partners which has been a learning experience for me. There is true power in dividing tasks between partners. It may seem obvious in theory but in practice (at least for me) it has required a mentality of strong cooperation with little room for individualistic attitude.

4 IMPACT ON LIFE OUTSIDE WORK

4.1 The vague border between work and free-time

Another thing that I have learned has been the fact that as an entrepreneur the border between work and free time becomes awfully vague. It is not a nine-to-five job. Sometimes days are long and the hours of the day don't seem to be enough. For me this has meant working late at night and cutting back on sleeping hours. I don't feel like this has been a problem for me personally because the driving force for working has been passion and an uplifting feeling of flow. But I've noticed that it has had some negative impacts for the people around me.

4.2 Irregular hours

My significant other has more than enough emphasized that my irregular hours affect her. Although I know the saying that it is good to keep work and home apart but for me it has not always been easy. My responsibility in our company is coding which requires this problem-solving mentality. Usually most of the time does not go into the writing part of the code but to solving problematic situations. Therefore some workdays are spent trying to figure out solutions that fit best for our service as a whole. This mentality of coming up with solutions cannot be turned off and I often find myself thinking about work related problems at home. I have had to focus in emptying my thoughts and giving my brain time off from work. Sometimes it is difficult to explain to others that the flow of working does not look at the clock and it may require sacrifices on some areas of my social life.

4.3 Self-reflection

I have also learned to listen to myself better. Doing work towards a big scale project has taught me a lot about my strengths and weaknesses. This has helped me to asses what things I enjoy doing and what are the things I am not excited about. Learning better self-reflection has given me motivation and a better orientation towards the things I want to do. It has given me a clearer direction for my career as well as my life outside work. I used to be and still am ambitious but working at an own company has given me a better way to reflect on the things I am ready to sacrifice and the things I am not. It is certain that I want to do things that I feel passionate about and I am ready to go the extra mile for. But still life is not only about work and I have learned that in a concrete way.

5 CONCLUSION

Working and managing an own company has been an experience where I have had the opportunity to apply and challenge myself in an engaging way. Applying the skills that I have learned from my studies has felt rewarding and educational. It is not only a goal that I had set to myself couple of years earlier but I see it also as a beginning of a paradigm that governs the way I see my career. Entrepreneurial mindset will follow me even if I might not be working at my own company all the time.

Working in a team and having real responsibilities has taught me the right ways to do things efficiently. I have learned the strengths of using good frameworks and good principles for effective work flow. Having had to challenge myself I have also discovered things I still need to better myself at.

I have also learnt valuable things regarding the balance between work and free time. Giving myself time to relax and time to spend with the people around me has been challenging due to the fact of irregular, sometimes around-the-clock working hours. As it is the case with tackling big problems and time management, having clear and explicit plans goes a long way in finding the balance between work and free-time.