You Must Be Joking... Is Only Getting Started

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ABSTRACT

“Don’t even get me started” is a powerful and direct, yet vague and meaningless, expression. What if you reply: “By all means, please, get started”. I believe that this will stun your opponent (it may be a friendly discussion, but if you don’t believe the other person is an opponent, you will never win.). Then, you can quickly grab his/her nose and yell: “Twos before eights, and one bird in the bush”. It can be very entertaining unless the other person is your boss or your psychiatrist. In any case, this column dares to go where no column at CCR has gone before. It is all about getting started. And by that, we mean starting start-ups.

Warning: the content below is not suitable for small children or adults with common sense.

1. INTRODUCTION

Let me start by apologizing for the abstract. Now that this is done, let me warn you that the rest of this article will follow a chaotic structure. Partly because I want to see if I can pull it off. I am so sorry again.

Here is the idea behind this article: I started a start-up. I will on purpose not say anything more specific. However, what I will say is that it has been an incredible experience. Primarily because of the team involved and a confluence of fortunate circumstances. Am I “happy go lucky” or am I “lucky therefore happy”? No one knows. The point though is that it got me thinking and I formulate the following fundamental question:

Fundamental question: is doing a start-up more fun than doing research?

Blasphemy, you may say. Many of the researchers and professors consider research the highest of activities that one can engage and get paid for legally. I would like to challenge this.

Most of us love research, right? That’s what we signed up to do. We are mortified with the idea that some of our PhD students will not go to a research lab. Oh, God, they may even have to write code that will go into a product. The horror, the horror...

Let us take a step back. What are the things that people associate with research? You probably have not thought about it, as I hadn’t until I started writing this, but you will ultimately agree to the following points:

(a) academic freedom: freedom to explore intellectual challenges and grand questions,
(b) purity: competition in the world of ideas away from ulterior motives and corporate politics,
(c) solidarity: working as a community to solve hard problems, and jointly refine and steer science and technology
(d) job satisfaction: impact on science and technology, and ultimately on everyday people’s lives.

Let us revisit now this list again, and ask: “Really?” No, I mean it, really? The answer is obvious: fa shizzle1.

Now I think we are on the same page.

2. IRRELEVANT SECTION

“The start is half of the whole effort”. This is a cherished Greek proverb2, that tries to answer the significance of starting. I believe some ancient grandmother thought it would be motivating to convince her lazy grandson that to get out of bed. “By the time you start, you will probably have plowed half of the field, then you just keep the momentum, you will be done before you know it.” However, I believe that it backfired brutally.

– The enemy is coming. Is the wall around the city done?
– We are half way there, My Lord.
– Half way there, you say, and you started last week. Very well, then, we shall be ready for them.

I attribute the demise of Greek civilization to this proverb. For a more contemporary proof, consider that building the infrastructure for the Olympics of 2004 in Athens was one of the most heart-pounding thrillers, despite its happy ending.

3. THE MAIN SECTION – PART 1

Not too long ago, I was talking with a very successful person, both academically and in business. The discussion was on how to interpret a rejection in a grant proposal. His statement (yes, he is male, but that’s all you will ever know) was that in the start-up world people assume it is their fault: what did I do wrong that the investor did not get interested in my idea? It was implied that the same thing should happen for proposal writers.

I thought about it quite a bit as this is someone whose opinion I take seriously. But then it dawned on me. There is a tremendous difference between a proposal and a business evaluation. The key being that the investors will benefit directly by identifying a good idea. What does a proposal panel stand to gain by the success or not of the funded proposals?

Later, the same person told me that researchers need to “engage” granting agencies. We should be visiting program

1From the urbandictionary.com: Slang term for “for sure.”
2Keshav, our Director from Canada, informed me that, there is an English proverb: “Well begun is half done”. But, you see, it is not the same. The English version assumes you begin “well”, the Greek proverb is a free for all, well or not well, as long as you start you are halfway there. Way more powerful.
managers 2-3 times a year, selling them our ideas, and getting feedback about what we should be proposing and how we should be presenting it. “Build a relationship with the program managers”, he said.

At the time I found this to be a revelation, something no one had told me before. However, I have since thought about two things:

a. Is this a scalable model? Can really all the researchers that apply to say NSF, visit NSF 2-3 times a year? One can say, that you don’t have to care about what others do, you do what you have to do to be successful. At a personal level, that may be right. But if the system has come down to this I think that something is not right, this thing cannot scale.

And of course, it turns out I was wrong. Jennifer Rexford gave me the perfect solution, after seeing this conundrum. I simply quote, because it is brilliant: “...maybe we should do something like speed dating to find the right program manager and get feedback on our research ideas? Having one big event might be more efficient than all of us visiting individual Program Managers 2-3 times a year. We could quickly find the Program Manager we want to have a relationship with. Just a thought. Before we progress to having coffee one-on-one with them. That day would also be a good time for everyone’s bi-annual shower, before the enforced intense social contact.”

b. Does research need to resort to marketing and public relations? This is actually my main objection. If I am to try to impress people and “socialize” my ideas, I might as well be in business.

What am I trying to say really? Research has lost its innocence. At least, for me. And I don’t think I am alone: I have seen many colleagues across disciplines, who are burnt out. Let me preempt the comment: “surely, you are not doing well, that’s why”. I am actually doing great, thank you for asking5. It is just getting tiring after a while, the nitty-gritty, the sales pitch writing, trying to preempt reviewer laziness or incompetence, the personal feuds, the unaccountability, the politics (oh yes, I said it, the politics). I primarily feel for the students and assistant professors. So, is doing a start up better? Yes. Here are my top reasons why.

a. Getting start-up money is easier than getting an NSF grant for research. Private funds can be tricky, but SBIRs have better acceptance ratio than regular proposals.

b. The idea for a start-up does not have to reek of intellectual novelty: a simple idea that solves a practical problem is enough. It is a completely different mindset.

c. You get to make new friends. The entrepreneurship puts you in touch with a completely different crowd: successful business, rich people, lawyers. These people are around you directly, or within two-handshakes.

d. You can boast about your failures. Previous failures can be considered “street credit” and “battle scars”5. They say investors are interested in “serial entrepreneurs”.

e. You finally get to learn how to spell “entrepreneur”. It’s French5.

Interestingly, I have heard several colleagues, tell me that they don’t want to do a start-up because “you have to work hard”. Typically, these are the colleagues that will routinely burn themselves out for a paper deadline. No further comment.

Finally, here are some philosophical questions, that you have most likely never heard before.

a. Is a start the beginning of the end or is the end the beginning of a start?

It is a trick question. The answer is that the start and the end are practically the same thing, except that, in the start, you get to pick names for the company.

b. Is the start better or is it the end? Or is it the middle?

Given the above Greek proverb, starting is half the effort, so you are already in the middle. Now whether the end is better, it will depend. For example, if the end of your start-up finds you alone in a golden bathtub the size of a small lake, hazy from drugs, wondering who you can trust, while a killing squad from a Columbian drug cartel is breaking through the security of your mansion, then you are most likely re-enacting Scarface, and, no, this end is not that good.

4. ADVICE AND NONSENSE

Initially, I thought I could compile some advice and information for people that are thinking of doing start-ups. But, this would have ended up being useful, and that’s not how we roll in this column. So, here is some more thoughts organized as lists.

Top-10 reasons to do a startup.

1. You have already found the coolest domain name, and it would be a shame to not use it.
2. You feel that if you don’t do it and someone else does it and makes money, you will hate yourself forever.
3. You are running out of excuses for avoiding social interaction.
4. You want to get laid.
5. You want to buy a new car.

Top-10 reasons not to do a start-up.

1. You are lazy, stupid, ineffective or all of the above.
2. You hate people. Especially, touching them.
3. Your business partner is a deranged sociopath, has a history of corporate fraud, or sacrifices small mammals to some obscure ancient God.

Note: the above list holds the record for the shortest top-10 list in the world. The previous record was held by the list before that, but it lost fair and square.

5. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

I would love to make a collection of stories and anecdotes regarding start-ups. So, if you have started, thought about starting, or had a friend that started a business, send me an email. It can be funny, sad, or educational.

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3I am coming off one of the most inconceivably successful years in terms of writing proposals. Two years ago, I had my students ask for spare change in street corners. Two years from now, who knows?

4Quoting Jennifer Rexford again: “On street cred... Don’t we get street cred for rejected SIGCOMM submissions? Damn, I was hoping for that if nothing else.”

5It comes from the word “entreprendre” which loosely means “to get in the middle of things and make crazy money”.

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