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Felix Rolka

Founding member of Evanium Healthcare
(The company focuses on modulation of alcohol-sensitive receptors, aiming to reduce damage caused by alcohol-consumption.)

1. Your company belongs to the pharmaceutical business, are you producing anything at the moment?

Currently we are in the research phase. This generally encompasses a long period in the pharmaceutical industry. Our team has built up during the event called ‘startup factory’ of the ‘BioPark’ two years ago. We won this contest and have been pursuing our idea since then. At the moment we have researched and approached far enough to experiment on the production tests of our pharmaceutical. Currently we assess our experiments and examine the necessary steps of the patent law. We are in the final steps of our basic research and are going to work on our product concept.

2. How did you get the idea to produce a pharmaceutical which reduces the adverse health effects of alcohol consumption?

My colleagues David and Carlo came up with the idea at the ‘startup factory’, where we became a team. The origin is obvious. Alcohol is an omnipresent neurotoxin with tremendous adverse effects. The mechanism of intoxication is very complex and we encountered them scientifically. In the beginning our team consisted of seven members and now there are three left. David studies pharmacy and I study business administration. Carlo is engaged in legal terms of our work which constitutes a big issue due to regulations in the pharmaceutical sector. Our aim is to reduce the damage of alcohol particularly on the nervous system.

3. How does your product work and does it have any disadvantages?

The core is to protect the body against alcohol which is a toxin by definition. Alcohol works in many places at the same time and causes diverse damage. We try to counter particularly the effect on the brain. In theory there shouldn't be any adverse effects of our drug. By the status of the pharmaceutical substance class of our product the dose to trigger observably adverse effects exceeds the dose used by us by 100 times. So, we anticipate no disadvantages according to the pharmaceutical theory. We modify a precedent substance, which is largely researched and apply it in another way. Our product would be classified as supplement rather than a drug and hence this facilitates the legal requirements.

4. What is the target group of the product?

We currently have different market approaches with different target groups. When we focus on an over-the-counter product - the main target groups are people with occasional risky alcohol consumption, which usually means more than 3 beers - a consumption that makes alcohol damage relevant - here we want to reduce harm. I clarify here that our product would reduce the damage of the inflammations caused by alcohol for instance, but alcohol consumption would be still damaging. It is comparable with the picture using a filter in cigarettes. In contrast with this example our product would have considerable effects on the well-being of the consumer. But also the development of a pharmaceutical drug is possible, for example as an emergency drug for alcohol poisoning.

5. When could you actually produce a product and what is necessary to enter the market?

There are high legal regulations in the pharmaceutical industry, which require efforts, time and money. Studies have to be conducted depending on the application and effect of the product. Furthermore, we will have to negotiate with investors and find access to the difficult marketing and supplying network and possible legal disputes. Big companies are significantly better prepared and so selling the company or rather licensing the patent to them is more lucrative and also usual in the sector. Our product is far in its conception, but for real medication thresholds like the production process other mentioned points have to be approached. I would assume the possibly access would be soonest in two years. There are some classic startup-rules like enter the market soon, make revenue fast and if you fail do it early, but that's not possible for our product.

6. Do you get money from the government or support otherwise?

There are some interesting possibilities in Germany, though a lot of them have very special criteria. The state Bavaria is giving us a research grant – the “Innovationsgutschein Bayern” - which significantly supports us and another grant for patenting our research. Investors would be helpful, but we could approach with our own capital. Of course, we could research with immense advantages with additional money, but the further approaches are till negotiations with the investors the stronger is your position. There was a project we applied for successfully including a credit. It was closer to a possible market entry, but we decided to focus on the main project and eventually declined the credit. At the moment we run on acquired money from friends and family, stayed independent and can provide a strong database for negotiations soon.

7. Who assesses your work and supports you?

We work together with the University of Regensburg and Würzburg. We received positive feedback by professors as well as positive results by simulations of the drugs effect in computer simulations and the laboratory on living cells. In the beginning there have been a lot of setbacks as things didn't work out like we theoretically predicted. But we progressed well and are very satisfied with our current status. The university embodies an important consultant regarding our research.

8. Are you exclusively focused on this project?

In fact, we were interested in two other projects. And until now we have several ideas, but to me it seems decisive that we concentrate our efforts on our current topic. At a point we had recognized that you can't pursue multiple ideas simultaneously and committed ourselves to our main project. Even as three-person team you must focus on one project – at least in this size - since it means a lot of work.

9. What do you contribute while working on the chemical development of a product?

We are currently in the research phase that's right, but also the economic aspects prevail. Recently I am engaged in planning the financing for the current research block, which is quite expensive for our company. You have to distribute the money and it requires an economical mindset. There are following questions I have to consider: “Should we conduct anything?”, “Is it possible?”, “Where are the borders?” and eventually weigh where to invest. I need to check the financial possibilities in combination with the importance for the company while planning tasks. Notably for investors there is a business plan required.

For all that a degree in business administration isn't necessary, especially for small enterprises it's important that anyone can acquire the know-how and economical mindset by themselves – as long as you are interested in the matter.

10. What advice could you give to establish a successful startup?

Team constellation. First there should be a balance of competences. Besides technical and scientific aspects the economical aspects should not be neglected. As a startup founder you are supposed to be much more a generalist than a specialist. Just focusing on the technology or service could be obstructive at a point.

Secondly there is the aspect of team chemistry. In our team we harmonize and have a close relationship of trust. You already have to rely on each other in the beginning of the mutual project. If you start to think competitive among the colleagues, the company is predisposed to fail. Eventually it is a mix, different teams have different mixtures but there is no pure composition of exclusive specialists.

11. What where the challenges in your company?

Of course it's compelling to believe in your enterprise and perform with your concentrated power. Nevertheless, you should realize when you're stuck and then contemplate the idea or find another way. In the beginning we had several setbacks and doubts about the success of creating a useful product. So you have to build a resistance against frustration to succeed finally. This was one of the most important points. Looking forward, new challenges will follow since we begin an actual startup phase just now after two years.

12. What where your intentions to establish the startup?

I already founded a startup in the past as a pupil. I would say the first startup was just to try what happens when you perform the first steps. From my family background and my course of studies startups were interesting for me. So I attended the 'startup factory'. In this contest you create a business case. As a group of seven people we won. This is a relatively high number of members for startups. The result was that the current three heads stuck to the idea till now. Fundamentally it was a coincidence. I appreciate that our profession requires certain skills and experiences you are enabled to acquire, which is very attractive to me. Frankly I admit that my time for academical education decreased and the company determines most time of my live. But because I enjoy my work I can enjoy everything I do.

13. What is your advice for other founders?

I think every startup is a different case. Basically I would advise to go through your life with open eyes, be eager to learn and dedicate your time with passion. Many people perceive the products they encounter every day as perfect. In fact there is a lot that could be improved. The point is you have to go through your live with open eyes. Why should we three individuals have an unprecedented idea – there are no indications for comparable researches – if the pharmaceutical companies research that much? A lucky coincidence. Be curious and willing to learn.

Interview: Uliana Abuzova and Bruno von Brüning

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