Profiles in entrepreneurial spirit

Barcelona Activa has created a successful model for helping start-up businesses negotiate the challenges of their own

BEN NEALE

- The heart of Poblenou’s 22@innovation district is precisely where you’d expect to find the headquarters of Barcelona Activa, the city’s entrepreneurial engine and a model of its kind in Europe. It was founded over 20 years ago to give both businesses and job-seekers a helping hand, and among its services is the tricky task of incubating start-up companies. An on-site facility hosts up to 60 start-ups for three years at a time. Along with access to support services, such as reception, meeting rooms and IT, the incubator helps with exposure to investors, marketing contacts and business seminars. In return, they must provide solid and compelling business plans, and make a contribution to the costs of their accommodation. After three years, most of Barcelona Activa’s start-ups are ready for life outside the incubator. Some move on to the Parc Tecnologic, in Barcelona’s Nou Barris, also run by Barcelona Activa, which is the follow-on to its incubator.

BMAT: on the ‘BODiBEAT’

- Founded just 18 months ago, BMAT is the youngest company in this group. It’s a spin-off from the Music Technology Group (MTG) of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the world’s largest research group in music. The company was created to commercialise the latest technologies emerging from MTG, and to develop relationships with firms such as Yamaha. BMAT is in an international race to exploit Google-style algorithms that will allow consumers to interact with music in new ways. One such product is called “BODiBEAT,” a Yamaha-backed MP3 player for joggers that matches the beat of the music with your heart rhythms. Another enhances karaoke performances, and already sells very well in Japan. It’s still early for BMA, but a key aspect of Barcelona Activa’s support has been help with publicity. However, as co-founder and Chief Strategy Officer Alex Loscos (right) says transcribing technology from a small company to bigger ones is challenging. "Promoting our new wave solutions to big foreign companies is a difficult sell," he says. Loscos says he is not only promoting the BMAT brand, but Barcelona as well. If the team succeeds in getting its technology into MP3 players and online services ahead of competitors, BMAT expects to at least treble its personnel over the next three years. Future employees will need both the music knowledge and business skills to strike such deals.

Digital Samba: web-conference player

- Digital Samba is near the end of its stay in the incubator. Formed by an international trio of young web-designers, the company is drawing on Apple’s philosophy of designing solutions people love to use. After coming up with various has landed contracts with US hospitals that use the technology to train their staff. Digital Samba’s founders say the incubator helped get the company off the ground, and it is now ready to strike out on its own. Its work now is to make its

GNE: mission-critical communications

- Global Network Engineering (GNE) skipped the incubator stage and went directly to the Parc Tecnologic. Spun-off five years ago from the Elecnor Group, a Spanish construction company, GNE designs and builds complex communications solutions used in sensitive environments such as power stations. The products are termed “mission-critical” and incorporate very high levels of resilience to ensure they cannot fail. GNE has already undertaken 45 projects in 18 countries, mainly in the Middle East, Africa and South America. It’s in the lucrative market where large companies usually do not venture and GNE has established subsidiaries in Mexico and Chile. Carlos Sier Otero (above), managing director, says the environment of the Tecnologic made the set-up process smooth.

Southwing gains altitude

- The company that’s been around longest and ventured farthest from its origins in the incubator at Barcelona Activa is Southwing, created by Dutch entrepreneur Bart Huiskens (right) in 2000. It moved to nearby carrier Air3 in 2006. It now has teams in the US, Europe, and Asia. The company is a leading specialist in web-conferencing and video-conferencing, and is active in Antonio meeting, events, and business communications pods. Southwing is a leader in the field with a team of developers and engineers working on cutting-edge technology. The company has a strong track record of success and continues to grow its customer base around the world.

The common space of Barcelona Activa’s start-up incubator in Poblenou