

Supernova – homing in on the stars

How do you find high-tech entrepreneurs – the men and women whose ideas could be worth millions? Many companies search far and wide for the best new business talent, but BT has found the answer closer to home with Brightstar – an initiative that supports high tech business ideas from its own people. *sphere* looks at an innovative development.

Brightstar, based at Adastral Park, Martlesham is the most ambitious and exciting programme for budding entrepreneurs ever run by BT. It aims to get the best high-tech business ideas from its own people off the ground and provide value worth at least £100 million within three years.

Brightstar's creative leader Harry Berry said the fact that BT held 13,000 patents was an indication of the enterprise and the quality of BT people.

"BTexaCT at Adastral Park is a global centre of excellence and, as the home of leading edge research, it is a hotbed of high-tech talent," he said. "We are harnessing that talent and providing the know-how and finance to create winners in the new wave economy.

"If you combine this with the ideas and intellectual capital generated by our people, you end up with a very rich asset base. To make the most of this asset, we need to create a culture of innovation and enterprise and that's where Brightstar kicks in."

Brightstar works in partnership with external investors to bring ideas to life. Venture capital company 3i is an early supporter of the initiative and holds a 37.5 per cent stake in Brightstar's first launch – a network management software business known as Truth Consulting and Technology.

Four high tech projects have now been launched as companies through Brightstar, with a further ten in what's termed as 'incubation'. Incubation prepares entrepreneurs for life as fully fledged businesses and typically lasts between three and six months after which the project is spun out as an independent company.

Chris Winter, head of business development for Brightstar helps turn ideas into successful businesses and looks after the pre-incubation stages of would be Brightstar companies.

Chris invites ideas and helps the very best to gain approval as candidates for incubation.

His considerable academic and technical credentials, together with his own experience of running a start-up company, make him ideal for the job.

Said Chris: "If people want to talk to me about their prospects, I'm pretty candid. When they ask me what it's like, I say it's hard work and can be risky. But at the same time, Brightstar has created the environment for truly innovative people to flourish."



Growing business: Creative leader for Brightstar Harry Berry (right) with team member Robert Walker outside the Adastral Park incubator.

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“To begin with, they might be small companies in BT terms, but there’s no telling what they might eventually be worth. BT gains, our partners gain and our people gain.”

Full support

During incubation, BT people work full time on the project which is fully funded by the company and benefit from business development support together with sales, marketing and administrative support. Incubating companies create a robust business plan and begin talking to potential investors, suppliers and customers.

Rocking Frog – one of the businesses to be born through Brightstar incubation – is soon to be launched and provides an intelligent application for delivering highly personalised and location-dependent information to mobile internet users.

It means customers get precise information – from football results to local cinema information – rather than just a list of options from a search engine.

The idea for the application came from work on mobile technology and one of its founders, Barry Crabtree said that being part of the Brightstar incubator had really accelerated progress enabling the team to focus on developing the business, with full support and guidance.

PsyTechnics is another leading-edge Brightstar incubator company based around what is termed as ‘perceptual engineering.’ This work centres on harnessing the power of human perception within technology – enabling products or services to be optimised in terms of the quality the end customer experiences.

Intelligent monitoring of speech quality over telecommunications networks is one area where PsyTechnics will have a big impact. But its applications could also have wider uses such as in the broadcast and entertainment industry or guaranteeing quality in web-based call centres. PsyTechnics is set to spin out as a business soon.

Harry Berry believes Brightstar companies like Rocking Frog and PsyTechnics offer huge opportunities for everyone.

“To begin with, they might be small companies in BT terms, but there’s no telling what they might eventually be worth. BT gains, our partners gain and our people gain.” he said.

3i recognises exciting potential

Europe’s leading venture capital company 3i has been involved with Brightstar from the start and following the launch of Truth Consulting and Technology last March, 3i has met with the Brightstar team to discuss further collaborations.

3i investment manager Robin Winning said there were an enormous number of interesting technologies that although not core to BT, had an exciting market potential and that Brightstar provided an ideal vehicle to transform great ideas into robust businesses.

“Brightstar enables BT to assess and develop these opportunities and get potential funders such as us to offer support,” he said. We can discuss how we can work together to take what is an early stage proposal and build a commercial business around it



Network gain for Truth and Motorola

Truth Consulting and Technology Ltd – Brightstar’s first launch company – has joined forces with Motorola to distribute a unique software testing tool for use on the new General Packet Radio Service (GPRS) network.

The Ipswich based company has developed a software for Motorola application developers to test and tune new applications before they are used on the GPRS network. Motorola will be providing GPRS networks for the world’s leading wireless companies.

Russell Cameron, CEO of Truth said “The agreement is a powerful endorsement of the unique and flexible architecture we’ve developed for the effective testing, emulation and monitoring of advanced networks. We’re confident it will give Motorola and its partners a competitive advantage in the growing mobile internet market place.”

Further incubators

Brightstar’s success looks likely to lead to further incubators around the UK. And there are plans for overseas incubators.

Brightstar also has the seal of approval from the Government, following a recent visit to the incubator by Minister for E-Commerce, Patricia Hewitt.

In a speech to the House of Commons after her visit she said it was extremely encouraging to see ‘a marriage of scientific research and entrepreneurship’.

And Stewart Davies, managing director of BTexaCT, said his organisation and Brightstar were unlocking BT’s expertise and value, as well as helping to support economic growth in the Cambridge-to-Ipswich Hi-Tech Corridor.