Pauline Issard

Job title: Co-Founder & CEO at Trackener
Graduation date: 2015
Degree: MSc Technology Entrepreneurship

What did you study at UCL?

I studied industrial engineering in France and then came to UCL to do an MSc in Technology Entrepreneurship.

Did you start your company straight after your MSc?

I started Trackener during the master's. We worked on our business ideas throughout the whole course, and if you have a good business idea, then it's a dissertation subject, so my dissertation was mainly about the ideation, market research and quick paper-based app prototyping. I met my co-founder Jeremie during this period and we then officially created the company in September 2015, which is exactly when I submitted my dissertation.

What was your motivation behind starting a business?

I wanted to get a role where I could be involved in technical product development but from a high level perspective and do various tasks – I figured out that starting a tech business was a good way to get that. Originally my plan was to work as an engineer for four-five years to get some experience and then start a business, but I heard about this MSc course from a friend, and decided to do it right away, as I knew that later I wouldn't have the motivation to go back to studies. It helped me to get the business skills that I was missing, but I didn't think I would start the business right after the master's. The degree was very hands on, and I realised the conditions were perfect for starting the business.

What is you view on reaching out to companies directly rather than going through an application process?

As a recruiter I prefer it this way, as it is usually the most motivated people who do that. Also, whenever we are looking for candidates, I always spread the word among my network, so someone can recommend someone, and it usually the most efficient method.

I think finding a dream job is possible and I'm always encouraging people to dare contacting people or companies they would love to work with. Don't take a job by default but really think through what you're looking for in a job and create the opportunities!

What form of networking do you think is the most efficient?

I think that going to events is very useful, as long as it's targeted – go to the events for the sector you are interested in. For example you don't go to an event just for networking, you go to an event because you are interested in the talks and you take the opportunity to network afterwards.

LinkedIn also works very well, as long as the message is right. You don't just say "I'm looking for a job and I saw you working there", it's more like "I saw you working in this company as a data scientist for five years, I would love to hear about your experience, I'm sure you have some great things to share", and then while meeting the person, you can always mention that you are looking for a job, and then they can spread the word. And don't hesitate to contact influential people, as you would be surprised about how responsive and friendly people are in general when you're genuinely interested about what they do!

What has been the best thing about being an entrepreneur so far?

The most rewarding thing is seeing the achievements and the results, seeing people trusting in our team, as well as meeting some amazing people. As an entrepreneur you have to build everything from scratch and every little success is hugely rewarding.

What about the biggest challenges?

There are challenges all the time. Being an entrepreneur is a real roller-coaster, there can be super good news and super bad news in the same day. For example last week, on Monday and Tuesday I just wanted to give up everything and just get a 9-5 job because we had some troubles with the electronics, and then Thursday and Friday were just great because of good sales meetings and problems getting solved. There are some sacrifices you have to make, for example not having a great salary, or maybe no salary at all at the beginning, and also having to work very hard.

The biggest challenge however is that everything is to be built. You are on your own and you have to build up your network, your team, find investors… That's the everyday challenge.

What should be a person's motivation to start their own venture?

It's definitely not for the money, I would say it's for the variety. Two things that drove me is that I wanted to have the responsibility that I wouldn't have otherwise, to be able to really make decisions, to drive things, to manage people and to be able to achieve more. I love the variety of tasks. In the 'junior' world you prepare the presentations and reports for the senior management, but you yourself rarely go in key meetings or have the power to be heard. On the other hand, as a tech start-up manager, in the same day you could be an HR person, do some accounting, and finish the day with some data science or product management.

What advice would you give to someone looking to either work in a start-up or start their own company?

I think the point about the variety of tasks is also true for being one of the few employees in a start-up. For someone hesitating whether to start their own business working for a young startup is always a good idea. In my case for example, while I was studying in France I did a project with HelloFresh, which at the time was still a small start-up, and I discovered what it was like working in a start-up, how everyone were doing a bit of everything, and that's what I liked.

The biggest advice I would give to anyone is to start building a network and share your ideas. Start-up world is quite small and friendly, so getting out there and meeting people is very important. Don't stay on your own, find people who can share their expertise and learn from them.

And of course, the most important thing is to get started and try – even if you fail, you will have learnt tons on the way!