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From inventor to CEO: TRUMPF lets employees found their own start-ups

TRUMPF employees often have "eureka moments" at work – the sudden inspiration of a brilliant business idea that they just can't get out of their heads. Fortunately, support for in-house entrepreneurs is on hand from the company's intrapreneurship and incubation program, which boosts employees' chances of turning their start-up idea into a successful venture.

It can be tricky to find the entrance to the Steyg co-working space, which is tucked away in narrow courtyards not far from Stuttgart's main train station. To get here, you have to follow a series of handwritten signs. The 2,000-square-meter space was previously home to banks and the local health authorities, but recent years have seen up-and-coming companies give it a whole new lease of life.

Steyg proved to be the perfect location for "Internehmertum", an intrapreneurship and incubation initiative launched by TRUMPF in 2017. It allows employees from any part of the company to try out new business ideas and – if the conditions are right – to put them into practice. The space was deliberately chosen to break with TRUMPF's normal working environment; with its radically different pace, look, atmosphere and culture, it inspires new ways of thinking. The time the participants spend here feels like diving into a whole new world.

With its rough-and-ready plywood walls and tables, Steyg is a versatile space that offers flexible work areas, plenty of team rooms and multifaceted event spaces. "The main focus here is on inspiring and learning from each other by networking and sharing ideas," says Dina Kohler, who has been running the program for the past two years. A few months ago, another Internehmertum incubation round came to a successful conclusion. The five start-up teams had spent nearly three months evaluating the technical feasibility and market opportunities of their concepts, with TRUMPF allowing them to spend half of their contractually agreed working hours on the project.

They support the teams in developing their ideas: Dina Kohler, program manager entrepreneurship (right) with Samuel Rumpf (center) and Felix Weyer (left), two coaches from the Berlin-based company builder "BridgeMaker".

In a relaxed atmosphere: The teams discuss their start-up ideas critically again and again and develop a detailed concept.

The jury with the last five teams of the previous Internehmertum final round in 2022.

Better sheet-metal parts with AI

Jonas Steiling, Max Hesselbarth and their team have long since made the leap into self-employment. Their Optimate start-up was incorporated in TRUMPF's intrapreneurship program in late 2019 and has set the benchmark for every project since. They launched an AI-based software solution that enables sheet-metal fabricators to optimize part design and reduce manufacturing costs. Users simply upload the CAD data for their parts to the online platform, and the AI instantly calculates where they could pare down their use of material or replace welds with bends. The algorithm also detects design errors, such as cut-outs that are too close to a bending edge.

Optimate was a 'first mover', the first business to provide a product of this kind, and it has been steadily gaining new users ever since the platform launched. The next milestone is to teach the software to identify assemblies that have potential for optimization and to make it available as a plug-in solution directly integrated into the design tools of well-known CAD providers.

Say thank you with Kunveno

Ever since working together in TRUMPF's corporate IT department, former colleagues Yannick Dickel, Tim Taraba and Dennis Knotz have been driven by the goal of promoting a culture of recognition and appreciation in the workplace. "Saying thank you to colleagues, especially those in different teams, is an important skill, even if it's just showing appreciation for something small! We believe it's key to a positive culture of communication – and it strengthens people's sense of belonging," says Tim Taraba from the start-up Kunveno.

Kunveno offers virtual notice boards where employees can leave electronic Post-it notes. These offer a designated space where people can express mutual praise and appreciation – not just in individual teams, but also across separate departments and different hierarchical levels. An initial version of the application has been up and running in the TRUMPF IT department since 2019, and it is also available to any other departments on request. The team is currently working on integrating Kunveno into communication tools such as Microsoft Teams and Slack and will subsequently look at apps for the Android and iOS mobile operating systems.

<h2>» The main focus is on inspiring and learning from each other by networking and sharing ideas. «</h2> Dina Kohler, manager of TRUMPF's intrapreneurship program

Learn faster from mistakes

The business cases that pass through TRUMPF's intrapreneurship program don't always prosper. Program manager Dina Kohler confirms that around half of the start-ups quit the program after three months. Putting business ideas under such intensive scrutiny sometimes reveals weaknesses nobody had noticed before, such as problems with the technology or the make-up of a team. "That's to be expected – and it's why we're here to help! We want the participants to encounter that feeling of making mistakes as early as possible so they can learn how to do things differently and better," says Kohler. And even if the team ultimately decides to drop the idea, it still ranks as a useful learning experience.

Internehmertum goes global

Dina Kohler is determined to see many more start-ups reap the benefits of the incubation program and achieve rapid commercial success with or without financial investment from TRUMPF. Since 2022, Kohler has significantly expanded the intrapreneurship program's geographical reach. Employees from the USA can now also submit applications for upcoming funding rounds over the intranet. Her goal continues to be to foster creativity and boost entrepreneurial thinking. And she is as confident as ever that the international TRUMPF community has the necessary inspiration to bring that goal to fruition.

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