

Taking the Leap into the Start-Up Life: It's Not All About You

By Jonathan Dean

Walking into the Cross Campus facility was quite a sight to behold, as compared to the quiet little street it is located on in Santa Monica. Upon entry, I was greeted by a friendly receptionist who sat behind a front desk made of LEGO bricks. The playful construction of the desk gave me the feeling that this is not a typical office full of cubicles and monotonous tasks. Meeting Dan Dato for the first time reinforced this belief, as the man goes through his workday in jeans and a T-shirt.

Mr. Dato gave me a warm welcome with a friendly smile as we took a tour of the facility. I found Dan to be a very engaging and energetic person who loves what he does and is full of humility. As we walked, he interacted with everyone we passed, trading pleasantries and ideas with Cross Campus members. After viewing the many rooms and work areas, we sat down in what is typically considered a lounge area, but is in fact where most of the creativity at Cross Campus. Mr. Dato was kind enough to indulge our curiosity about what it means to him to “take the leap” into entrepreneurship.

After speaking with the start-up expert, a question had formed in my brain: ever just found yourself just sitting in a chair in a semi-dark room alone, staring blankly at a computer screen in an effort to put that great idea into practice? This is what Dan Dato saw when he first arrived in Southern California in the mid-1990s. The entrepreneurial ecosystem was virtually non-existent in the area, with no real established start-up community, let alone any resources to draw upon. Everything was in Silicon Valley, the heart for start-up companies who were looking to take their innovations into the future. Much like an actor having to move to Hollywood to be successful, so it was for start-ups in Silicon Valley. Dato was unsatisfied with this trend and was personally ready to do something about it.

Cross Campus was created from Dato's frustration, which stemmed not from anger, but from disappointment that the established culture for entrepreneurs and innovators in Los Angeles and the surrounding counties was stagnant and unchanging. Dato lamented that although Southern California has some of the best universities in the country, including three of the top ten technology schools nationwide, these resources were going virtually unused by the community. These "raw materials" consisting of education and technology were abundant in Los Angeles, just waiting to be utilized. Dato decided to use his experience and expertise in start-up situations to establish an environment in which an entrepreneur could truly grow by bringing many of them together for collaborative efforts.

Dato drew inspiration for Cross Campus from other start-up accelerator programs he had observed have success other cities, including Tech Stars of Boulder, Colorado and Tech Wildcatters of Dallas, Texas. Dato had visited with the people who had begun these programs, and mired at the success they had brought to their respective entrepreneurial communities in 2010. The idea to create a workspace environment where enterprising individuals could come and let their creativity guide their success and the success of others was born in 2010 as Upstart LA, the precursor to Cross Campus.

In mid-2011, Dato met his soon-to-be business partner Ronen Olshansky, a fellow entrepreneur with his own take on business sense. Dato remarked that he and his new-found partner "fell in love with each other's business," and described the relationship formed between himself and Olshansky as peanut butter and chocolate. "These individually were great, but when you put them together, they were special and unique." Thus, a new venture was born from Dato and Olshansky, combining their passion, expertise, and experience to form Cross Campus, now located in Santa Monica.

Dato admitted that there were plenty of challenges along the way up to the present time, but his perseverance and experience in building previous start-up companies has kept him on the right path for Cross Campus. Most of the challenges Dato faced when

starting and nurturing a community-based business incubator were not unlike most other start-ups: identifying his great idea, implementing it, and delivering a product/service that people were willing to pay for.

Dato knew going in that Cross Campus was not going to blossom, or “go viral” as he put it, overnight. The road was tough ahead, but not completely unfamiliar to the entrepreneur. It has been well-established that he has had much to do in the way of changing Southern California’s cultural outlook on the start-up ecosystem and its place in generating wealth.

When asked about Cross Campus’ mission as a start-up helping other start-ups to succeed, Dato simply stated that such a thing could take up to 15 to 20 years to complete. He noted that most entrepreneurs in the Southern California area are novices as compared to their Silicon Valley counterparts, and that his plan was to help as many of them along as he could to bring up the general expertise of newer company heads starting out.

Dato also believes that being an entrepreneur and trying to implement that next big idea is a full-time job, requiring all of one’s perseverance, stamina, energy, and conviction to make any kind of progress. Too many entrepreneurs try to swing the part-time passion of making their dream a reality, but this method is ultimately ineffective, as other obligations and commitments only hurt the dream, not put it into practice; to be successful, a person has to “grind it out.”

Dato concedes that working out of a bedroom or a coffee shop can also hurt one’s ability to let his or her creative juices flow, as such places are fairly sterile environments with too many ambient noises and distractions to keep a serious entrepreneur off-track. Sterile environments can slow down progress, which sets Cross Campus apart from other workspaces and business incubators.

Dato and his partner have gone to great lengths to make the Cross Campus facility as comfortable and homey as possible, providing areas and rooms that encourage people to sit, stand, and interact together to trade ideas and gain feedback. The idea behind replacing stiff office chairs with couches and white boards was to alleviate the sense of isolation entrepreneurs can feel. Removing barriers between people, whether physical or mental, provides that sense of community for the start-up members of Cross Campus, so that they can fuel one another's creativity.

Time was another consideration that Dato stressed when implementing the Cross Campus dynamic. He considers time to be an entrepreneur's greatest resource, as opposed to the popular belief that money is what is needed most. Dato made the point that money can always be raised, but time is something that one can never get back. Time is precious, and Cross Campus looks to help members allocate their time better as entrepreneurs, as better time management always leads to speeding up initial processes and overcoming obstacles.

For individuals who are not sure if they are ready to take the leap into entrepreneurship, knowing what it requires of the individual, Dato gives this advice: become educated. Becoming familiar with the start-up culture is always the best way to alleviate those early doubts about what to expect and how to go about making one's business happen. Education of entrepreneurship can be gained in a few ways. One of these is to seek formal education from universities for proper introduction to forming your own business. Another way is to attend meet-up events that bring entrepreneurs and would-be's together to mingle and communicate with one another for information gathering; this is a service that Cross Campus itself greatly advocates and holds many of these events on its premises. Lastly, Dato suggests that any start-up hopefuls that remain unsure to simply go get a position at an established start-up to view firsthand how start-ups work and what is required to make the business become successful. This last method provides real world experience to an individual and can provide more information in a short amount of time than the other two methods.

Dato pointed out that because of technological advances, creating a start-up has become easier, cheaper, and more accessible to younger individuals with great ideas. Although things like computers and certain software programs have streamlined many of the processes for start-ups, Dato stressed that expertise, experience, and business sense are still cornerstones for an entrepreneur looking to implement his or her idea past the initial start-up phase and becoming an established business. It should also be noted that many enterprising individuals do not put enough value on failures. Dato notes that it is through failures that entrepreneurs truly learn to hone their skills and ideas into workable business models.

A full-time commitment can be stressful on an individual and his or her relationships, so consideration must be taken when taking the leap into entrepreneurship. Marriages, friendships, and intimate courting can suffer from time taken away to devote to a start-up. Entrepreneurs must accept that their relationships, hobbies, and family more than likely will take a backseat in the entrepreneur's list of priorities, as long workdays and even later nights will become the norm. If a person wishes to balance their professional and personal lives, it must be done with others that are willing to make the same sacrifices as the entrepreneur in regard to time, money, and support.

Cross Campus aims to help with many of the challenges that start-ups experience by offering membership to entrepreneurs who seek a creative and collaborative environment to make their dream a reality. Dato believes that the facility best fits individuals who are willing to break out of their own comfort zones and become involved with others to benefit the start-up ecosystem community. There are no lone wolves at Cross Campus, as Dato also believes that no one gets a company off the ground alone. He wishes to provide a place where creativity can flow uninterrupted and unrestrained between people who wish for the success of others and themselves. There are many challenges that an innovator faces today (the economy, financial stability, idea generation and implementation, etc.), but Dan Dato wants the entrepreneurial community to know that they are not alone in their struggles and is there to lend a helping hand for those who seek it.

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