Lessons from a Start-up

By Adi Gaskell
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Previously I interviewed Jonathan Lehrich, program director of the MIT executive MBA program on how they foster entrepreneurship amongst their students. Today we have Rob Mancabelli and Hisham Anwar with us to talk about BrightBytes, the start-up they founded as part of their EMBA studies at MIT.

BrightBytes is an educational data analytics company. It delivers decision-support tools that (1) enable educational leaders to build 21st century learning environments, and (2) enable educational technology companies to measure the effectiveness of their products and services.

Is the service aimed at the corporate market or the schools market?

Both. First, the platform serves the needs of educational leaders around the globe. These leaders work in school districts, regional agencies, states or national departments of education. Second, the platform is built for educational technology companies to evaluate the effectiveness of their products and services.

How did you get the idea for the business?

BrightBytes was started by two friends, one an educational thought leader (Rob) and the other a silicon-valley technology leader (Hisham). They met on the first day of the EMBA program at MIT, and they quickly became friends. They discovered a shared passion for improving education, and during the next two years, they spent countless hours analyzing the K-12 educational technology space to determine the biggest needs in that market.

Their conclusion? While technology has become an indispensable part of learning, there's currently no easy way to separate the effective application of technology for learning from mundane usage that just wastes time and money. There's also no way for educational technology companies to measure the impact of their products and services. With billions spent annually on ed-tech, this inability to measure the impact of this investment creates inefficiencies that deeply impact student learning, school budgets and stakeholder confidence.
What role did MIT play in taking the business from idea to start-up?

Both founders met at Sloan while attending the MBA program. The expertise gained from that program, combined with MIT's entrepreneurial resources, enabled them to grow BrightBytes from a "back-of-the-napkin idea" to a revenue generating business in less than three months. MIT also provided a path that led to venture capital, industry expertise and advice from specialists. Not a month goes by when their MIT network is not engaged in someway to unstick an issue, accelerate growth, or provide assistance in some form.

What were your biggest challenges?

When launching a startup there’s a lot of variability and risk that needs to be systematically addressed. BrightBytes is a data-driven company that experiments every week on ways to minimize risk in a host of different areas. The company's biggest accomplishment so far is over-coming the long sales cycle and sales channel challenges inherent to the education market.

Does MIT still contribute to the business now?

Some highlights of MIT's role at BrightBytes
- Two MIT alumni and one professor are on the company's advisory board
- We have monthly meetings with MIT's Venture Mentoring Service, an organization that delivers advice to startups
- One of our investors is a direct connection from MIT
- One of the key members of our management team is a graduate of MIT Sloan
- We often reach out to professors and alumni for advice and introductions. Their openness and willingness to help is remarkable, even with people we don't know.