

ATSUMA TECHNOLOGY

The project Atsuma Technology was joint first prize winners of the 2001/2002 Startup@Singapore competition.

The Beginning

Imagine having the power of a supercomputer but without having to pay for it through your nose. Thanks to the efforts of Associate Professor Teo Yong Meng and his team partner Johan Prawira Gozali, companies can now use the software the two developed to tap idle computing power and save money.

The two met when Gozali did his undergraduate research opportunity programme under Teo while in his second year at the National University of Singapore. At that time, Teo, a lecturer with the computer science department at NUS, was working with another Honours student on the project, which involved developing applications for grid systems - a system which connects high-performance computers in different locations, allowing them to share resources and boost processing power.

Gozali got along well with Teo and after he finished his third year project, was inducted into the team. At that stage, Teo was putting his idea to tests and speaking to some venture capitalists. Encouraged by Friar Tuck's win (whose members were also from NUS) at the previous Startup competition, the team decided to join to gather additional feedback on their idea.

Limitations

On the outset, the team was confident about their technology and even on the operation side of things, but felt the business aspect to be their weak point, as this was their first attempt at writing a business plan.

Teo said one of the main hurdles in writing the plan was in obtaining specific data on a projection for a particular area. Although they managed to get some of the information they needed from Infocomm Development Authority (IDA), it was not to the level of detail they had hoped. He said what was eventually incorporated in the business plan was public data the group found through the Internet. The kind of information they wanted was either not publicly available or too expensive to obtain. He said, "There were plenty of resources, but not all were useable, and we had to tailor them to our needs."

Nevertheless, the team was able to get enough help to complete their business plan. Being confident on the technical side, the pair sought help from a couple of mentors in the industry who helped them size up what numbers were achievable. They also had some help from the Industry Technology Relations Office at NUS.

Benefits

Teo and Gozali found the bootcamp organised by the competition particularly helpful. With the aid of their mentor's feedback who viewed their slides and presentations, the team was able to improve their preliminary sketch. With some sample work Teo accessed at a business competition at Nanyang Polytechnic and by attending talks and seminars, the team managed to further polish their plan. The area where Teo felt the team benefited the most was the feedback they received from the judges. The two rounds of feedback elicited many diverse comments and allowed Teo and Gozali to beef up problem areas in their plan that had not been foreseen earlier. Some of the things Teo learnt during this process was the difference between academic and industry research. He said:

“All along, I’ve been involved in academic research, and I think industry requirements could be somewhat different. Some of the technology that we have may not be relevant to the industry at this point in time. I think to be successful, it’s not about technology, but also about the relevance of a technology at that particular point of time.”

Despite some misgivings Teo had about not winning, Atsuma tied with Systeme Therapeutics for the top prize at the competition. Teo acknowledges things could have been very different if he and Gozali had not entered the competition. For starters, the team received the feedback they originally joined up for and also some much-needed publicity for their work. "Assuming we didn't join the competition, I think we would have had to get through the hurdle of introducing ourselves," he said.

Atsuma today

Today, Atsuma Technology, the first start-up in Singapore in grid computing, currently comprises Teo, Gozali and two other graduate students. In time, Teo hopes to expand his research team to at least ten members to concentrate on different aspects of the business. To date, Atsuma has built two applications for the Bioinformatic Institute and is exploring various collaborations with the Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing (CRISP) at NUS. With the market being rather depressed at the moment, Teo hopes to participate in the National Grid Plan and ride on the publicity of this national level initiative.