Off and Running

Alumni are finding creative ways of starting businesses soon after graduation — or even before.

RIT students have been doing exactly that since the university’s creation. But for many, the dream takes a different shape. A growing number of graduates are launching their own businesses, choosing to follow the entrepreneurial path.

“Every clear trend among students and graduates to embark on the independent road,” says Emanuel Contomanolis, associate vice president and director, Co-op and Career Services. “The environment at RIT, our culture of innovation, is well suited to encourage the entrepreneurial student.”

In fact, an estimated 10 percent of students have started businesses — typically something computer related — before entering RIT.

“Go to college, graduate and land the dream job with an important company,” says Otamendi. “But many, the dream takes a different shape. A growing number of graduates are launching their own businesses, choosing to follow the entrepreneurial path.”

RIT alumni at Teldio Inc. are, from front to back, Nicolas Otamendi ’09, CEO; Bob McCook ’07, technical lead; and Mark Dabrowski ’08, technology director.

What drives them? We talked to a few of RIT’s newest entrepreneurs to learn their stories.

A friend in high places

Nicolas Otamendi was looking for a co-op job when opportunity knocked.

“Professor (Carl) Lundgren (mechanical engineering technology) asked me if I wanted to meet a billionaire,” says Otamendi ’09 (mechanical engineering technology).

Bob McCook ’07 (marketing) had a “techie sales job” with ESPN when he received a call from Richard DeMartino, director of RIT’s Simone Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship. “Dr. D invited me to ‘interview with a really famous rich guy’ ”

Mark Dabrowski ’08 (computer engineering technology) “couldn’t believe it” when he received an e-mail from Michael Eastman, department chair, Electrical, Computer and Telecom Engineering Technology Department, encouraging him to come to an unusual meeting. “I thought he was joking.”

It was 2007. The three were introduced to Sir Terrence Matthews, serial entrepreneur and knight of the British Empire. He has founded more than 80 companies and is current chairman of Wesley Clover Corp., a venture capital firm, and Mitel Networks Corp. and March Networks Corp., both involved in developing Internet Protocol (IP) systems.

Matthews has become a frequent visitor to RIT, giving presentations about business, meeting with students — and sometimes hiring them. Otamendi, who came to RIT from Argentina, McCook of Holmdel, N.J., and Dabrowski of Manchester, Conn., were soon on their tour many families, then out on their way to Matthews’ headquarters in Ottawa, Canada. “Their challenge: Take an idea and develop it into a viable business. Matthews would provide the idea, the funding — and an ambitious timetable.”

Their efforts led to Teldio Inc., which launched its first product, Radio Branch Exchange (RBX) platform in 2009. The patented technology allows telephone communication over two-way radios. Teldio formed an important partnership with Motorola and now has customers in 10 countries. In April, the company was named one of the Top 25 Up and Coming technology companies in Canada, and in June, Teldio opened a sales office in Chicago. They are currently focused on raising capital, growing the business and developing product ideas.

Otamendi is CEO, McCook is director of sales and marketing, and Dabrowski serves as technology director. Teldio has grown to 15 employees, including one more RIT grad, Ben Willis ’08 (computer engineering technology), of Lawrenceville, N.J., technical lead.

All agree they have had an amazing opportunity. But they work very hard, in fact, they work pretty much 24/7. Everything else comes second, says Otamendi.

“This is what you do when you’re 23. This is the time to work hard.”

“This is a lifestyle, not just a job. You live it. I always told my children as they grew up that if you can support yourself, that’s really good. If you can support a family, that’s better. If you can run an enterprise that can support many families, then you’re a hero.”

Sir Terrence Matthews, serial entrepreneur
We're not promising to solve world hunger, comfortable. product would make use of new materials pretty much unchanged for decades, says

The technology is out there to do this, “ he says. “Everyone

The website makes it easy for users to create a personal look and links to numerous social media sites – everything about you in one personalized package.

That’s the biggest reward for me. “

As a panelist at RIT’s first Shark Tank event, Bal Dixit had tough questions for the would-be entrepreneurs.

Rising from the flames

As a panelist at RIT’s first Shark Tank event, Bal Dixit had tough questions for the would-be entrepreneurs.

We're not promising to solve world hunger, but this is something people can benefit from. That’s the biggest reward for me.”

“Vimeo was amazing, “ says Zerby, who was offered the opportunity to become a partner in the new venture.

My biggest fear in starting a company is I could go on forever living in my parents’ base-

world. An engineer, Dixit worked for several major companies, ultimately setting up “the most modern factory in the world to manufacture asbestos” in Canada.

That was in the early 1970s. Then the Environmental Protection Agency deter-

There’s a personal page with a unique look and feel.

“Do you have any experience in this industry?”

“Who is your competition?”

“Who are your potential customers?”

“Do you have any experience in your product?”

This is a creation of Jack Zerby, son, Jack, and wife, Maria.

"Rich Dixit ’74 served as a panelist at the first ‘Shark Tank’ event in May. Student entrepreneurs gave short presentations on their business ideas and the panelists asked questions and awarded prizes. Dixit, a successful entrepreneur, is a member of the RIT Board of Trustees. (Photo by student photographer Rigo Perdomo)"

Bob McCook ’07, sales and marketing director, Teldio

High hopes and aspirations

The business idea that Sandra Turner and Chen-Chung Lin are working on isn’t exactly glamorous. But it could solve a real problem faced by many people. They're developing a product for people who perspire excessively.

“Once you get over the fear of losing stability, it’s so much more exciting than working for someone else. You’re in control, and there’s so much you can do.”

“Vimeo was amazing, “ says Zerby, who was offered the opportunity to become a partner in the new venture.

The only thing that survived the fire was our fabric. It’s a testimony to the people

“Vimeo was amazing, “ says Zerby, who was offered the opportunity to become a partner in the new venture.

The management wasn’t very interested.

Vimeo was amazing, “ says Zerby, who was offered the opportunity to become a partner in the new venture.

“Do you have any experience in your product?”

“Who is your competition?”

They're developing a product for people who perspire excessively.

Dixit pioneered the first global producer of high-temperature

We’re predicting the market to be a billion dollars, says Zerby. “That’s the biggest reward for me. “

"The free market is a very honest place and dictates which products are needed and which are not. Why would you develop something for your employer who is undervaluing you in the first place? Why not own what you develop and then sell to the end user?"
Tech companies this fall. (Photo by student this summer before starting work with are developing their own business ideas Greg Koberger '10, left, and Ian Mikutel '10. Mikutel heads for Seattle to become a professional. Koberger might have been tempted to spend this summer kicking back. Koberger might have been tempted to spend this summer kicking back. Koberger might have been tempted to spend this summer kicking back. Koberger might have been tempted to spend this summer kicking back.

Best of both worlds

After receiving their information technology degrees in May, Ian Mikutel and Greg Koberger might have been tempted to spend this summer kicking back. They both have enviable jobs starting in September: Koberger will go to work for Mozilla in San Francisco as a web developer; Mikutel heads for Seattle to become a programmer manager for Microsoft.

But since graduation, they have been focusing on their own company, 10 Tangent Labs, which will function as an umbrella for development of business ideas. “We have been working on a startup ideas all Internet-based,” says Mikutel. One possibility is Intersect, which won a top prize in the Alumni Association Board of Directors Innovation Incubator competition at this year’s Imagine RIT festival (see page 24 for a list of winners). Intersect is a tool that allows students to search for interesting and relevant college courses online, making the process of registering for courses more efficient and rewarding. Koberger started working on the idea nearly two years ago. They hope Intersect could someday be used by colleges anywhere.

Mikutel was in high school when he launched his first online venture – TheWiire. com, a website devoted to Nintendo Wii – in 2005, a year before the product came out. TheWiire.com features news, product reviews and podcasts. About 7,000 people all over the world tune in to listen to his updates, which include interviews with key industry figures. The site makes enough money through advertising to cover expenses, and Mikutel has a small volunteer staff including two programmers from Canada, a graphic designer from Washington state and an editor from Milwaukee.

Likewise, Mikutel and Koberger are working from different locations this summer; Mikutel at home in Glens Falls, N.Y., and Koberger with his family in Schaghticoke, N.Y., near Troy. They expect to continue collaborating on the side after starting their new jobs. Entrepreneurs is a passion for both, and they know they are not alone among RIT students and grads. This past spring, they created RIT48, a two-day event that brought students from across the campus baggage-free to collaborative coaching from business professionals and develop plans for startup companies. Ten teams participated.

“Being an entrepreneur is not for everybody,” Mikutel says. “I think it boils down to how much risk and uncertainty can you stomach. You have to get to use the idea of going against the grain. You have to be able to take criticism, you have to be willing to change when things don’t work out as you expected.”

“I’m looking forward to working at Mozilla,” says Koberger. “But I also like working for myself. I’m excited about seeing what we can do.”

Engineer, writer, movie mak-er

Nathan Mellenthien ’05, ’06 (mechanical engineering, MBA) started making movies in fifth grade. He also envisioned designing roller coasters.

When it came time to choose a career path, the practical side of his nature won out and he studied engineering because he felt the opportunities were promising. For the past four years, he has worked as a die technician for Dunlop Tire in Buffalo. He likes the work. But then, on a flight home from Seattle in 2008, a story idea came to mind.

“During my free time, I started writing a film script.” When he finished, he wanted to produce it as a live-action feature film. So he talked to an accountant to figure out how he could finance the project. That led him to set up his own company, Linkrose Productions.

“A lot of people put a lot of money on their hobbies,” he points out. “This could turn into a business.”

The project brought him back to RIT this spring, when he got permission to film a scene during the annual Tora-Con convention sponsored by RIT’s Anime Club. Mellen- thien’s movie is a love story about an engineer who works at a toy factory who meets a girl at an anime convention, then meets another girl and ends up caught between them.

“It’s not really based on my life,” he says. But the project is very closely entwined with his life at this point. Most of the actors and camera people are friends and family. He has set up his house like a movie studio. And his hobbies – anime, gaming – “have taken a seat back to seat.”

His parents, Donna and Don Kathke, have been very supportive. “I was kind of afraid to go to them at first. But I had a serious conversa-

sation with my mom and she said ‘Go for it.’”

Mellenthien hopes to hold the premiere at Anime North 2011 in Toronto next May and release the movie through independent channels.

While I love engineering, I love film work. It’s been a great experience. We’ve had a really good time. I can’t wait to see the finished product.”

Kathy Lindsay

Innovative programs provide kick start for emerging entrepreneurs

California’s Silicon Valley has roots deep in the classrooms and labs of Stanford University. Likewise, development of the Bostons high-tech corridor was largely driven by MIT (see page 27). Will programs now underway at RIT ultimately spur an economic and technical renaissance in the Rochester area?

Maybe so. The university is stepping up its efforts in this regard. The overall goal: Provide experiences, mentoring and coursework that foster entrepreneur thinking.

“Studies have proven that people who have had that experiential education are much more likely to start businesses later in life,” says Richard DeMartino, director of the Simone Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship and an associate professor of management, Saunders College of Business. “Maybe not right out of school, but soon after that. The age at which young college graduates start businesses is getting younger and younger.”

This is good news for the region, says Sandra Parker, president and CEO, Rochester Business Alliance.

“It has been the small businesses that have sustained the area over the past decade as the large companies have cut back,” she says. “It is going to be even more true in the future. We look to the young, educated people for the innovation and business growth we need and we work closely with the area colleges and universities to encourage that.”

Among the newest programs and facilities aimed at helping students nurture their inner entrepreneur are:

• Simone Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (SimoneCenter.rit.edu), founded four years ago, the umbrella for a collection of academic programs and facilities, including a student business incubator within RIT’s Venture Creation business incubator.

• Center for Student Innovation (innovation.rit.edu), a multi-faceted facility opened last year where students from all disciplines can collaborate, brainstorm, build, and showcase their ideas.

• Entrepreneurs Hall (entrepreneurship.rit.edu), which combines a residential facility and academic courses, mentoring, co-ops, and 24/7 access to the Center for Student Innovation. Entrepreneurs Hall, opening this September, gained national attention in “Incubation Nation: Where Great Ideas Are Born,” an article in the May 2010 issue of Inc. magazine.

• Shark Tank business presentation competition. In the first of what is intended to become an annual program, 17 groups of students summed up their business ideas in short “elevator talks” before a panel of business people, and $5,500 in prize money was awarded.

• RIT 48, also new this spring, a weekend event that brought students from across campus together to collaborate, receive coaching from professionals, develop an idea for a startup company and present it to a panel of judges. To see a video of the inaugural event, visit www.youtube.com/user/RITUneraver-

News.

• Deaf Entrepreneurship Research Initiative, a multidisciplinary effort to explore the current state of deaf entrepreneurship. Funded by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the project involves NTID, the Saunders Col-

lege of Business, the Simone Center and the Lab for Social Computing. The initiative hopes to announce research results by June 2011, says DeMartino, principal investigator.