

Alumni @Work

Where do the alumni of the Amsterdam science community end up in the worldwide job market? This item zooms in on alumni who have started their own science-based company.



Wouter Weerkamp

Founding fathers of startup 904Labs

→ “Bringing some of the cool stuff that is being developed in academia to the market: that was the original goal when I started 904Labs mid-2014,” says Wouter. “By the time Manos joined, at the end of 2014, we had started to focus on one particular piece of technology: self-learning search engines. This is what we currently offer to the e-commerce market: next-generation search technology that learns directly from customer behaviour.”

“We both followed a very similar career path, starting with four years of being a PhD student at the Informatics Institute of the University of Amsterdam. Our research group at that time, called ILPS, focuses on information retrieval, more commonly known as search-engine technology. After graduating, we both spent another two years as postdoc in the same group.”

“At the end of 2013, Wouter decided to leave academia to start a new venture. “Since we already wrote many papers together and were responsible for several courses, it was not a surprise that Manos also joined at some point. At the start of 904Labs, we were part of ACE Venture Lab, an incubator located at the Science Park. The incubator currently hosts about 15 startups: we are all located on the same floor, share a kitchen, and have regular internal and external meetups. Being at ACE



Manos Tsagkias

Venture Lab allowed us to get in touch with CTCue, a startup in the medical domain, with whom we are currently working on a shared R&D project funded by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency.”

“As entrepreneurs there’s a sense of freedom to your working days. No one will tell you what to do and you can decide on your own direction. On top of that, you get to learn many new things, for us mainly on the business side. There are obviously also disadvantages to entrepreneurship: the future is almost always uncertain; you need discipline, since no one will force you to do your job; and you are responsible for your own salary and, even worse, for that of your employees. For this, we are lucky to have obtained a proof-of-concept grant from IXA (Innovation Exchange Amsterdam) to develop particular unexplored aspects of the self-learning search engine.” Ω

→ Insider’s advice

“Are you thinking of becoming an entrepreneur? The only good advice is to just give it a go! However, advice is probably the last thing you will listen to, as you’re very likely to be too stubborn to listen to anyone telling you what to do. And that’s probably a good thing.”



Sander Kluwer

CEO of IncatT

→ “Already during my studies at Leiden University and my PhD at the University of Amsterdam I was fascinated by the ability of catalysts to both stimulate and steer chemical reactions. The ability to gain control over molecules and the way they react appeared to me to be the ‘perfect’ way to make new molecules,” explains Sander.

“As I did not see a clear academic path for myself, I also explored the industrial approach to (catalytic) research via internships at Shell and Unilever. After my PhD, I moved to the University of Missouri for a postdoc to investigate various imaging NMR techniques. Then a postdoc position in the Reek Group at the UvA became available which combined both of my main interests: catalysis and spectroscopy.”

“Back at the UvA I was introduced to the exciting world of spin-off companies. I joined a freshly started spin-off company called Cat-Fix, bringing novel catalyst capturing technology to the market. Two years later I became part of another newly formed spin-off company, called InCatT (short for Innovative Catalyst Technologies), based on research done at the group of Prof. Joost Reek at UvA. This company commercialised a patented service that finds and optimises catalysts for chemical companies. With our technology we were able to decrease the catalyst development time and thus reduce the

time to market. The start looked promising, but a changing pharma market, take-overs, and mergers, and finally closures of major industrial research facilities in the Netherlands resulted in a difficult initial phase. After five years, we joined the Ace Venture Lab where we redefined the company strategy during the boot camp. We still use the business coach we hooked up to then to keep track of the company developments.”

“Since November 2014, I am the CEO of InCatT. My job consists of an exciting mix of business and research topics, ranging from setting up business deals, exploring markets, leading a group of highly motivated researchers, keeping track of the latest scientific developments and finding new business opportunities. Every day you need to give 100% and be able to quickly adjust to the ever-changing markets. And once a year I am now a coach myself at the Ace Venture Lab boot camp, using my knowledge to help the next generation of entrepreneurs.” Ω

“My job consists of an exciting mix of business and research topics”

→ Insider’s advice:

“Develop your business instinct, build a large network, and when a business opportunity arises, go for it!”