Spin-offs: an innovative idea is only the starting point

1. Background

One day in August 2005, a student of Professor D. Iannuzzi at VU University Amsterdam came to his office because in his experiment on some quantum force measurements, he could not get rid of an artefact of the instrument he was using. To solve that specific problem, Professor D. Iannuzzi came up with the idea of fiber-top technology.

After testing the working principle with some colleagues, Professor D. Iannuzzi realized that that idea could have many applications well beyond what it was originally devised for. At that time the VU University Amsterdam TTO was still assembling its team and, to avoid slowing down the process, engaged the services of an external patent attorney for the preparation of possible patent applications.

2. Problem faced

With the assistance of a patent attorney, a patent application was lodged, which is now enforced in the US and in Europe. The assistance of a professional patent attorney turned out to be valuable, since the language in patent applications is quite different from research papers. However, Professor Iannuzzi considered it important to work closely with the patent attorney and to carefully check the formulation of the patent application, since he as the scientific inventor was better placed to verify the boundaries of the envisaged patent.
However, the costs of fabrication of that technology at that time were far too high for the market. Hence, in order to bring the technology to maturity it was necessary to perform further research on the development of alternative, more business-oriented, manufacturing methods.

To get funding for such activities, Professor Iannuzzi applied for an ERC Starting Grant, a EU funding programme that aims to support up-and-coming research leaders who are about to establish a proper research team and to start conducting independent research in Europe.

After the successful evaluation of the proposal, he launched the project. During the period of the ERC Starting Grant, Professor Iannuzzi and his research team further developed two potentially competitive manufacturing methods which led to the lodging of two more patent applications. Some of the costs associated with these patent applications were covered by the ERC grant, since they were eligible costs. In addition, as a result of the project he has acquired unique technical know-how, allowing Professor Iannuzzi and his team to be recognised internationally as pioneers of a unique technology.

3. Outcome

Given the potential of the technology developed and the distinctive character of the know-how acquired during the ERC Starting Grant, Professor Iannuzzi decided to lead a spin-off - Optics11 - with the goal of marketing successful products based on these innovative assets. Even though at the moment the company does not need to rely on venture capital, Professor Iannuzzi is confident that, should that moment arrive, the company will be in a good position given its strong patent portfolio and professional intellectual property management.

The assistance of the VU University Amsterdam in this process has been fundamental, and included not only putting patent professionals at the disposal of Professor Iannuzzi, but also providing space at the university’s premises for the new company, time to set it up, and a series of opportunities for professional growth. Another essential factor was the personal motivation of Professor Iannuzzi, who invested five years in this venture to bring to maturity his technology and to launch the company. After the launch of this spin-off, his department has already seen the launching of two more companies.

4. Lessons learned and suggestions

✓ While patents are of central importance, other forms of intellectual property should be considered, particularly know-how.

✓ Close collaboration between inventor and patent attorney is important for sound patent applications.
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