

# “ETH is a place that inspires me”

by Janine Braun



Roman Engeler and Maurice Burger co-founded Atla in their garage in 2023. One year on, the start-up has grown to nine employees and moved into offices near London's King's Cross station.

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It was serendipity that catapulted Excellence Scholar Roman Engeler into the world of start-ups. As a co-founder of Atla, he currently has an ambitious vision: helping to develop an artificial general intelligence that is safe and trustworthy.

*What's your take on the current AI hype?*

**ROMAN ENGELER** – Today we're at an exciting point in AI's development. The first breakthroughs happened around 10 years ago, with artificial neuronal networks, but the general public has only had direct access to AI since ChatGPT was launched. Now it's becoming more of an everyday thing and is increasingly being integrated into

apps, products and corporate processes.

*Last year you founded the start-up Atla. Can you tell us what sparked this?*

My co-founder and I developed an interest in AI opportunities and risks early on. When we met each other at the Entrepreneur First Program a few years ago, we quickly realized that we were very much on the same page. The progress of large language models like ChatGPT provided us with the crucial use case for our startup. We're now located in London, since we were drawn to the progressive vibes of the city and its status as an international tech hub.

*How are you bringing your vision to life, in concrete terms?*

Unlike conventional software, AI is more difficult to test since we still don't fully understand what's going on inside the models. This is where Atla comes in: We analyze the behavior of AI models, for instance by determining whether they generate false information, also known as hallucinations. That's how we help companies integrate their AI more safely and reliably into their products and services.

*Speaking of risks, is it possible that AI will become more intelligent than humans in the future?*

I don't rule that out. The central question will be how to ensure that AI is acting in the best interest of humans. There's huge potential here, for instance for curing diseases or conducting scientific research. At the same time, however, we also have to keep the risks in mind and develop a precise understanding of the thought and behavioral patterns stored in the models.

*How did ETH help cultivate your entrepreneurial spirit?*

Originally I wanted to pursue a doctorate, but towards the end of my studies I accidentally ended up in the start-up scene.

The ETH Entrepreneurs Club hosted a "startup speed dating" event, where I spontaneously decided to participate and immediately accepted my first job at a start-up. Having the freedom to help shape things and take ownership early on were aspects that immediately spoke to me. Today, ETH offers even more opportunities like the Student Project House and the Pioneer Fellowships, which make it easier for young entrepreneurs to get started. I think that's terrific.

*You took the Founder's Pledge – a promise to support ETH if your start-up becomes successful. Why's that?*

ETH trains and educates young talents and conducts cutting-edge research, both of which are important contributions to society. As an alumnus, I want to give something back to ETH and contribute to a strong, long-lasting educational and research institution. Access to knowledge, resources and a varied network is important for young graduates, especially for founders. I want to support this and contribute to a community that helps each other.

*You're already a donor of ETH. What motivated you to support the university?*

It's always been important to me to give something back, especially since I had the privilege of being supported by an Excellence Scholarship while I studied robotics. It feels right to pay forward the support that I received.

*What role does ETH still play for you today?*

ETH is a place that inspires me. Whenever I'm in Zurich, I try to spend time there. My former fellow students have taken exciting paths, from founding companies to management consulting to research. Being in touch with them still provides me with valuable insights.

*What advice would you give to young students who want to found a start-up?*

Courage and a high risk appetite are crucial. You have little to lose, especially in the early stages, but the upside is almost unlimited. Founding a company is a great opportunity to take on responsibility and work on something that truly matters to you.

<https://ethz-foundation.ch/en/spotlight/awc24-roman-engeler-eth-is-a-place-that-inspires-me/>

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