Success through perseverance



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Jan Wurzbacher and Christoph Gebald have gone from an unconventional idea to a company with a hundred employees: they now run Climeworks, an internationally successful ETH spin-off. The road to success wasn't always smooth.

The facilities produced by Climeworks capture CO_2 from the atmosphere and store it underground; experts believe that the technology that makes this possible could play a central role in combating climate change. Climeworks is an important player in a rapidly growing global market involving direct air capture. The company is currently about to complete its biggest facility to date in Iceland, which will capture more than 4,000 tonnes of CO_2 from the atmosphere each year and store it underground on behalf of companies and private individuals. The facility will run on renewable energy. The customers in this project include Microsoft, which is also investing in the construction of the facility via its Climate Innovation Fund.

The rocky road to spin-off

The Zurich-based company's motto is "Let's reverse climate change", and its investors see great potential. In 2020, Climeworks concluded a financing round with CHF 100 million. One might assume it was relatively easy for Jan Wurzbacher and Christoph Gebald to get their idea off the ground.

But the reality is a little different. "When we created our spin-off at ETH in 2009, there was little interest in our idea," Wurzbacher recalls. "There were no support programmes for young entrepreneurs at ETH at the time, and we were nowhere near having a marketable product."

He and Gebald did however receive a great deal of support from their professor Aldo Steinfeld during their doctorates at ETH. They were able to benefit from the infrastructure of ETH for the development of Climeworks' technology. This was vital during the initial phase, as access to highly specialist infrastructure is essential for technology-based innovations in order to be able to develop prototypes at all.

Wurzbacher believes that the developments of the past ten years at ETH in terms of entrepreneurship have been extremely positive: "Start-up capital, mentoring and access to labs, as offered through the Pioneer Fellowship programme, would have made things much easier for us in the beginning." The benefits of a hub like the planned ETH Centre for Students and Entrepreneurs are also clear. "I had to painstakingly acquire all the know-how myself. Promoting an entrepreneurial approach among students is also a great advantage when it comes to international competition."

Persistent and unwavering

Wurzbacher and Gebald found their first customer in 2014, and they received a major political boost from the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, which obliged all countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the first time. Interest in their technology increased exponentially. The urgency of finding solutions to climate change was also recognised by the general public. This customer segment is important to Wurzbacher and Gebald, who believe that it will take each and every one of us to make a difference. Through a monthly subscription, the company offers private individuals the opportunity to contribute to CO_2 reduction. The minimum subscription amount is CHF 8 a month, and this popular option has already been chosen by over 4,500 people from 54 different countries.

This positive response is highly motivating for the two entrepreneurs and their team, who plan to move up a gear once the facility in Iceland has been commissioned in mid-2021. The two have never doubted their vision, even during the difficult initial phase when almost no one shared this vision with them. "We've always just kept on going, with our sights set on the target," explains Wurzbacher.

It's been helpful for the two of them to be able to motivate each other, he adds. He doesn't believe there's a secret recipe for a successful start-up. In addition to a good idea and the right support, persistence is also essential, he says. "There's always a reason not to do something. Just keep going, and don't stop!"



Turning gas into stone: Climeworks converts CO2 into stone using the Carbfix process. After just two years, 95 percent has been mineralised and can no longer escape.
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>
> **Jan Wurzbacher**

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