

Akamon Entrepreneurship Club

Starting an International Venture from the Best University in Japan

By Mohamed KHARRAT



Author
Mohamed Kharrat

Akamon Entrepreneurship Club (AEC) is a vibrant international circle at the University of Tokyo with the principal objective of spreading an entrepreneurship culture in Japan. Our main activity consists of holding seminars to which we invite distinguished speakers to give talks on entrepreneurship. As many as 40 participants attend each seminar including both students and professionals. These events are usually followed by a free-of-charge networking party where participants can discuss future business opportunities. The circle has succeeded rapidly in attracting participants from more than 20 different countries and this not only from Southeast Asia but also from America, Europe, Africa and even the Middle East. One of the secrets of this success is our circle policies, which try to provide a friendly environment for participants from different cultures. For example, we avoid holding events with alcohol (so as not to exclude Muslims), or meetings on early Sunday (so as not to exclude Christians). We also do our best to provide food for people with specific diet such as Vegetarians.

Circle Establishment

AEC is a young circle which started its official activities last year. We decided to create the circle because of the lack of open entrepreneurship seminars in English at the University of Tokyo. In 2009, I was the only foreigner who took part at the University of Tokyo business plan contest called "Entrepreneur Dojo". The five-month program was a marvelous experience for me. However, as the main activities were conducted in Japanese, most of the international students could not take part in the program due to the linguistic barrier. I expressed this concern to those responsible at the Science Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development (SEED) center, Professor Shigeo Kagami and Professor Katsuya Hasegawa. They kindly understood this concern and proposed to give two special seminars in English for international students. In the first seminar, Prof. Kagami, who is the general manager of SEED, talked about the entrepreneurship center's activities to encourage students at the university to start their own business. In the second seminar, Prof. Hasegawa, who has long experience in Silicon Valley, talked about the entrepreneurial culture difference between Japan and the Silicon Valley region. The success of these events encouraged us to continue these activities.

A group of motivated students who joined the seminars responded to my call for establishing an entrepreneurship circle at the University of Tokyo to promote these kinds of activities.

The group was composed of Saad Gul (Pakistan), Chaminda De Silva (Sri Lanka), Bryan McKelvey (USA), Mohammed Sahli (Morocco), Saurabh Sharma, Shailesh Kumar, Priyasheel Prasad (all from India), M. Fahim Ferdous Khan (Bangladesh), Marcos Ikegame (Brazil) and myself (Tunisia). The circle was soon thereafter known as the Akamon Entrepreneurship Club.

A few weeks after the decision to start the circle, Japan was hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake which has caused some decline in the Japanese economy. This heart-rending incident brought us an

additional motivation to develop the circle's activities to promote the creation of new start-ups in Japan. In fact, most Japanese graduates prefer to work for big corporations instead of taking the risk of starting their own business. One of the reasons is related to social factors as a new start-up has a greater likelihood of failing than succeeding and Japanese society is less tolerant on this issue.

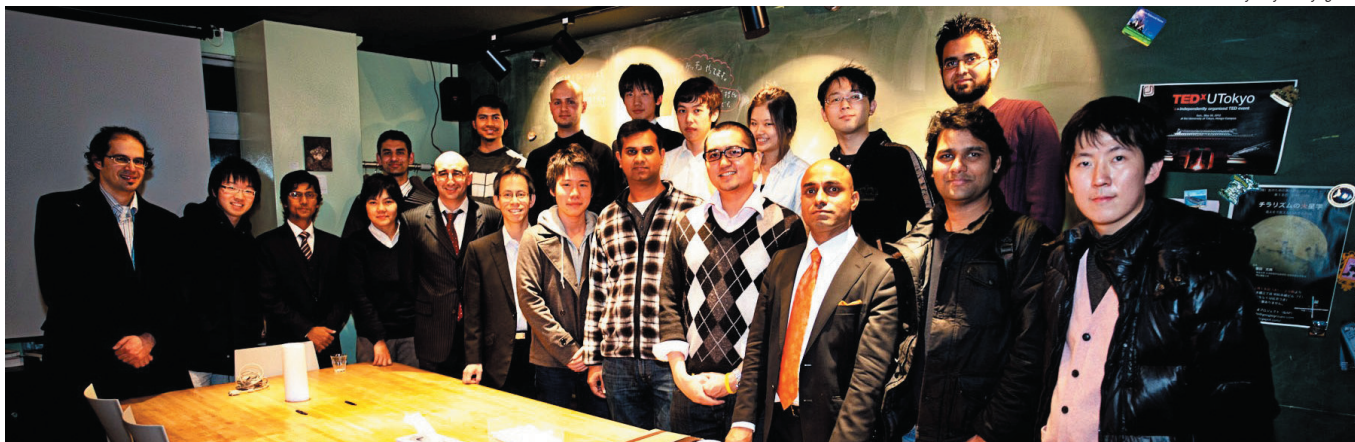
Akamon Entrepreneurship Club Seminars

The difficulty of starting a venture in Japan was highlighted in our first official event by Jeffrey Char, who is a serial entrepreneur and president of J-SEED ventures. During his talk, he shared with us his experiences in starting various ventures. At our next seminar Takafumi Yamamoto, director of the University of Tokyo Technology Licensing Organization (Todai TLO), explained about Todai TLO activities, which consist mainly of invention protection by issuing patents and commercializing them through licensing. We also invited Neil Rosenblatt, president of Eclipse Learning Corporation, to be a speaker at our seminar, where he talked about product marketing and how it could be used effectively in different business situations.

In our most recent seminar, Sanjeev Sinha, president of Sun and Sands Advisors, talked about Japanese and Indian business collaboration and highlighted especially the cultural differences between the countries in business decision-making. Several of the videos of these seminars are available in the media video section of our website www.akamon-ec.org.

Bilateral Exchange Program with National University of Singapore

In addition to the monthly seminars, we co-organized BizAsia Japan 2011 which was a one-week entrepreneurship program with the participation of 15 delegates from the National University of



Annual ceremony of Akamon Entrepreneurship Club at LabCafe February 23, 2012

Singapore. The program started with a two-day intensive business plan contest with the topic: Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake. A total of seven teams, composed of both Japanese and Singaporeans, competed with business plan ideas to support survivors in the areas affected by the 3.11 earthquake. In order to help them understand the current needs and problems in these zones, several experts and volunteers were invited such as Professor Hiroyuki Ozaki, who gave a talk about the earthquake and entrepreneurship.

Neil Rosenblatt, the chairman of the contest, explained the main rules of the competition and how to develop social entrepreneurship business plans, while I attended to team mentoring. The evaluation committee of the contest also included Prof. Kagami, Jeffrey Char and Tsuyoshi Ogawa, senior director at Itochu Technology Ventures. The winning project was “*Obachan no Bentoya*” (Grandma’s Lunchbox Delivery Van), which was described by Neil Rosenblatt as “a business model that would enlist older women to cook, then deliver lunch and dinner boxes (*bento*) initially to temporary housing, and then later throughout northern Japan. The business concept was based on raising funds to cover start-up costs and defraying the cost of *bento* to needy end-purchasers, while also being a viable sustainable business.” After the business contest we organized several seminars for the Singaporean delegates, and we also invited Mark Lee Ford, president of Moneo and Nipponica companies, to give a talk about venture strategy.

The final event in BizAsia was the organization of a case study which was composed of two sessions. The first one was about social entrepreneurship by Neil Rosenblatt with the participation of Michael Anop, the founder of a new social entrepreneurial venture called “Playground of Hope”. Neil Rosenblatt outlined the different challenges facing Michael Anop while developing his idea of installing playgrounds for children living in northern areas whose lives have been affected by the earthquake. The second case study was about Mixi, Japan’s number one social network, which I presented in the presence of representatives from the strategy department of Mixi, led by Toshihiko Yasuda. The participants got an opportunity to learn about the different challenges currently facing Mixi and the different decisions on strategy taken during the company’s development. The Singaporean delegates joined other programs organized by partners such as a negotiation session and a rich Japanese cultural program.

BizAsia Japan was part of a bilateral exchange program agreement with the National University of Singapore NUS Entrepreneurship Society. The second part of the program was in Singapore. AEC members were invited to join a Japanese delegation to attend iConnect, an international entrepreneurship week organized by NUS. Fourteen students from Japan took part in the program in which delegations from Russia, Taiwan and China also participated. The program included various sessions such as one dedicated to social entrepreneurship with open discussion with the founders of several ventures. The case of Dignity Kitchen particularly attracted my attention – a court management school focusing on the training of disabled and disadvantaged persons. The program also included special lectures such as one focusing on the emerging aging society in Southeast Asian countries called Silver Market.

In summary, I hope that AEC keeps expanding its activities in the future with further collaboration from different organizations in Japan and abroad.

The BizAsia program generated considerable interest and such future collaborations can provide a means to motivate young Japanese people towards a global perspective. This coupled with an aptitude for business start-ups can provide the necessary impetus to Japanese society to enhance its social perspective. In fact, to be successful, AEC needs to have more such programs and recruit more Japanese people, especially Japanese students, among its members.

For nonprofit organizations, succession between executive committees is very important to ensure renewed interest in the circle’s activities and for gradually expanding to new activities. At the time of writing this article we have just finished the selection of a new executive committee and elected a new circle leader. The new executive committee includes representatives from Waseda and Senshu universities. I hope that readers of this article will join the activities of our circle in the future and help us develop.

Finally I would like to thank all the advisory board members of our circle and the former executive committee for all their efforts. I would also like to thank Saad Gul, co-founder and former AEC member, for his continuous efforts in support of the circle’s activities and for reviewing and enriching this article.

JS

Mohamed Kharrat is co-founder and former president of Akamon Entrepreneurship Club and BizAsia Japan Business contest. He is originally from Tunisia and is currently pursuing a Ph.D at the University of Tokyo.