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## Entrepreneurs of innovation

Switzerland is home to many promising start-ups. They are led by young entrepreneurs who apply their skills and energies to develop their businesses and bring their products to market. Here is a selection of six innovative companies trained by Venturelab.

Text: Stanislas Cavalier      Photos: Thierry Parel

**At EPFL, there are many opportunities to learn how to be an entrepreneur”**



**Launched in November 2009 by Jean-Christophe Zufferey, the start-up company senseFly sells miniature autonomous drones.** No bigger than a sparrow, the drones developed by senseFly, a spin-off of EPFL, are among the lightest flying robots in the world, weighing in at barely 500 grams. "Their small size and light weight make them easier to use and above all less dangerous," explains Jean-Christophe Zufferey, founder and CEO of senseFly. The story of these drones began in 2001, with Zufferey's thesis in microengineering at EPFL. "At that time, my colleagues and I were among the first to work on bio-inspired flying robots. Then we received support from various national and European programs for developing

flying robots that were able to avoid obstacles or work in swarms." To sell these little fliers, Zufferey decided to start a company. "I'd been thinking about starting a company for a long time," he says. "There was on the one hand the desire to be an entrepreneur and on the other the possibility of having a good product." Finally, senseFly was launched at the end of 2009. The company benefited from a 100,000 Swiss franc loan from the Foundation for Technological Innovation and venture kick Phase I and II funding (30,000 Swiss francs). Zufferey has had the help of a PSE coach to help develop his management skills. "At EPFL, there are many opportunities to learn how to be an entrepreneur.

We have a lot of help." SenseFly is selling its camera-equipped drones, which can take aerial photographs up to 20 km from their takeoff point. The product interests security companies, mapping companies, farmers and real estate agents, as well as public communities. Totally autonomous, these machines navigate using GPS receivers. They also have gyroscopic sensors, accelerometers and pressure sensors on board to control their flight.

In cooperation with MeteoSuisse, senseFly is currently adapting its flying robot to take atmospheric measurements. "We are adding sensors for temperature, humidity, ozone and other pollutants to the drone." The goal is to replace weather balloons, which lose their sensors every time they are launched.

**Marc Rocklinger has just launched Power Insoles, a start-up that is developing an electronic insole to prevent plantar ulcers.**

"The idea of starting a company was something that gradually grew on me. Everything clicked during my last salaried job; I was working for a start-up, and as I watched how things were going, I real-

ized I could do this, too." At the age of 40, Marc Rocklinger thus took the leap and launched his start-up, Power Insoles, in mid-2009. Power Insoles develops electronic insoles that measure plantar pressure and transmit this information to a smartphone or PC. These devices could be an important advantage for diabetics. "These patients often develop plantar ulcers," explains Rocklinger. "Detecting the pathology earlier, thanks to our insoles, would allow them to avoid costly and painful medical treatment." The commercial potential is promising because 3 million people suffer from plantar ulcers in Europe alone.

The company's first prototype, demonstrated on an android, received the Innovation trophy from the Geneva University Hospitals (HUG) in September 2009. And the commercial idea of Power Insoles was among the top 25 finalists in the Venture 2010 competition. In parallel, Rocklinger obtained Phase I venture kick financing (10,000 Swiss francs) and

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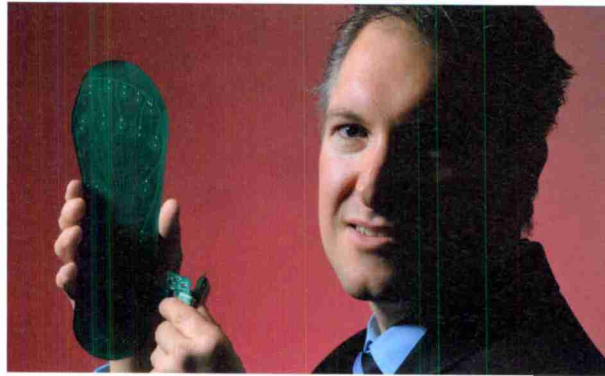


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took venture plan training in October-November 2009. "This training helped me better understand how financing, marketing and businesses work."

After having applied for a first patent in September 2009, Rocklinger plans to apply for a second in July. This summer, the company will raise funds to start clinical tests in the fall. His objective is to obtain the CE label at the start of the new year in order to begin marketing in 2011. "The timing might seem ambitious, but we have a simple product, which allows us to get it to market quickly."

## "A simple product can be developed quickly"



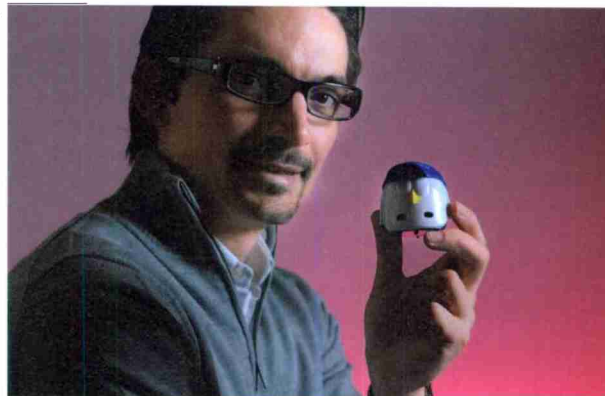
## "I always wanted to start a company"

In March 2008, Pierre Bureau launched the start-up Arimaz, which sells a robot that detects the reception of e-mails and informs users when friends connect to social networks. "Create a company? I have always wanted to do that. But before actually doing it, I had no idea what was involved." An engineer who studied in France, Pierre Bureau, 33, has realized his dream. In March 2008, he launched Arimaz, a start-up based in Renens, which has been selling a little robot called mydeskfriend since December 2009. Continuously connected to the Internet, the robot detects incoming e-mail messages, reads them, and also informs its owner if a friend connects to a social networking site. It can also read news bulletins if they are

translated into RSS feeds, give weather predictions and transmit stock market information. With Arimaz, Bureau won the 2007 venture leaders prize. "For me, the trip to Boston was a real eye-opener," notes the entrepreneur. "At the time I went, I was starting from zero. In ten days, I had acquired

the essentials that I needed to start my company. It was a very enriching experience." Funded by the CTI Start-up program, Arimaz also was included among the 100 best European start-ups in the Red Herring ranking in 2008. For the moment, the company is selling its mydeskfriend robot only on its website.

In 2010, Bureau plans to extend his distribution network to other Internet sites, then into stores. "We are also currently in discussions with toy manufacturers in Japan and in the U.S. The goal is to establish partnerships with them in order to develop interactive toys based on our technology."





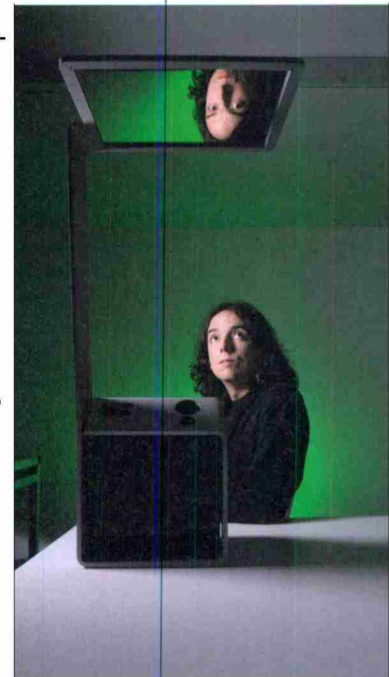
## “We’re going to revolutionize communication”

**Guillaume Zufferey has developed a new interactive interface, SimplyPaper, that could revolutionize sales communications.**

“Becoming an entrepreneur is something that I often thought about, but without it being a particular goal.” Twenty-eight-year-old Guillaume Zufferey traces the creation of his start-up, Simpliquity, to the design of an interesting product: SimplyPaper. “I found it fascinating to develop a product and improve it using user feedback. Today, I want to follow up on this with clients.”

What is this product? Developed by Zufferey and his two thesis advisors (Patrick Jermann et Pierre Dillenbourg) as part of CRAFT (Center for Research and Support of Training and its Technologies) project, SimplyPaper is a new kind of keyboardless, mouseless computer in the form of an “augmented reality lamp.” A projector and a camera placed underneath a table allow

the user to use a piece of paper to set up computer applications and display electronic content. SimplyPaper is already being used to train apprentices in professional development centers in Yverdon-les-Bains and Thun. Zufferey sees more in store for his product. “The idea could be very useful to improve sales communications in banks, insurance companies and more globally to improve marketing.” The problem: “With my education, I never had the opportunity to learn how to become an entrepreneur,” admits Zufferey, who earned a MS in Computer Science from EPFL in 2005 and is finishing his PhD in CRAFT. To obtain management training, he took venture challenge training in the spring of 2009. “It’s really an excellent introduction to the world of entrepreneurship. The teachers are excellent and their advice allowed me to avoid a certain number of pitfalls.” The SimplyPaper project has received Phase I venture kick funding (10,000 Swiss francs).



## Venturelab: Innovation for job creation

**Venturelab, a national program of the Swiss Federal Innovation Promotion Agency (CTI), offers training modules to support young, innovative companies and to introduce students to the idea of entrepreneurship.**

**Courses are free of charge, but selective, for those whose projects have a strong innovation/high tech component.**

**Venturelab works in close collaboration with ETH Zurich and EPFL, Swiss universities and professional schools.**

More information: [www.venturelab.ch](http://www.venturelab.ch)

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## “We’re always losing stuff!”

**Secu4 is developing and marketing electronic systems to protect valuables using wireless technology.**

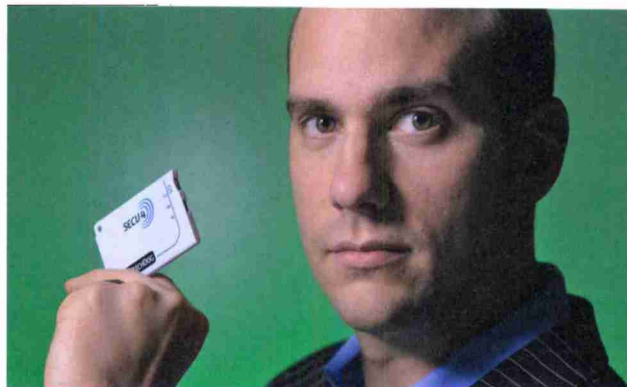
The story of Secu4, a spin-off of the Business Experience program at the University of Applied Sciences in the Valais, started with a common situation: “Two friends from the HES Lausanne and I were in the train,” recounts Ralph Rimet, Secu4’s founder. “And one of us lost his briefcase. Fortunately, a kind person found and returned it. But I realized that we do lose a lot of things in the public transport system.”

The 31-year-old entrepreneur thus decided to create a system, called BlueWatchDog, that lets you protect your valuables while traveling. It’s a card that the user inserts into the object he or she wants to

protect, such as a computer or a handbag.

Using a Bluetooth connection, the card communicates continuously with the user’s mobile phone. If, for one reason or another, the card (and thus the object) gets too far away from its owner, the latter is alerted by phone. If nothing is done, a 110 decibel alarm is set off after a time period that is pre-set on the card, which is supposed to scare off a possible thief.

Created in 2005, the project had its first prototype in 2006, and then Rimet launched his company, Secu4, at the start of 2007. “I always wanted to start my own company; it was really a goal since I attended the University of Applied Sciences Lausanne and participated in its Business Experience Program.”



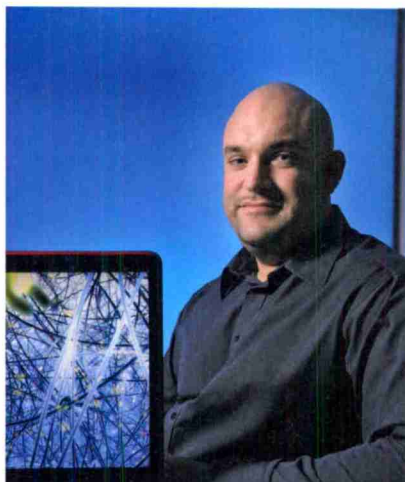
After having won the “Excellence” prize from the “PERL” Trophy, then obtained “The Ark” funding, Rimet won the venture leaders prize in May 2006, which allowed him to go to Boston.

“It is a very good training program to help you optimize your presentation abilities,” he notes. “In addition, it helps

you create a good entrepreneurial network.”

Today, Secu4 markets its product in 10 countries (it sells for 79 Swiss francs in Switzerland) and hopes to turn a profit in 2010. The company was included in the Top 100 best start-ups in the world by Red Herring in January 2009.

## “Making science accessible for everyone through visuals”



**Pablo de Heras Ciechowski started Visualbiotech three years ago, to make 3D animations to illustrate and explain the life sciences.**

“Scientists need tools to communicate their findings more effectively.” With a passion for the medical domain, Pablo de Heras Ciechowski, 32, quickly realized that this problem needed to be addressed.

After studies in computer science and engineering at the prestigious Lund Institute of Technology in his native Sweden, he came to Switzerland to do his PhD in crowd simulation and rendering. “I find it fascinating to be able to represent virtual worlds using algorithms.”

Visualbiotech’s activity began in 2006, making movies of the neurological system for EPFL’s Blue Brain project. The images and videos were seen in major news media all over the world. Requests started to roll in, including from scientist Ray Kurzweil, who used the images to illustrate a book, and EPFL Professor Patrick Fraering, who is using the services of Visualbiotech to explain his research on Alzheimer’s disease.

To acquire management skills, Pablo de Heras Ciechowski took a course in venture training in 2008. Today partnerships with the private sector have been established, helping to make complex scientific content accessible to a larger audience.