



OI INSPIRATIONAL CASES



HARNESSING THE BENEFITS OF OPEN INNOVATION TO ADVANCE SOCIAL INNOVATION

SEATRAC is a unique device that helps people with physical disabilities to go swimming in the sea autonomously, easily and safely. It is the successful outcome of a collaborative project between a university laboratory, local government and the end-users' community, which was able to leverage technology, engineering knowledge and user experience inputs to design, validate and launch the innovation.

- TOBEA Ltd. is a spin-off company that was founded in 2012 by Ignatios Fotiou and George Sotiriadis from the Applied Mechanics Laboratory of University of Patras to support the commercial development of SEATRAC, a device that helps people with limited mobility to go swimming in the sea unassisted.
- The original concept was developed in 2009 by Gerasimos Fessian, Vice-Prefect at the Prefecture of Achaia and himself a person with limited mobility, along with Professor Vasilis Kostopoulos from the Applied Mechanics Laboratory of the University of Patras and his research group.
- With the feedback from a crowdsourcing platform they managed to develop, validate and launch commercially SEATRAC, which is installed on numerous beaches in Greece, Cyprus and abroad.

The Origin of the Open Innovation Collaboration

In 2009, Gerasimos Fessian from the Prefecture of Achaia contacted the Applied Mechanics Laboratory of the University of Patras in order to find a technical solution that could assist people with physical disabilities to go swimming in the sea completely unassisted.

The Applied Mechanics Laboratory under Professor Vasilis Kostopoulos formed a research group in order to analyze the problem and find a solution. The team soon discovered that although there existed wheelchairs which were designed for going into the sea and small cranes that required an operator to lift a wheelchair into the water, no technology solution or application was available that would allow people with limited mobility to cross the beach and enter the sea safely, while unassisted.

They therefore launched an effort which was co-financed by the Prefecture of Achaia along with the University of Patras to identify a solution that would transfer the person from the



The device was developed and tested in real environmental conditions before reaching technological maturity. In 2012, TOBEA Ltd was created (standing for Thinking Out of the Box Engineering Applications) as a spin-off from the University of Patras to take the innovation to the market, led by Mr. Ignatios Fotiou and Mr. George Sotiriadis. Both of them, along with Professor Vassilis Kostopoulos, Mr. Gerassimos Fessian and the University of Patras are holders of the Greek, European and US patents that cover the SEATRAC device. As a spin off company, TOBEA Ltd returns funds to the University through royalties.

SEATRAC would not have met with the same success without the help of its community of potential users. Continuous feedback, interaction and collaboration with the end users was made possible by the crowdsourced feedback model through a live community of 3 000 members (Facebook group: "Rights of the People With Disabilities to the Sea"). This community continues to provide TOBEA with the necessary information for the evolution of the device according to the users' needs, and at the same time is a vehicle for dissemination, awareness raising and the provision of user information.

Impact of the OI Collaboration

Over the years, the market has become more mature and is now ready for an enhanced offering that would cover new users' needs. At the same time, TOBEA has to face increased competition as more companies provide similar solutions. As a result, the SME is working towards enhancing team awareness and providing the opportunities and tools to access and share new knowledge, as well as develop new skills (capacity building, training, team building) so as to create an organizational culture that embraces continuous improvement in processes and products.

Moreover, the team is in the process of developing new products and services for people with physical disabilities to improve their quality of life. (e.g. with the arrival of the Internet of Things it will be able to deploy technologies to improve the SEATRAC experience with the use of sensors giving information on temperature, weather etc.). In the future, the SME plans to expand the development of the company and gain more market share while offering new job opportunities.

IGNATIOS FOTIOU
DIRECTOR



OPEN INNOVATION DRIVING THE CAUSE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Open innovation can have a very positive impact on society: collaboration between academia, local government and the potential users' community led to the creation of a successful new product which met the special needs of a specific section of the population.

FEEDBACK FROM CUSTOMERS IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF OPEN INNOVATION

The company engaged with end users to gain feedback for the specific purpose of improving its offering.

THE SPIN-OFF COMPANY AS THE DRIVER OF THE OPEN INNOVATION PROCESS

The roll out and commercialization of the device was one of the core activities of the spin off company which successfully brought the concept from idea to market with mutual benefits for all the parties involved.

CONTACT DETAILS

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