

ETH Podcast - Episode 2 - Incube - Transcript

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INTRO

(Sebastian Pinegger:) It's not easy. Those four days are very stressful.

(Lino Guzzella:) This is crazy. Who would do that?

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I like to do crazy stuff.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *ok, so here is the story: a handful of students will move in to a small glass cube for 4 days and nights and work on a task, a business challenge.*

A few cubes will be standing in different places in Switzerland and one in Massachusetts on the campus of M.I.T.

In a sense the team in one cube competes with the team in the other cubes. That's InCube - invented and organized at ETH Zürich.

((PRONOUNCED IN ENGLISH))

(Lino Guzzella:) Do me a favour. Call it E-T-H... *((PRONOUNCED IN GERMAN))*

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *I get it, he's right. After all the person asking me the favour is someone important:*

(Lino Guzzella:) My name is Lino Guzzella. I am the president of ETH.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *...until the end of 2018, he was the president for the past 4 years..*

This is the second story of the new podcast by ETH Zurich. The first four episodes focus on entrepreneurship at ETH on all levels. From student projects to successful spin-offs.

I am Jennifer Khakshouri.

CHAPTER 1

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Chapter 1 - Before the InCube-Event*

So I told you what the 4 days in a cube are about. But of course there is a lot of work and a ton of organizing before the event. InCube is run by students who are members of the ETH Entrepreneur Club. So it's young people who learn organizational skills from scratch. One of the organizers is Sebi:

(Sebastian Pinegger:) We're standing right on Polyterrasse, the center of innovation of the ETH Entrepreneur Club. This cube here is one of five...

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *...there is one more in Zürich right next to the main train station, one in Bern, in Crans-Montana and even cross-Atlantic in Boston on the campus of MIT.*

(Sebastian Pinegger:) For the people who know Polyterrasse you've got a beautiful view over Zurich and in the back you have the Swiss Alps. And directly next to the cube there are a lot of benches there are people strolling around people who are having drinks so it's a very diverse surrounding you have it's on one hand it's very inspiring. Because you're not really locked in somewhere still in glass cube, But you have a beautiful view and secondly you have people around which is very essential for the design thinking process.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Design Thinking - that's a method to solve complex problems in a creative and structured way. Based on needs the student develop prototypes and test them with the public, that procedure is repeated multiple times in a row.*

Design thinking is the method Sebi and his friends from the ETH Entrepreneur Club will teach the cubees. The method is useful not only for the Incube challenge, it is also beneficial for future startups or businesses.

(Lino Guzzella:) I ask our students if they want to also to look into entrepreneurial activities and the Entrepreneur Club is an outstanding example of how this can be done concretely. It is not an initiative that is mandated top down. It is something that has organized, that has emerged from the student body itself. I personally believe that this is much more efficient and effective and it is simply beautiful to see these young people these young students how much energy and creativity they put into it. This is really something that is very gratifying.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Sebi from the ETH Entrepreneur Club and his colleagues chose a handful of people out of all the applicants and decided who would be on what team, students from all the disciplines and universities. Sebi and Co also made sure to get permits from officials to put up the glass Cubes in public spaces, they make sure that the Cubes are built up correctly and they will set the challenges together with their sponsors, challenges, that the students will work on for 4 days and nights in the glass boxes.*

(Lino Guzzella:) This is crazy. Who would do that? They do it to force themselves into a state of mind that is really encouraging completely new approaches and I think this is something that it's a clever experiment. It is an approach that is in the box and by being so extremely in the box it is completely out of the box. And that's one of the part of entrepreneurship. You have to think out of the box you have to think new ways you have to leave the beaten path...

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *...by venturing an experiment in a glass box for example.*

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *So, I didn't meet Sebi alone. He brought one of the participants. Her name is Agnieszka, she's 25 years old and isn't here on the Polyterrasse for the spectacular view.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I come from Poland from Gdansk which is a city size of Zurich at the coast in the north.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *She studies geomatic engineering at the ETH. It is the first time that she sees the cube, where she will spend four days and four nights.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) So now we're in the cube which is actually quite small. Smaller than expected although I just heard that it's bigger than last year or so. There are only glass windows so like we can see everyone everyone can see us like it's quite see through let's say yeah there's like almost nothing it's like we only work because we don't have anything else to do. (laughs)

(Sebastian Pinegger:) The cube itself it's six times four and a half meters, two shipping containers put together. Three of these four walls are glass. Nevertheless there is privacy for the night. There's a curtain which will be hung up during the night and then mattresses put on the ground and the students or the cubees - we call them the cubees - the students in the cube can sleep safely at night.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Why did Agnieszka apply to be a cubee?*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Just to learn something new like just to broad my experience, my knowledge. Yeah meeting people probably just experience something else.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) How did you hear about Incube?

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) So I was in another event from Entrepreneur Club so I don't know if I can say out loud fuckup night (laughs). Yeah, it's a name, right? And yeah they were just making advertisement of Incube and I thought I'm crazy enough to do this.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) What's the crazy thing?

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) It's not like everyday life. It's something different than normal studies. It's more intense. There's more to learn, there's more to experience like go outside your boundaries and comfort zone for sure. Like I didn't really feel comfortable at the moment to sleep with other five people in this tiny tiny tiny space. So that's something new for sure.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *While Sebi and the other organizers from the ETH Entrepreneur Club are somewhat nervous about the flow, Agnieszka is ready for the challenge:*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I'm not really nervous actually. I'm actually really excited and I'm just thinking it's only four days so however it is it will end quite soon.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *The teams in every cube will get a specific task on which they will work. Each cube is partnered with a company or institution. The cube on the Polyterrasse for instance is partnered with the ETH itself and the Gebert Rűf Stiftung. The topic of the challenge will be Educational Technology. And the task is basically one question. The cubees will be given the question right before entering the cube and based on this question they have to do their work.*

CHAPTER 2

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Chapter 2 - Incube in preparation*

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *One week before moving into their glass box, all the cubees meet at the so-called Out-Cube event in the Alps, in Crans-Montana. They attend workshops in design thinking and business modeling. At the same time they all get to know each other. Agnieszka promised to record some moments there with her smartphone.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Okay, I just didn't work it out. (giggles). I need to press when I am talking. So we just arrived in Crans-Montana. So we are in beautiful Wallis. We already met most of the people. Like the people

seem to be really amazing. We are heading to a workshop soon and yeah here from you soon.

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) We have different workshop which we attend. We are separated to small groups. And we have actually people coming from outside giving the workshops. Different entrepreneurs or people involved in certain topics like video editing, rapid prototyping or others. It's super-interesting. The time passes by super-quickly. We are already done with half of the out-cube event which is incredible because we just came like a moment ago. So yeah for sure it's worth it. For sure it's worth it. Yeah.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *And then: It is Thursday evening. In Zurich. The big Incube event begins.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) We just got selected to our teams. We saw our challenges. Now we know who is in our team. Now we know who are we going to spend the next four days locked in this tiny cube. So. Yeah. Basically - let's do it!

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *The challenge of Agniezka's team is a simple question: How can digital technology support a lifelong learning process? The team at the ETH Polyterrasse has to create a prototype for this educational challenge. After four days, on Monday evening, they will have to pitch it to a jury. We meet Agnieska in the middle of the Incube experience, on the second day, on Saturday of the Incube challenge in the afternoon. She looks tired. How did she sleep in the glass box?*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) First night. So so because it was too warm. Second night. So so because we worked for 22 hours and we didn't have that much time left.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *The worries she had about sleeping with strangers in a tiny glass box are gone.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Well I don't even consider them ever being strangers because we spend so much intense time together that I forgot that this could ever be an issue.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *But an issue is finding a solution to the challenge. The team is in a crucial moment of their process.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) We have our ups and downs and at the moment we are down. We are puzzled because we struggle with the whole designing process because none of us ever did it in life. So that's something new for us. And on the other hand all of us have some different wishes and different hopes or solutions like of our problem. And I think that's what's puzzling us like we cannot we cannot somehow find something which is good for everyone likes a solution or not a solution but like an issue which we want to focus on and which would fit everyone.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Agnieszka leaves the box to tape some comments for us and to get some fresh air. Stepping out for a few minutes changes her mood.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I thought I lost motivation but now I'm standing outside. Looking at them working and I'm just like yes I want to know what's happening! I want to know what they're doing! Like come on I want to solve it as well.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *She goes back into the Cube to her team and is motivated to find a solution now. Sebi just arrived at Polyterrasse and isn't surprised at the state of exhaustion of the cubees.*

(Sebastian Pinegger:) Yeah. They didn't come here for sleeping. They are pushed in a good way so we constantly give them the overall design thinking challenges so they need to follow a certain program. They are free to adjust the times they need to deliver at certain steps milestones so they need to upload files and this way I can ensure that the quality is consistent. The second one is during the day they have so-called mini challenges where they need to get out of the box create something. On Friday the mini challenge was to create a short video about living in the cube...

(SOUND VIDEO)

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *On the video Agnieszka is dancing and hopping around in the cube.*

Two days left and they have to pitch their business idea - but so far Agnieszka's team has no useful ideas.

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Hi Jennifer, there is this last day of Incube which is incredible. We have 20 minutes to our final final presentation when we will pitch the idea that we created over the last four days. What is really funny is that's our ninth prototype the solution which we will actually present. So we really rethought a lot during the whole process. We were circling around like crazy - up and down, failure, success, failure, success - I don't know if it's something I can officially say at the podcast but this is what it is: we are super-hyped. I think we really love our idea although they say do not fall in love with your prototype. It's too late. we fall in love. I am standing in front of the Incube waiting. My team is inside for the last twenty minutes playing some crazy music and basically dancing around as we used to during these four days. So yeah. The Incube is ending. Unfortunately. So I guess it's time for me to go, dance the last time and go to the final event. Bye!

CHAPTER 3

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Chapter 3 - afterwards*

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *2 weeks later, on a warm day in October, the Incube team of Agnieszka didn't win a prize at the final event. was it because they loved their idea too much? Before we get into that... what did they actually pitch?*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Our idea in the end was Animix. This is the name of our product and it's basically allowing you to build a knowledge graph which guides you through your whole learning process in life. So basically whenever documents whenever you're browsing whatever you're googling you can save it into your knowledge graph which gives you the overview over of your knowledge...

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *I somehow don't get it. Sounds pretty abstract.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) It's a little bit complicated product to express in one two sentences but you will hear about it when we will be big and famous and you know. (giggles)

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *What was her reaction to the failure at the final event?*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I didn't really care. Actually it was really cool to see your friends winning. So in the end whichever team would win I would be happy. It's more or less like this.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Incube was a turning point for her.*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) I never had such a good group work experience in my life.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *After the final ceremony, they danced again at the afterparty,*

(Agnieszka Rozniak:) Then I felt extremely exhausted. I was just like OK I want to go to my bed. I don't want to talk I don't want to do anything I just want to be home.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *what about Sebi, one of the main organizers, how did he experience these 4 days?*

(Sebastian Pinegger:) It's not easy: Those four days are very stressful and the awarding thing is what they have learnt during those four days, that they grow together, live in a box with six or five people. This is the actual reward.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *For him as an organizer and member of the Entrepreneur Club during the Incube event he was worried about several things but all in all he also experienced something for life:*

(Sebastian Pinegger:) The most important thing I learned: A day only has 24 hours and not 25 hours. And you need to sleep at least six hours a day otherwise you're not functioning well enough.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Although he knows there is room for improvement, he looks back at the entire experience happily.*

(Sebastian Pinegger:) I can say I'm satisfied with the outcome of the overall goal we had and even even now - we are in the startup phase now - there are two teams who actually keep talking with potential people they can go into the future.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Students laid the groundwork for spin-offs. For the president of the ETH, Lino Guzzella, this is of great importance.*

(Lino Guzzella:) ETH is a publicly funded university and this brings a lot of responsibilities with it. One of the responsibility is to pay back to society what society invests in ETH. We have spun off from ETH very very successful companies. These companies create jobs. These companies create opportunity for employment these companies generate tax revenues. These companies contribute to the well-being of society and in this sense the Entrepreneur Club is one piece in a big mosaic where ETH pays back what society has invested in it.

OUTRO

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *Students from different disciplines come together, work and live in a glassbox for a couple of days , search for a business idea and learn for life.*

(Lino Guzzella:) When I was a young student at ETH this was completely different totally different. Becoming an entrepreneur was not an option. People who did that were considered as essentially failures that they didn't succeed in either academic or the industrial way. And it is really very much encouraging that this has completely changed at ETH. I'm extremely glad that we have changed the attitude at ETH and in many other places as well so that we offer this opportunity not to everybody but to those students who want to go that way. Now there are many many more options and I think it is a big step forward.

(Jennifer Khakshouri:) *This is the second episode of the new podcast by ETH Zurich.*

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