



The Innovators

Conversations

on the *Cutting Edge*

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Interview with Guido H. Petit, Ph.D. Director, Alcatel-Lucent Technical Academy Bell Labs, Chief Scientist Office Alcatel-Lucent



Guido is Director of the Alcatel-Lucent Technical Academy, a corporate program recognizing individuals who have made outstanding contributions to Alcatel-Lucent's technological leadership. Since 2006, he has been co-responsible for the launch and organization of Entrepreneurial Boot Camps. Previously, he was a Director of Alcatel's Network Strategy Group. From 2001 to 2004, he was a visiting professor at the Department of Telecommunications and Information Processing at the University of Ghent (Belgium).

Guido is a member of the Alcatel-Lucent Bell Innovation Board, the Advisory Board of Flanders Inshape, and the Strategic Advisory Board of the Artesis College School in Antwerp. He holds 14 European patents and has published more than 70 papers in leading technical journals/conferences. Guido has his Ph.D. in Chemistry. His hobbies are sailing, gardening, cycling and travelling. Guido can be reached at guido.h.petit@alcatel-lucent.com

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, INNOVATE doug@innovate1st.com

Doug: Please begin by providing our readers with background on the Alcatel-Lucent Technical Academy.

Guido: The Technical Academy was an initiative launched by the Chairman of Alcatel in 2000, just before the Internet bubble. Talented people were leaving the company to join startups and we needed to develop an approach to retain them. The Academy was expanded when Alcatel merged with Lucent. I became Director of the Academy program in 2004.

The mission of the Academy has evolved and is three-fold. First, recognize and reward individuals who have made exceptional contributions to the technological leadership of the company. So, the Academy is a corporate recognition program for top technical talent in our company. Second, facilitate and improve R&D effectiveness through innovation, networking, knowledge sharing and best practices sharing across the boundaries of the organization. Third, act as a channel for communication between the company's R&D community and its top executive management on issues of importance to the R&D community.

We have members worldwide in China, India, the U.S., Canada, and various countries in Europe. The Academy started with a flat organization. In 2004, we started putting

some structure into the organization. Today, in every country where we have a critical mass of Academy members, we have created chapters led by one or more chapter chairs. Each chapter organizes themselves to accomplish the mission of the Academy with the support of local executive stakeholders.

Doug: How are your outstanding technical contributors identified and selected?

Guido: The Academy is limited to 500 people with a membership period of 3 years. Each year 170 people leave the Academy and 170 people join or rejoin. The selection of the new members is based on yearly application by technical contributors with the support from his or her local leaders. In applying, a person describes their technical skills and career, as well as their top technical achievements and their impact. The selection of the new members is based on a peer ranking by current Academy members.

When people join the Academy, each chapter organizes a recognition ceremony, attended by local stakeholders and occasionally corporate stakeholders. They are awarded a certificate signed by the CEO of Alcatel-Lucent, Ben Verwaayen, as well as by Jeong Kim, president of Bell Labs.

Doug: How are the members of the Academy working to facilitate the improvement in R&D effectiveness?

Guido: Let's start with the example of networking and knowledge sharing events. These are events where we invite both distinguished internal guest speakers, as well as distinguished external experts, to share their knowledge and best practices with anybody in the company interested in that topic. Every chapter decides whom to invite, and the subjects that are of interest for that R&D community. Subjects include: lean and agile development, green and local sustainability, and various new technologies. They also include innovation best practices, to which we invite innovation managers of other companies. In addition, we promote the sharing of internal practices that the network of Academy members is trying to promote and make visible to other parts of the organization.

Another recent achievement is our technology hotline. We have a lot of experts in our company, with 23,000 people working in R&D. Sometimes people are struggling to find experts or get an answer to a technical question. Therefore, we have set up an Academy working group comprised of members from various parts of the organization in order to come up with how best to connect technical experts. The technology hotline is a web-based tool for anyone in the company to launch a request for technical help. In 24 working hours, the Academy network connects those who are making requests with a person able and willing to help. In this way, we help the R&D effectiveness of the individual, as well as the organization as a whole.

Finally, I'll give you an example related to innovation. Since 2002, I have been a member of the Innovation Board in Alcatel-Lucent here in Belgium. We have set up a whole process and program to involve every employee in coming up with new ideas and identifying new business opportunities for the company. Since 2006, we have been organizing, on a yearly basis, two Entrepreneurial Boot Camps where individuals and teams are assisted and coached to transform an idea into a business opportunity plan. This business opportunity plan needs to be defended to a jury consisting of the local CEO, CTO and CFO of Alcatel-Lucent in Belgium, a number of venture capitalists, as well as Business School professors. If you can do that with a multidisciplinary team consisting of people from research, engineering, sales, marketing and so on, and you

do it together with coaching from these professors, then the chances to succeed are much, much higher.

This program has been a success in Belgium, and resulted in the launch and execution of two internal ventures. Through the Academy's worldwide network, we have promoted this to other locations in Alcatel-Lucent. Now, we have Entrepreneurial Boot Camps with local business schools in France and the Americas. We also have a light weight version in India, and soon the Boot Camps will start in China. The Belgium boot camp has become an international one, involving teams from all over Europe.

Doug: What is an example of a Boot Camp venture that Alcatel-Lucent is commercializing?

Guido: In March of this year we announced a technology-based service called 'touchatag' that makes it possible to pay for goods and services, such as theater tickets, mass transit, or gas for the car, simply by waving a contactless card or mobile phone. It's based on a new kind of short-range radio called 'Near Field Communication (NFC)', which promises to revolutionize everything from payment systems to home networking. In the next few years, NFC chips are expected to find their way into cell phones, PCs, consumer electronics, and industrial equipment. The original idea for this service was developed through a Boot Camp. Today, it is being commercially deployed, and is part of Alcatel-Lucent's mobile wallet strategy.

Doug: It is exciting to hear how you are using the Academy in a very practical way to promote entrepreneurial thinking and new ventures. Does this also help people to secure funding for their entrepreneurial projects?

Guido: Bell Labs has what we call the Alcatel-Lucent Ventures organization with the funds and the budget to launch internal ventures. The Boot Camp has become a complementary way to both bring grassroots proposals from employees in the organization to the attention of the internal decision makers, and to fill the pipeline of venture proposals.

Doug: Earlier you said that one of the missions of the Technical Academy is to be a communication channel between top executives and the R&D community. Can you expand on that?

Guido: Last year, we started to prepare position papers for top executive management on issues identified by them. One was related to talent redeployment, where people sometimes see it as a risk to move from one R&D department to another R&D department. Instead of asking human resources to come up with a proposal, they came to the Alcatel-Lucent Technical Academy and asked us to make a grassroots proposal to be deployed in the R&D community. One of the Academy members active in this working group took the opportunity to give the presentation to the CEO and management committee members.

As an Academy, we are not going to compete with existing functions and organizations in the company to get a job done. With our large network of members coming from different organizations, different cultures, and different countries, some of the issues that need to be solved in our company can best be addressed by the Academy.

Doug: Having spoken to the evolving role that the Academy is playing within Alcatel-Lucent, how has the Academy approached rewards, recognition, and retention?

Guido: From my comments, you can see the various ways in which the Academy has increased the recognition of our technical contributors. Members also receive a monetary bonus when joining the Academy. We don't measure the retention of

people selected to the Academy. However, being a member of the Academy gives people personal opportunities for growth, networking, and improving leadership capabilities that facilitate next career steps.

Doug: You are building networks outside the company with customers and with the technical organizations of other companies.

Guido: The risk of employees focusing too much on meeting their deadlines is that they could forget to look at what is happening beyond Alcatel-Lucent. So we face the challenge of bringing the outside world inside. We found that sending people to conferences is not very effective for knowledge sharing. That's why we regularly invite experts to come to Alcatel-Lucent premises to share the information with anyone interested.

Doug: If you were advising senior R&D people who were interested in establishing their own version of the Academy in their company, what would you say?

Guido: Actually, I am invited by other companies to speak at their premises. These companies are interested in the Entrepreneurial Boot Camps, and in the added value that the Academy brings to Alcatel-Lucent. I tell them that when you launch such a program, it is important that you get, from Day 1, the full support of the executive leadership team. You need somebody to lead the Academy who believes 100% in the goals and the mission of the Academy, because that energy will spread at various levels in the organization.

In order to succeed, you need to focus 80% of your time and energy, if not more, to the positive people because they are the ones who are going to help you to bring the program to the level you want. Don't spend much effort in convincing the negatives. Once they see that the program is running and getting up to full speed, they will jump on the bandwagon; maybe not all of them, but at least a large part of them.

At the beginning, when you set up such a program and you are looking for chapter chairs in your different countries, select those people who have strong relationships with local management, and really have the passion and skills to convince others to join the program and contribute to its mission.

I'm very fortunate to have this opportunity to lead such a great program, and to bring it into the next orbit in the company.

