

## How I became me, and turned that into a book

*To my father and grandfather who made me want to become an entrepreneur, both in their uniquely different ways.*

*To my wife, without whom I might still be a corporate slave.*

*To my children, who teach me every day that Today and Tomorrow will never be enough.*

*To everyone I ever had the pleasure to work with and who helped me become what I am today.*

When I wrote my last book, it ended up slightly bigger than intended. Ok, a lot bigger. So I had to make some tough choices and, eventually, weeded out some parts that were very important to me. Like this one: my very honest account of my personal and professional development. Basically: the story about me turning into what I am today and how THAT turned into a book called The Day After Tomorrow.

So this is me opening up, telling my story, and hopefully inspiring others to dream their dream and to prepare for what's ahead. For their company, their organization, their team but, above all, for themselves.

### Otium

We're starting this journey in ancient Rome. Not because I'm that old, but I want to introduce you to a wonderful word that's foreign to the English (or Dutch) language: Otium. Remember it. You might need it one day. Prominent Roman military commanders or leaders who had provided great service to the public or private sector, would, in later life, withdraw from the strenuous daily business and retreat into what is known as 'Otium'. Otium was a time for contemplating, academic endeavors, intellectual musing, speaking and writing. It was seen as a reward, a gift if you will, to be able to ponder from a distance, far from the hustle and bustle of daily life, and to observe with a perspective, an intellectual vantage point. In many ways, it feels like I've been blessed to dabble in a significant amount of 'Otium' myself.

At heart, I'm a technologist. From early childhood, I knew that I wanted to become an engineer, like my father. Fascinated by computers at an early age, I spent most of my adolescence glued to computer screens learning to program in BASIC, Pascal, C and Assembly Language. And I loved every minute of it. I also knew I wanted to start my own

company, run my own businesses and, above all, be free from corporate bureaucracy. I'm utterly convinced that context plays a huge role in how life plays out. The gene pool may be pivotal in deciding if you are up for a challenge, but the way this challenge is presented to you is remarkably related to context, and therefore luck, or fate, if you prefer to call it that. In my case, my father was key in providing the context that, ultimately, would shape my future. Actually, it was my father's father.

My grandfather was an entrepreneur. During the Second World War he raised a family in the Netherlands, and endured five long years of German occupation. Especially the final winter, known as the 'Hunger Winter' was incredibly tough on the young family, as blockades cut off food and fuel shipments from farm areas, and millions of Dutch people had to survive on food kitchens.

After the end of the war, my grandfather - who was mechanically extremely gifted - started a firm repairing failing equipment for farmers who had been unable to invest in their tractors and harvesters during the war. Soon he realized that Belgian farmers had suffered less than the Dutch ones and he moved his entire family to the neighboring country of Belgium to start his business. In true entrepreneurial spirit he expanded into a wide variety of endeavors. He started a garage, sold tractors, built sheds and storage facilities, and launched a bus company that set up tours around Europe. One of his killer ideas was organizing inspiration tours to the holy city of Lourdes, taking busloads of Catholics on a journey to a remote village in the Pyrenean mountains, where the holy mother had apparently once materialized in front of Bernadette Soubirous. It was a goldmine.

My father was the brainy kid in a family of five children. The designated 'nerd', he was put in charge of father's business accounting when he was only 14 because he had a real knack for mathematics. That's when my father started to realize that my grandfather was constantly on the brink of bankruptcy. He noticed the serious cash flow issues, and knew that the repo-man could seize the family house and its assets any day. It never happened, the business of my grandfather pulled through in the end, but it left an emotional scar on my father. He swore he would never do anything that would put his family in financial danger, and vowed he would never take such foolish entrepreneurial risks. When he graduated as an engineer, he started a safe corporate career at Exxon where he worked his entire life.

Growing up, I remember my father coming home exhausted from meetings. As the years ticked by, I saw him become increasingly frustrated by bureaucracy and corporate politics. I listened as he told discouraging tales about an insane amount of incompetence and inefficiency in such a large red-tape organization. That's when I

swore I would never, ever, work in a large corporation.

“We all turn into our parents someday”. That’s what they say (I’ve never quite figured out who “they” are, though). I didn’t. I turned into my grandparent and became an entrepreneur. My entire career has been centered on the startup life. Ever since I was a little boy, growing up in a world where technology was rapidly becoming commonplace, I knew I wanted to start things up myself. I dreamt of creating my own companies, and of building new exciting opportunities.

So. A life of startups it has been. I’ve had the extreme pleasure to be the founder of three technology startups early on in my career. I almost didn’t make it though.

## **Knock it off, kid**

I graduated from university, with a master’s degree in Electronics, and a focus on Telecommunications. I soon realized that I did not have the maturity and practical experience to start up on my own. That’s why I chose to first become an employee in a company that was then called Alcatel, which would later merge with Bell labs to become Alcatel-Lucent, and much later merged into the re-christened Nokia.

My very first job was to work on ATM systems. At the time, ATM (Asynchronous Transfer Mode) was a radical new concept that allowed high bandwidth to be sent over traditional, old, copper wires. It enabled telecom operators to reuse the same vintage copper wires - that they had used for ages to connect telephones - to bring ‘bandwidth’ into households. This was a couple of years before we even had the World Wide Web, so back then the concept of ‘bandwidth’ was extremely vague and nebulous.

I loved my first job. I was allowed to work in the R&D lab, where we were building applications that would show how wonderful this new ‘bandwidth’ would be. Alcatel couldn’t sell the concept of ATM and ADSL (the practical use of the technology) to Telecom Operators unless it showed what it could do. And that was exactly our task: develop really cool new shiny applications that would make the Telecom operators go gaga and open up their wallets.

My group worked on Video On Demand. In a world today where Netflix has become a global phenomenon, it needs no explanation. Instead of going to a video rental store, we would build a solution that would allow you to watch any video from an online library in the comfort of your own home. Netflix has made this laughable to even explain it but, back in 1993, this would feature in the same category as electric cars

that would drive themselves, or robots that would be beat the best go-players in the world. Oh, right, that has happened as well in the meantime.

Our lab was all about the tradition of the 'Big Telco'. We would have huge machines humming in large air-conditioned hangars, blinking millions of red LEDs to power our ATM technology, trying to push 'bandwidth' onto copper wires. Big Machines, Big Power, Big Bandwidth trying to get Big fat contracts from Big Telcos. And I loved it. It was like working in the research department of the Death Star.

## The birth of the web

But, in the meantime, a revolution was brewing. About 1,000 kilometers away from where I was working, a group of scientists at the CERN laboratory in Geneva was becoming mighty frustrated dealing with documentation and paperwork in trying to run the particle accelerator under the lovely Swiss countryside. A multitude of scientists from all around the world was visiting CERN, sharing information and trying to collaborate. But having everyone to share the same data, was a complete and utter disaster.

Out of utter frustration, two geeky scientists called Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau built a rudimentary system to allow a browser to view a page on a remote server, and the rest is history: the World Wide Web was born. I've had the pleasure to meet both on a number of occasions. Both are very open and transparent about their discovery: they had absolutely no clue they were onto something big. They actually thought it was a pretty simple and quite raggedy rickety solution. But it did the trick.

On the other side of the pond, at the University of Illinois, there was Marc Andreessen: a smart young computer scientist who saw the potential of this mysterious web. Based on the first version of the CERN concepts, he started to build his version of the browser which was to become Netscape, the browser that most of us have used to get online for the first time.

It was a friend from university who called me up, and told me I had to see this. They had the first web browser up and running at my alma mater and I just HAD to see it. I remember driving from work to the old university lab where I had spent five years of my life trying to get a degree (and many nights playing multi-player games on the university's computer systems). I did not immediately understand the magic of the Web. My friend was overexcited about using the new browser to connect to a web server somewhere in Chicago where he could check out the weather report from over

there. Yet I recall driving home late that night thinking: "Why the hell would I want to know about the weather tomorrow in Chicago?"

Over the next couple of weeks, on the commute to work, I started to go back to the demo of the browser I had seen. I was trying to get my head around the concept of a potential global communications platform, that would allow everyone around the world to have access to all information, instantly, regardless of distance or time. And suddenly I got hooked. I became terribly excited, and I started to experiment. I was eager to know how it worked, and where it could go.

When I came home from work I started dabbling with browsers, servers, and building my own websites. At first, to understand the technology, and then to comprehend the ins and outs of the technology which was clearly still in its infancy. But then I started to build websites for friends and then for organizations. What started as a hobby became a small business, and soon I was building websites for six, seven hours per day after my actual job. And I was dragging myself to work with smaller and smaller pupils, and less and less spring in my step.

And then, one morning, I got called into my boss's office. "Are you on drugs?", was his opening salvo. When I reassured him that I was neither intoxicated nor inebriated, he asked me to explain why I looked completely scruffy and raggedy. I told him about the World Wide Web, what I had discovered, how I had started building websites, and how I got excited about it. When I had finished he said: "You know this World Wide Web thing is kid's stuff, right? It's foolish, and it will never amount to anything. Knock it off, kid. Concentrate on the serious work we do here if you want to have a career here."

I was flabbergasted. I remember going back to my cubicle, calling my girlfriend who later was to become my wife, and telling her what happened. I'll never forget her advice: "If you think you're right, then you should quit, and follow your dreams." I quit that same afternoon.

The commute home that evening was exhilarating. The feeling - of quitting my job and throwing myself into an adventure that no one, not the least myself, could anticipate what it would me bring at this young age of 25 - was fascinating, refreshing, and breathtaking. I was also scared out of my skull, and experiencing extreme nausea.

In hindsight, I'm extremely grateful for my manager at Alcatel. He was the only boss I've ever had in my entire life. The first, and the last. But if he had not put it as directly as "Knock it off, kid. This is kid's stuff.", who knows ... I might still be employed at

Alcatel today. Nokia that is. I might have become a corporate minion, working my way up from cubicle to office, perhaps to a corner office, with more and more memos to write, expenses to approve and meetings to attend. I missed out, therefore, on numerous cups of coffee, morning donut breakfasts and corporate planning events to determine next year's budget. Instead I chose a life of mystery, of the unknown, the uncertain, the volatile. And I haven't looked back since.

Today I frequently meet people that I studied with who did not have the benefit of having someone like my boss at Alcatel. People who remained in corporate life, and grew up through the ranks, adding dependency in their lives, building families, adding mortgages, second wives, and complicated new-family vacations. Those who created an impossibility to free themselves from the shackles of corporate life. Many of those tell me how they would have loved to engage in a more 'startup' type of activity, but that they never had the chance, the opportunity or even the guts to do it later in life.

The longer you wait in life to go your own way, the more difficult it becomes. Thank God I had the boss I did at such a young age who told me: "Knock it off, kid".

The other factor that allowed me to make the jump was, without any doubt, my wife. She might have reacted very differently that day, stating what probably most would say: "Are you out of your mind? You have a great job and a great career ahead of you, and you would be foolish to throw that away right now!" My life would have evolved quite differently had she done so. But she didn't. So, thanks to my boss, and my wife, I was thrown into the startup world.

It also put me onto the Big Questions in life, and onto Big Question #1:

## **BIG QUESTION #1:**

*"Why is it almost impossible for large organizations to spot radical new technologies quickly, and develop their potential? What explains this organizational blindness to new opportunities?"*

I became fascinated by the fact that this large organization was biased towards making bets on the old, rather than making big bets on the new.

## **Startup Life**

The next twenty years were terrible. Terribly exciting, but also really, really terrible.

Working in a startup is exhausting enough but running technology startups is exceptionally tough. And I've done it three times.

One of my favorite books in the last few years has been the extremely open, outspoken and brutally account of Ben Horowitz in 'The Hard Thing about Hard Things'. I love that book, because I can literally feel his pain as he describes his startup experiences.

Ben Horowitz was the partner of Marc Andreessen in Netscape.

As Ben paints it, startup life isn't glorious or glamorous. It's bloody hard work, extremely unforgiving, and 99% of the time you wonder why the heck you've gone down this road. But, in the end, when it pays off, it's extremely rewarding. In the end.

And still, I've done it three times.

My first startup was a company that I founded right after I left Alcatel. I had no idea what I was doing, but the World Wide Web was exploding onto the scene, and I knew I had to do something with it. So we created a company that built large-scale intranets. We developed a platform that allowed companies to use web technology inside their organizations to communicate, share documents and collaborate. We contrived a version of Microsoft SharePoint years before Microsoft did. And it was fantastic.

In the space of just four years, the company grew to about 200 people, and it was pure chaos. The lovely part of a startup is that there is little hierarchy, and you don't need it. Everyone understands what everyone is doing, how to get things done, and how to help the customers that need help. We had 200 people working in perfect harmony, building amazing products, and serving customers around the world who were doing amazing things with our products. There was no structure at all, but it worked. It was bliss.

And then we sold the company.

It was a strange period. We had been expanding like crazy for four years, exploding in size, and revenue, and customer base. We had investors who were getting anxious about the rapid expansion, and we had an opportunity to sell. So we did. I sold my company to Alcatel, my very first employer, where my boss had told me "The World Wide Web is kid's stuff, it will never amount to anything. Knock it off". Yet four years later they bought my company. Oh, the irony.

In hindsight, it was a disaster. I should have known this would not work but, at that



time, in my mind it made perfect sense. They had the global sales & distribution channels and access to the fortune 1000, and we had a great product.

The next six months were a combination of heaven and hell. For me personally it was amazing to have financial security, something I had never experienced in my adult life. In a startup, you live from moment to moment, hoping you will be able to make payroll, hoping that you won't lose your customer, hoping you won't lose your best developer. Now, suddenly, money was not an issue anymore. Me and my wife could afford to buy the house of our dreams, and in our company, we had access to all the funds we could desire to expand. We acquired similar activities in England, France and Germany, and expanded to almost 500 people in just one year.

But the combination didn't work. Yes, they had sales-teams globally selling into the Fortune 1000, but they were used to palavering about telephone exchange equipment to minions in the IT department, with a focus on price. We, on the other hand, were selling complex collaboration platforms to executives who were trying to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. I was getting frustrated that the Alcatel sales teams were incapable of pushing our sophisticated products and services.

But the worst aspect was that I was getting increasingly caught up in the bureaucracy of this traditional company and spending more and more of my time in pointless discussions about rules, procedures, policies and governance.

My most dreadful moment arrived when I got into a fight with a corporate controller who had travelled all the way from the headquarters in Paris down to our startup offices to discuss our car policies. He wanted me to replace our company cars with leases with French car manufacturers because "that was corporate policy". I thought he was ignorant, annoying, and rude. Probably I was rude as well. I threw him out of my office, and subsequently I was thrown out of the company for insubordination.

Boom. After four years of working day and night developing my company, selling it, and striving like crazy for a full year trying to make it work inside a global corporation like Alcatel, shit had finally hit the fan. It was one of the strangest moments of my life. Having cleared out my desk, and carrying the rest of my dignity in a cardboard box, I was escorted out of the building by two security guards. And out I marched of the company that I had started myself, watched by scores of my employees, my friends in fact as I left the building. Strange, eerie, bizarre, and unnatural.

I guess I will remember how I felt that moment for the rest of my life, but it also made me wonder about Big Question #2:



## BIG QUESTION #2:

*"Why are large corporations so eager to acquire new startups, and why are they capable of screwing them up so profoundly in such a record time?"*

I was amazed at how hungry Alcatel had been to acquire us, how they had spared no expense to woo and acquire us. Yet the moment that our 'honeymoon' was over, I was amazed at how quickly the corporate reflexes and bureaucratic DNA had made our startup life a living hell.

A perfect metaphor exists for this, which I first heard from strategist and author Ann Badillo, who's also a great friend. I'll go more deeply into it later on, but she likens large corporations to Plantations, exquisitely capable of producing a single crop. This in contrast to the startup world which lives in the Rainforest: an inherently dangerous place where you are continuously in danger of dying in many different ways, but where, despite the dangers, you have the lure of the unknown and - above all - the chance to discover great new things. The trick to understand this difference, and the answer to Big Question #2 is to understand the differences in culture. But I did not appreciate this nuance when I was fired from my first startup.

## A match made in hell

When they fired me, the good people at Alcatel were terrified I would just walk across the street and start over. They were worried I would 'steal' away the best people from my first startup, even worse that these people would be happily join me. In short, they were really afraid that when they fired me I would become their worst enemy and potential competitor.

So they had me sign a non-compete clause, stipulating that I would not be active in the IT, online, digital or Telecom sector for an entire year. In hindsight, I could perhaps have opposed this in court, but I decided not to. Faced with the prospect of spending an entire year in my backyard mowing the lawn, or learning how to grow petunias, I was rescued from all that by a ringing telephone: a few days after I was fired, McKinsey called.

McKinsey & Company is perhaps the most iconic consultancy firm in the world. I believe they have the smartest people on the planet working on the toughest problems of some of the largest firms in the world. And they called to see if I would be interested to spend my 'non-compete year' with them.

And so I did. McKinsey is a firm that 'breeds' its own consultants. It loves hiring extremely smart people straight from school, and trains them to become the best consultants in the world. They seldom enlist older, 'more experienced' talent, because they know how difficult it is to mold these into thinking and acting in the true McKinsey way and how long it takes to get them truly embedded into the McKinsey culture. Yet, in order not to insulate themselves too much, from time to time, they invite the outside into their family.

I was invited to become an 'Entrepreneur in Residence' with McKinsey. I was intrigued by the question. The executive who had invited me, said just the right thing: "You might learn something from us, we might learn something from you. Just spend the year with us as a guest. We'll put you in front of some of our toughest problems with our biggest customers in the field of digital, and you will be our special guest." That, combined with one of the items on my bucket list to 'Send an invoice to McKinsey & Company', won me over.

When I sold my company to Alcatel, it was the end of the 20th century. The dot-com boom was solid, and companies such as Yahoo, Amazon and Netscape had become huge players overnight. The NASDAQ was at an all-time high, the startup world was booming in Silicon Valley, and real estate prices were going through the roof in the Bay Area.

The digital era was upon us, many companies were frantically looking for their 'dot-com' strategy, and McKinsey was flooded with questions from large global corporations to help them in their 'digital strategies'. An exciting moment to start.

And then, in March of 2000, the NASDAQ exploded, the dot-com bubble burst, and the whole fragile, nascent online industry collapsed. The dot-com boom became the dot-com bust.

Ironically, McKinsey never suffered. It was now being swamped with questions from large corporations about how to divest, in the quickest way possible, of their now toxic and dangerous online, digital and dot-com acquisitions, partnerships and developments.

I truly enjoyed my residency at McKinsey, where I had the pleasure to meet some of the smartest people in the world. I was accustomed to hanging around with developers and coders, geniuses who understood how to build databases, develop code and build applications. I was used to smart people. But nothing compares to the extreme breeding at McKinsey, filled with individuals who are virtuosos at the long-term strategy game.

But it also showed how difficult their customers, large corporations, had it in doing this 'second horizon thinking'. How hard it was for them to understand what the strategic end-games were, and how to move their organizations accordingly. Companies could easily get 'hooked' on McKinsey, and could become completely dependent on their outside guidance.

This give rise to my Big Question #3:

### **BIG QUESTION #3:**

*"How is it possible that large corporations - even when they understand their own challenges and the directions they need to take - are incapable of moving on their OWN, without external help and guidance."*

It was strange to see some of the largest corporations in the world, seemingly unable to move and take the right steps on their own. It was fascinating to detect the role companies such as McKinsey played. But it was also terrifying to watch huge global corporations get hooked on this outside guidance, like a crack-cocaine addict continuously craving his next shot, unable to escape his isolated nightmare of an existence. Possibly less dark, but just as obsessed.

## **Startups 2.0**

My wonderful life of Otium at McKinsey only lasted one year. I learned a lot and I hope that they learned something from me too. In any case I feel like I'm now part of the 'extended family' of this wonderful organization.

It was time to continue my entrepreneurial journey. I started two new startups, almost at the same time. One was a startup dealing with streaming video and interactive television, going back to my roots at Alcatel. The other was a startup that was one of the first cloud companies in Europe, a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) Provider.

I can be brief about these two adventures. The first was a true disaster. This is a company that tried to dabble in online video before this was a market. We started out four (4!) years BEFORE YouTube. Today any teenager sees YouTube as the most logical thing to consume video, check out the latest news or vlogs, or follow celebrities. We have the connectivity, bandwidth or mobile access that allows us to watch quality video online virtually everywhere. But back then, there was nothing. No bandwidth. No connectivity. No codecs. No infrastructure. No users. No customers. Nothing.

It was a sobering experience. After the success of my first startup I was convinced I could do anything, that I had the Midas touch. Nothing could be further from the truth. We got the timing completely wrong. We were way too early. We burned through venture capital, hired a great team of people, built a great platform and developed a great product. But we were too early. Way too early. After burning through most of my own capital as well, we sold the company for one symbolic euro. For the American readers, that's in same ballpark as a symbolic dollar. Sobering.

I was reminded of Steve Jobs after he had left Apple and started a crazy new adventure by founding NeXT computers. As he so eloquently put it "the heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again". I learned the hard way that there is no guarantee that your next chapter will be successful, no matter how much you've thrived in the past.

The third startup was a winner, though. We founded a SaaS company that became one of the pioneering cloud providers in Europe. At first, we struggled to find the right business model and had some difficult years. But when the Cloud-based revenue model started to materialize, it was a beauty: extremely predictable revenues, and extremely loyal and stable customers.

It was a fabulous company, with a strong group of technical developers, brilliant infrastructure technicians, seasoned project managers and a terrific sales team. We expanded quickly to a few hundred employees, and then went public in 2006. The IPO of the company was a culmination of years of hard work, and it was terribly rewarding. Being able to convince the public to invest in your company is one the most thrilling challenges I've ever been privy too.

We ran the company as a publicly quoted company listed on the stock exchange for almost four years, and then we sold our company to our competitors in Canada. They were listed on the NASDAQ and wanted to expand in Europe, and the deal made perfect sense. Being able to list your company on the stock exchange is wonderful, being able to then successfully hand it over to the next player is truly rewarding.

What I've described in the last brief paragraphs constitutes more than 10 years of my life. Years in which I've never worked harder, ever. Years in which these two startups, one a failure, one a success, were at moments almost more important than my own children. Years during which I've neglected my own family, my own social life, my own health, and focused almost exclusively on my companies, our employees and our customers. Am I proud of that? No. But it's the only way if you want to make your startup succeed. It's tough. Really tough.

## Not Glamourous. Fear.

That's why I posted an article on LinkedIn about the subject a few years ago. The title was "Startups are NOT Glamorous - They Run on Fear". It created a lot of commotion, was read and discussed by tens of thousands of readers online.

I wrote about the likes of David Karp, the founder of Tumblr who sold his company to Yahoo for \$1.1 billion at the age of 26, and the ever present Elon Musk, the wonder boy who co-founded PayPal and sold that to eBay for a fortune. And risked it all again when he founded Tesla Motors, which turned into the biggest buzz in the auto industry since Henry Ford introduced his Model T. Last but not least, he's also the genius behind SpaceX, the commercial space-venture that can do what NASA can't do. And he's 100% committed to putting a man on Mars.

Their stories are truly inspiring. This new generation of digital Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are brilliant new role models for young people. And that is good. That is absolutely amazing. Lord knows it's much better to have young kids aiming to be the next Mark Zuckerberg, David Karp, Elon Musk or Robin Chase than hoping to be the next Justin Bieber. Or Macaulay Culkin.

But the image portrayed with these examples is that it's 'easy'. That somehow it's all fun and games, and 'simple' to evolve a company into a billion-dollar valuation in a couple of years. And that you would have to be a complete dumb-ass fool to work at a large corporation from 9 to 5, waiting for that belittling pay-check at the end of the month instead of striking gold in Silicon Valley.

That's why San Francisco is attracting aspiring international talent by the busloads. And they all want the same thing: striking it big in the Valley and posing on the cover of Forbes magazine as the next Elon Musk. Just like Los Angeles has been the magnet for acting talent hoping to "make it in Hollywood" - only to employ a great deal of them as busboys, bellhops or waitresses.

The hard truth is that the Tumblrs, Teslas and PayPals of this world are rare exceptions. In reality, there are tens of thousands of startups in San Francisco and all over the world trying to compete in an ever more difficult landscape. They all have the ambition to become the next Google or Facebook. The competition is cut throat.

All of my three of these startups were intoxicating, exhilarating and fascinating. But every single one was also an enormous risk, a huge effort and a tremendous fight. None of these stories was easy. Smiling on the cover of Forbes only happens to the happy few.

When you build a startup, you gamble. Even as a serial entrepreneur, you will often put everything you've earned back on the line because you're willing to take that next big risk, in the hope of that next big reward. I've poured everything I've earned into my startups, three times in a row. Trust me, that isn't glamorous. It's nights and nights lying awake thinking about what could go wrong, and what would happen to your life, your family and your reputation if you failed. Fear is the engine of a startup.

There is the constant doubt that your best developer will walk out the door and join the competition. The war for talent is so intense in a startup in Silicon Valley that you know you're not getting the A-developers. They're hired by Google and Facebook, or Twitter. You probably won't even get the B-developers. When you start out, you have to settle for C-talent at best. And even then, you're never sure when that precious developer is going to walk out the door and say "sayonara". Fear.

There is the constant fear that the best people in your team will leave and start your biggest competitor, across the street. Ideas are not scarce in Silicon Valley. Everyone has an idea. They percolate, circulate and gravitate. Everyone in your company wants to start their own one day. You live in constant panic of your company falling apart, by the very dynamic that made you start your own company. Fear.

There is the constant fear of running out of money. True, it's cheaper to create a startup today than say 10 years ago. You don't have to buy hardware, invest in datacenters, or even software. You can put everything in the cloud. But people need to be paid (a lot), offices are incredibly expensive, and marketing will cost you an arm and a leg. You're in constant unease over lack of funding. You're always looking for the next financing round, even when you've just closed one. Funding never rests, and the worry of money drying up is always on your mind. Fear.

There is the constant fear about your customers. When you're out there pitching your product to the very first client, you're terrified they will find out that you have no references, and that you'd be willing to do anything just to sign them. You're afraid they won't like the product and will decide to take their business elsewhere. And you know you're doomed when you can't show a growth curve to your investors. Fear.

And even when you've received a couple of millions of dollars in a serious round of funding and have some ace VCs on your board, you're still terrified that you won't be able to live up to the expectations. You continuously dread that the business model you pitched to them won't pan out. That the hockey-stick curve won't bend in time or that the customer and revenue growth that you're projecting won't materialize. Fear.

Building a startup isn't glamorous at all. It's bloody hard work, requires tremendous investments of time, energy and commitment. It means that every single minute of your waking life is devoted to thinking about your startup.

That's the story that is hardly told. The missed birthdays of your children, or siblings, the family reunions where you're constantly on the phone trying to close that deal, the romantic dinner with your lover that is interrupted by investors who need an update, or by your CTO who is going through an emotional crisis.

Now, don't get me wrong. Fear is not a bad thing. It's what keeps us focused. It can bring out the best in us. I've always thrived on fear. "Only the paranoid survive" was the motto of Andy Grove, the CEO of Intel who built his company into the world's largest chipmaker. I think he was absolutely right, and that his belief applies 100% to startups as well. Paranoia is just another word for fear.

## Perspective

After my three startups of my own, I decided to take a break from building companies, by focusing on coaching young entrepreneurs. Probably because age and fear don't mix all that well. That's why I highly recommend creating a startup when you're young. When you have no kids, no mortgage, no significant other, and when you can concentrate fully on your startup. The fear is probably a little easier to bear when you're young.

But, in all honesty, here isn't a day that goes by when I don't fantasize about going back to the startup world. As American chef, author, and TV personality Anthony Bourdain puts it, "It's like a heroin addiction, where even after being clean for years, you can still long for that shot, even when you know it might kill you." Same for startups. Once in your blood, it will never let you go.

It's the most intoxicating experience in the world to be part of an adventure, to think you and your team are going to conquer the world, that you have a shot at greatness. I can only recommend it. It's a better business (and life) education than any school would ever be able to provide you with. But don't think for a minute that it's glamorous. It's not.

Today I invest in European and US startups. It is wonderful to observe (young) entrepreneurs trying to build something truly unique, truly exceptional and giving it all they've got. And I absolutely love coaching them, helping them, guiding them.



But that's half of my life now.

After the experience in the startup world, I decided to give something back. I wanted to talk about my experiences, and my perspective on this fast-changing world. I began teaching, writing books, giving keynotes and advising organizations about all the things I passionately believed in, first in Across Technology, and later in nexxworks.

When I sold my last technology startup, I grabbed an opportunity to teach at the London Business School (LBS). I've been doing that since 2010, and I absolutely adore it. My favorite part is the Senior Executive Program, the flagship program for executive education at LBS: when senior executives from all around the world gather in London for four weeks. They listen to the best educators in the world talk about the latest and finest in the world of finance, strategy, marketing, leadership. And they get me for technology, innovation and the 'Day After Tomorrow'.

When I started working at London Business School, I wrote a book called 'The New Normal'. It describes what happens in society when technology stops being 'special', but just becomes 'normality'. That book was based on my experiences trying to show these senior executives at LBS how the world was changing. And how they should 'use' the eyes of their children to observe the next generation of customers and employees. When I wrote 'The New Normal', those executives were still completely over the moon with their RIM Blackberry phones. There were no iPhones, no iPads, no Smartphones.

That changed quickly. It was fascinating to see behavior of these executives change, how quickly they realized that the digital world indeed was transforming at the speed of light. But they were puzzled with the new business models and the rise of players such as Alibaba, Uber or AirBnb. They were confused by the rise of network players, such as Google and Facebook. And they started to get worried.

This inspired me to write 'The Network Always Wins'. I truly believe that this 21st century is the age of the Network. Markets are turning into networks, with customers in the middle. Customers who no longer accept to be treated as 'average', but demand to be handled as unique individuals. Companies that don't learn to speak the 'language of the network', run the risk of becoming irrelevant for their customers.

A lot of organizations feel that they have become too slow, too hierarchical and too rigid to survive in this ever faster changing, networked world. So, when markets turn into networks, organizations must rethink the fabric of their structures and behave like a network in order to become agile again.

But the biggest - and most exciting - challenge is the acceleration of innovation. Platform players like Uber and AirBnb have proven that if you leverage the power of the network you can develop unparalleled scale to grow and expand, and therefore transform and threaten entire markets.

The irony of publishing books is that you end up in a lecture circuit. I could have literally filled my days flying around the world from convention to convention, from boardroom to boardroom, talking about 'disruption', and 'paradigm shifts'. Apparently, the more alarming and threatening my story becomes, the more I get asked to tell it. It's a certain kind of corporate masochism that runs deep. Many of those on the lecture circuit make a very good living scaring the living daylights out of their audiences.

But my task in life is not to scare people. I'm a technologist. I've seen startups. I get excited about new technologies, new business models and new concepts. I love to investigate them and talk about them. But I'm dumbfounded by how difficult it is for large organizations to take these fundamental changes seriously, and do something meaningful with them.

For the last few years I've had the pleasure to talk to audiences around the world about the fundamental changes in society that (will) occur as a result of technology. My corporate audiences tend to stare at me like reindeer into the headlights of an oncoming car. They seem unable to move, unable to adopt, act, and respond quickly enough. It's tragic.

Even the people who ARE performing 'radical' innovation in large corporates tell me how relieved they are that I talk about the need to fundamentally address these challenges. I really feel for them, because they often are the most frustrated individuals who are constantly banging their heads against corporate inertia. Being a 'Day After Tomorrow' thinker in a large corporation is one of the loneliest jobs to have these days.

So that brings me to my final, Big Question that I want to address here:

## **BIG QUESTION #4**

*"How can corporates accelerate their 'Day After Tomorrow' thinking? Why do large organizations - that understand the fundamental challenges coming at them, because of disruptive technologies, business models or concepts - seem to be too paralyzed to move fast enough to respond? How can companies become agile in their 'Day After Tomorrow' thinking, and be successful in developing an approach that works?"*

And that is probably the Big, Big Question.

I have spent the last years, after my startup career, in that unique position of 'Otium' to observe large corporates as well as keep my affinity with the startup world. That unique perspective is what I used to address these Big Questions in my book 'The Day After Tomorrow'. It is what I will spend the rest of my days gladly trying to facilitate.

*-- written on a KLM Flight from Amsterdam to San Francisco on a Boeing 787, listening to Brian Eno*

Curious about my book 'The Day After Tomorrow'? [Check it out here.](#)