

Silicon Fen shows off its wares at Cambridge showcase

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By **Dougal Shaw** Technology reporter

Technology companies show off their products in Cambridge

The iPad hovers over the poster showing a picture of a fire.

Suddenly the static image bursts into flames with a crackle.

"That's the devil's work," cries an onlooker, taking a step back.

The man holding the still smouldering device turns to his audience with a grin.

Simon Taylor has done this trick dozens of times today, but still seems to relish performing his Harry Potter-esque magic to the crowd.

Meerkats and Avatars

His company Zappar is showing what its augmented reality software can do at a technology event on the outskirts of Cambridge.

Meerkats and Avatars, held on Tuesday, is a showcase for small and medium sized companies (known as SMEs) in the technology sector, held at St John's Innovation Centre.

The showcase is an important day in Cambridge's business calendar.

It is a chance for the next generation of technology giants to reach out to a wider audience, including investors.

Products on display this year include software that can turn a series of traditional photographs into a 3D panorama, a USB stick that improves password security and an application that allows you to transport your desktop from one computer to another using your mobile.

Cheek by jowl with these digital innovations are more "physical" inventions.



The event is a chance for small businesses to impress investors

A "black box" for cars that saves fuel and improves safety; a new acoustic device for detecting leaks in water pipes; a "life light" for children's bedrooms that can guide firemen in thick smoke; and a nutritional supplement shake devised by a former athlete.

From their humble stands, all firms are vying to be the next Autonomy.

Formerly the largest British-owned software company before it was bought by Hewlett Packard earlier this year, Autonomy had its first offices in St John's.

In the current economic climate, with scarce capital and wary investors, events like these are more vital than ever to give small firms a hand up.

Firestarter

Mr Taylor of Zappar is entertaining a constant trickle of visitors to his stall with his augmented reality tricks.

He is typical of this event in that he is a Cambridge graduate, from the engineering department.

He cut his technological teeth as an undergraduate, staying on to do a PhD in the department's Machine Intelligence Lab.

It was here he worked on the code for the augmented reality software that turns posters into fireballs.

The first incarnation of the company, Extra Reality, operated out of Cambridge.

Zappar now has offices in west London, but personal ties forged studying here bring him back to events like this.

They are vital to generate buzz about the product in a competitive market, he says.

Rivals like Blippar and Aurasma are also touting augmented reality applications.

Mr Taylor believes a small company like Zappar needs work hard to sell itself, and be



St John's Innovation Centre supports emerging businesses across the "East of England"

clever in the way it applies the technology.

"Our company is split," he says, "between creatives with no software knowledge and developers."

The creatives are vital in coming up with compelling applications for the product, which will set it apart from rivals.

Elephant app

There is a similar technology "split" in the stand that boasts the youngest entrepreneurs.

At Handy Elephant's stall are Robin, 26, Lewis, 22 and Sarah, 21.

Robin and Sarah both went to Cambridge University, studying computer science and anthropology respectively.

They were brought together by founder Ben Wirtz, courtesy of a "Silicon Valley comes to the UK" event in Cambridge.

Mr Wirtz had left Lancaster University armed with a business degree, and went on a digital pilgrimage to the fabled Silicon Fen.

The four co-founders have benefitted from the practical support offered by local centres like St John's and Ideospace.

The fruits of this union are an app that tries to help business people with a large client database manage their contact workflow.

The app co-ordinates the myriad calls and texts that a business person makes, finding the best time to approach customers.

Email and social network messages will shortly be added to the product.

The appropriately named co-founder Robin Message admits he finds it hard to gauge how tough the current climate is, as this is his first venture.



Sarah Malik of Handy Elephant shows off her app for managing contacts

"You have to work out what customers can afford," he ponders, before adding, "but I suppose that is always the case."

Walk the line

By contrast Diana Hodgins is a technology start-up veteran, and she is here to show off her latest in a long line of inventions.

At her busy stall she has given a free medical check-up to more than a dozen people.

Her product can quickly test the way people walk by means of gyroscopes and accelerometers, stored in sensors strapped to the legs.

Bill, who introduces himself as a proud Scouser, is a willing guinea pig, and watches anxiously as his results are loaded onto a laptop.

As the software returns a near perfect gait, he beams with chest puffed out.

Mrs Hodgins developed the product with her husband, Denis, and they have come from their base in Hertfordshire.

The device can be used by athletes, who need their joints to be constantly monitored.



Diana Hodgins holds up a leg sensor from her latest technology product

But another aim of the product is to spot when an elderly person's gait has deteriorated to the point when a fall is imminent - rather than wait to deal with the consequences.

The husband and wife team regularly visit retirement homes with the product.

While collecting valuable data, she confesses with a smile, they have also become a welcome entertainment slot.

Mrs Hodgins has witnessed many economic cycles.

"Innovation at this time is one of the hardest things to do," she says.

"You have to work very hard to get companies to listen about anything new which is-

n't an essential item."

Helping ARM

Tucked away next to the orange juice dispenser in the refreshments room is a remarkable young woman.

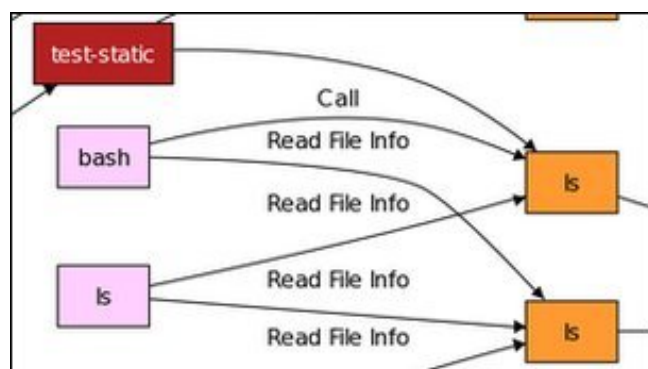
At first glance her stall is not so impressive, lacking any pyrotechnics or 3D displays.

Instead her sober table is decked with images of pale-coloured diagrams, which look like circuit boards.

On closer inspection, they are a kind of on-line instruction manual for programmers.

The graphic interface in her Breeze system visualises how programs interact with the computer in an IT infrastructure.

The dashboard system can be used by programmers in multiple computer languages for debugging, installations, and migrations to cloud computers.



Close up of part of an Ellexus workflow diagram

"It works like an X-ray, making programming more intuitive, visualising the code process," says Rosemary Francis, founder of Ellexus.

She developed the idea working on a PhD in microchip design at Cambridge.

In September she secured her first customer, microchip manufacturer and Cambridge tech giant extraordinaire, ARM.

Cambridge blues

Based in Cambridge's Innovation Park, St John's Centre has played a vital role in tilling Cambridge's Silicon Fen.

It schools academic blue sky thinkers in the hard rules of business.

Along with Ideaspace, it is one of the vital organs for putting government funds to use promoting business growth in Cambridge.

Companies tend to come when they are about a year old, and leave after three or four years, when they have a staff of about 10 or 15 people, says the centre's managing director David Gill.

If the Research Centre is like a school, then Ideaspace is the tech nursery, or "pre-incubation centre" as it prefers to call itself, supporting start-ups in their infancy.

In fact the companies at this showcase represent the whole of the East of England, a zone that runs from Peterborough to Southend, Bedford to Lowestoft.



David Gill, managing director of St John's, says downturns can be good for tech firms

This is the artificial geographical area served by the Regional Development Agency (RDA), which becomes obsolete this month.

The RDAs are to be replaced shortly with a new funding body, and this Meerkats event represents one of the local RDA's last acts of financial generosity.

Wherever the new money comes from, it is certainly needed in the current economic climate.

However, the centre's managing director, David Gill, remains upbeat.

There has been no downturn in the number of companies approaching St John's Innovation Centre for support, he says.

"For early stage companies, in many ways starting up in a downturn is a good place to be," he adds.

"It looks tough but it does mean you prove yourselves early on, you validate your technology."