

Data Pitch

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D5.5: Peer networking and alumni services report

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1. Executive summary

Without a strong network, a startup will struggle to scale, and peer networking is one of the most important services that a startup programme can provide. When running a virtual programme like Data Pitch, there are a number of challenges in how to bring together the relevant stakeholders, and how to facilitate peer-to-peer support. A programme needs to provide a range of resources, from in-person events to online tools, to support startups to grow their networks.

The Data Pitch acceleration period was designed to support each startup's development so that by the end of the six months they are ready to grow their company with the right product, skills and expertise. As startups continue to grow post-Data Pitch, they will come across new challenges, or may need help to continue their momentum, so it is important to have a plan for alumni support and to maintain communication channels once startups have graduated.

This deliverable details the activities related to providing peer networking and alumni services to startups. It includes the lessons learned from running these activities for 47 startups across two cohorts, and recommendations based on these lessons.

2. Description of services: peer networking

Access to a strong network is a crucial factor to support a startup's growth. As the Data Pitch programme is a virtual accelerator, the consortium partners recognised that there would need to be a range of activities to encourage peer learning between startups on the same cohort, and to support the startups to build and strengthen their networks.

The section describes each of the activities and events organised, both virtually and in-person, to facilitate interactions between the startups and to grow their networks more widely, including introductions to mentors and potential investors and clients.

2.1. *Bi-weekly team meetings*

For both cohorts, the partners scheduled bi-weekly team meetings on every other Monday throughout the accelerator with the entire cohort, during weeks where startups did not have 1-2-1 meetings with their advisors. The purpose of the meetings was to provide general programme updates to startups, including upcoming deadlines or opportunities, and to promote information sharing between startups.

The meetings took 30 minutes, and were held using the web conference software GoToMeeting. Each startup gave a short update (between 30 seconds - 1 minute) about their progress over the previous 2 weeks, and if they had any requests for help from their peers. Examples of requests include advice on where to advertise job roles and recommendations for which marketing software to use.

For startups, feedback about these bi-weekly team meetings was mixed. While most found the meetings useful, and enjoyed the opportunity to hear updates and share knowledge, a few startups fed back that they did not find the meetings a good use of time. In response to this feedback, we adapted the structure to focus on startups sharing issues or advice, rather than just updates. Nevertheless, these meetings were overall a positive experience and partners felt it was important to offer a range of different communication channels.

From a partner perspective, holding the meetings was useful for identifying common themes around the issues startups were facing. This helped feed into planning workshop topics and where to focus advisor meetings.

2.2. *Online peer networking opportunities*

As a virtual accelerator, online tools proved particularly useful as a form of networking, both as instant messaging (Slack) and mailing lists (Google Groups). The consortium learned that by facilitating online open networking opportunities, the challenge of time difference and geographical disparity could be reduced.

Slack played a vital role in the communication between startups and advisors, as it built a sense of community and enabled the teams to discuss opportunities easily. Slack also created an easy means of communication between the startups, both on group channels and through direct messaging.

As not all startups were active on Slack, to keep cohorts up to date with upcoming deadlines, opportunities and other relevant information, partners used a Google Groups mailing list for each cohort as a more formal means of communication.

2.3. In-person events

Online tools can have limitations, and in-person events are also vital to facilitating relationships. One of the programme's KPIs was to organise 10 peer networking events, and in total the partners organised 11, which includes leveraging existing events where partners were helping to organise or exhibiting. The events aimed to cultivate relationships between the startups taking part in the programme, as well as introduce them to key contacts such as potential investors, clients and mentors.

Some events, such as the cohort launch and final reviews, were mandatory, as they marked milestones in the programme. Others, such as the Lisbon Investment Summit and ODI Summit, were recommended but not mandatory, as the partners recognised that some startups had limited capacity to travel to events, and that some startups had stronger existing networks than others, and therefore these types of events would be lower priority.

The events organised were:

- Round 1 accelerator launch event (attended by entire cohort)
- Round 2 accelerator launch event (attended by entire cohort)
- Round 1 Final Review (attended by entire cohort)
- Round 2 Final Review (attended by entire cohort)
- Data Pitch Demonstration Day 2018 (attended by entire Round 1 cohort)
- Investor Speed Dating event 2018 (attended by 4 startups)
- ODI Summit 2018 (attended by 4 startups)
- ODI Summit 2019 (attended by 5 startups)
- Lisbon Investment Summit 2018 (attended by 4 startups)
- Lisbon Investment Summit 2019 (attended by 5 startups)
- South Summit 2019 (attended by 11 startups)

In addition to partner-organised events, we also secured free or discounted tickets for startups, which provided further opportunities for peer networking. Each of these events were attended by one or more Data Pitch startup using a discount or free ticket:

- Rise of the AI 2018 (Munich)
- Unbound Innovation Festival 2018 & 2019 (London)
- Sprinters 2018 (London)
- Tech London Advocates Investor Showcase 2019 (London)
- B2B Rocks 2019 (Paris)
- Unbound Innovation Festival (London)

For more information about the events, please see deliverable D5.3 for Round 1 and deliverable D5.4 for Round 2.

2.4. Mentor introductions

To ensure a wide range of expertise was available, the partners invited mentors to join the programme on a voluntary basis. Mentors created profiles on the online platform Mentornity that included their areas of expertise and short career biographies. For round 1, 25 mentors featured on

Mentornity, and in round 2 this increased to 27. Startups could search and contact mentors, either through the platform or directly by email, depending on the mentor's preference. Mentors also could use the platform to discover startups in their sectors of interest, and reach out to offer support.

In Round 2, the partners attempted to increase the engagement between startups and mentors, based on learnings from Round 1, where engagement was low. This included inviting mentors to in-person kickoff events, asking mentors to lead online workshops, and facilitating direct introductions between startups and mentors (rather than leaving either the startup or mentor to approach each other using Mentornity). Engagement was still lower than expected, but it is worth noting that for data provider challenges, in most cases the data provider provided domain expertise through mentoring.

The partners constantly looked to add further value to the mentorship programme where relevant. When a gap in expertise was identified, either through startup requests to advisor, the bi-weekly startup reports or during team meetings, then the partners would look to leverage their networks to find this expertise. In most cases, this would lead to a direct introduction between the startup(s) and expert, rather than the expert joining Mentornity. For example, when 3 startups requested support with Google Cloud Platform (GCP), they were introduced directly to senior member of the GCP team to arrange a 1-2-1 call.

2.5. Investor and client introductions

As explained above in 2.3, we held a number of events to help startups meet potential investors and clients, including the Lisbon Investment Summit and the ODI Summit.

In Round 1, the partners hosted an open Demonstration Day in Lisbon to showcase the startups to an audience of investors, corporates and other startups. The pitches were also broadcast online via YouTube to increase exposure. For more detailed information about the format of the Round 1 Demo Day, see D5.3. Based on learnings from Round 1, and to increase audience size, for Round 2, the partners chose to combine the Demo Day with a larger event, South Summit. For more detailed information about South Summit, see D5.5.

In addition to facilitating these events, the partners also created an investor portfolio. Startups were invited to submit a profile that included top level information about the company, target markets, growth stage and investment seeking. A physical copy of the [investor portfolio](#) was taken to South Summit and a digital copy is also available to be shared and is available on the Data Pitch website. You can see an example of a profile included in the investor portfolio in Annex 1.

3. Description of services: alumni services

Once the acceleration period ended and startups graduated from Data Pitch, the partners ensured that some services and support continued.

3.1 *Alumni handbook*

The partners produced an [alumni handbook](#) for the startups to use as an information resource following the end of Data Pitch. This handbook includes ways to stay in touch with partners, recordings of workshops held during the acceleration phase, and other resources designed to help startups grow sustainably.

3.2 *Mailing lists*

The Google Group mailing lists for both cohorts were kept active after the acceleration phase ended during the programme period until December 2020. They were used by partners to ask for progress updates for monitoring purposes, share relevant opportunities, such as free tickets to events or funding opportunities, and by startups to ask questions to their cohort. These mailing lists provided an easy and convenient way to stay in touch with alumni and continue to offer support with minimal effort.

After Data Pitch ends on 31 December 2019, startups and consortium partners will be invited to join a Data Pitch alumni mailing list so a channel of communication for the Data Pitch community remains.

3.3 *Data Pitch website*

The Data Pitch website will remain online once the programme has ended, and it includes a profile for every startup and news stories about startups' achievements and learnings from the programme. This helps to increase the startups' credibility, as it proves their involvement in the programme. It also helps increase their visibility; during the programme, we received several requests for introductions to startups based on their website profile, including from the UK government's Office for AI.

3.4 *ODI startup directory*

All Data Pitch startups are included in the ODI's Startup Directory that is publicly-available and hosted on the website. Like the Data Pitch website, this will also help increase their visibility and credibility, and help generate new leads as the ODI receives regular requests for introductions to startups from corporates and investors.

3.5 *ODI Membership*

One of the perks of joining Data Pitch is a free ODI Membership, which lasts for one year. This means that startups continue to receive exclusive content and discounts to training and events from the ODI for at least six months post-graduating, as well as having access to a network of thousands of companies and individuals working with data. In total, 24 Data Pitch startups opted to use this benefit and become ODI Members.

4. Recommendations

In conclusion, peer networking and alumni services are an important part of any startup programme, and require careful planning. As each startup's needs will be different, it is important to ensure a range of opportunities for networking and for post-programme support.

Based on the activities described above, a list of recommendations has been provided below to support the running of any future programmes that are similar to Data Pitch.

- **Mentor engagement requires proactive input from partners.**
In a virtual accelerator programme, with limited face-to-face engagement, it is difficult for mentors and startups to build relationships. In order to encourage higher mentor engagement in the programme, mentors should be used as facilitators for the workshops and be invited to face-to-face events. Programme partners should also proactively make direct introductions between startups and mentors, as this was found to create far more incentive for a mentor to engage than if they were approached via the Mentornity platform. If it is feasible, the partners would recommend not using a third-party platform like Mentornity to manage mentor relationships, as many startups and mentors would forget to check it on a regular basis.
- **Leverage existing events for greater networking opportunities with corporates and investors**
Organising events is time-intensive, especially when running a virtual programme. Reach out to established events for startups or in target sectors to negotiate discounts or free tickets for affiliated startups, and for opportunities to exhibit your programme as part of the wider event.
- **Offer a range of channels to facilitate peer-to-peer networking**
Peer-to-peer networking is challenging to do remotely. Where possible, create as many opportunities for face-to-face meetings, and offer a range of online communication channels to nurture this. This programme found a combination of Slack, Google Group mailing lists and regular videoconferences using GoToMeeting to be the best way to facilitate remote peer-to-peer networking.
- **Introduce startups into partners' networks**
To ensure that startups continue to receive support and stay engaged after a programme ends, create connections and opportunities outside of the programme where possible with consortium partners. Successful examples of this have been the ODI Membership and inviting startups to apply for relevant startup programmes run by Beta-i.

5. Annexes

5.1 Data Pitch investor portfolio example profile

Energeo

Using geospatial data and machine learning to inform energy strategy for a zero-carbon economy

Problem

The EU energy market is faced with the challenge to meet the ever growing demand for energy - which is set to increase by a third by 2040 - while addressing the need for rapid decarbonisation to limit Global Warming to 1.5C and avoid the dangerous effects of climate change.

Solution

Energeo have developed the Energy Project Identification Platform (EPIP), a SaaS platform that enables stakeholders to rapidly identify opportunities to deploy low carbon technology at city-scale, and understand the potential future impact on associated power infrastructure.

Market

Market conditions increasingly favour cleantech projects, underpinned by policy across the UK and EU. The EU is phasing out €112 billion fossil fuel subsidies by 2020, and clean growth is a key element of the UK's Industrial Strategy.

Traction

Energeo's clients span the Public, Private and Third sectors, and they have secured funding and support from organisations such as the European Space Agency. Energeo are partners in three multi-year energy projects in the UK.



Country of origin: UK
Business model: B2B / B2G
Sector: Energy
Stage: Seed

FINANCIAL INFORMATION
Amount seeking: €560,000
ARR: €560,000 (forecast)

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