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**INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY SET**



**Volume 10**

# **Open Innovation: Human Set-up**

**Pascal Latouche**

**ISTE**

**WILEY**



## Open Innovation: Human Set-up



**Innovation and Technology Set**

coordinated by  
Chantal Ammi

Volume 10

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Human Set-up**

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# Contents

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<b>Acknowledgments</b> . . . . .	xi
<b>Preface</b> . . . . .	xiii
<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	xv
<b>Part 1. Multiple Journeys</b> . . . . .	1
<b>Introduction to Part 1</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Chapter 1. Mr. José Jacques Gustave, the Global Entrepreneur!</b> . . . . .	5
1.1. Context . . . . .	5
1.1.1. Parents-warrior . . . . .	5
1.1.2. Difficult school years . . . . .	7
1.1.3. An asserted curiosity . . . . .	7
1.2. The little voice inside . . . . .	8
1.2.1. The journey of awakening . . . . .	8
1.2.2. Reconciliation . . . . .	9
1.2.3. Values . . . . .	9
1.3. The fool with the hands full . . . . .	10
1.3.1. A network . . . . .	10
1.3.2. Convictions . . . . .	11
1.3.3. A thirst to move forward . . . . .	11
<b>Chapter 2. Mrs. Cindy Dorkenoo, No Destiny, Only What She Does!</b> . . . . .	15
2.1. Context . . . . .	15
2.1.1. “Classic” parents . . . . .	16
2.1.2. Boring education . . . . .	16
2.1.3. The period of studies . . . . .	17

2.2. From employment to entrepreneurship . . . . .	18
2.2.1. Not made for wage-earning . . . . .	18
2.2.2. Full-time entrepreneurship . . . . .	19
2.2.3. Naïas, a means and not an end . . . . .	20
<b>Chapter 3. Mrs. Elodie Sarfati, a Brownian Journey!</b> . . . . .	<b>23</b>
3.1. Context . . . . .	23
3.1.1. A modest and open environment . . . . .	24
3.1.2. Quiet schooling . . . . .	24
3.1.3. Studies . . . . .	25
3.2. Time to build . . . . .	25
3.2.1. A student entrepreneur . . . . .	25
3.2.2. Back to employment . . . . .	26
3.2.3. Getting started . . . . .	27
<b>Chapter 4. Mrs. Chrystèle Sanon, “A Schizophrenic Who Treats Herself?”</b> . . . . .	<b>29</b>
4.1. Context . . . . .	29
4.1.1. The origins . . . . .	29
4.1.2. A voluntary journey . . . . .	30
4.1.3. Towards working life . . . . .	30
4.2. From employment to entrepreneurship . . . . .	31
4.2.1. The emergence of an entrepreneur . . . . .	31
4.2.2. Her first entrepreneurial experience . . . . .	31
4.2.3. FULL’SREET, the launch . . . . .	32
<b>Chapter 5. Mr. Christophe Vattier, the Lucky Rebel!</b> . . . . .	<b>35</b>
5.1. Context . . . . .	35
5.1.1. Origins . . . . .	36
5.1.2. Teenage years of disruption . . . . .	36
5.1.3. A dream student life . . . . .	37
5.2. From employment to entrepreneurship . . . . .	38
5.2.1. Classical wage earning . . . . .	38
5.2.2. Entrepreneurial wage earning . . . . .	38
5.2.3. Pure entrepreneurship . . . . .	39
<b>Chapter 6. Mrs. Lise Bellavoine, When Entrepreneurship Becomes an Art!</b> . . . . .	<b>41</b>
6.1. Context . . . . .	42
6.1.1. Nothing but nature . . . . .	42
6.1.2. A poet . . . . .	42
6.1.3. The loop . . . . .	43
6.2. Employment to entrepreneurship . . . . .	44



6.2.1. Paid employment . . . . .	44
6.2.2. The trigger . . . . .	45
6.2.3. Entrepreneurship . . . . .	46
<b>Chapter 7. Ms. Laura Nordin, the Paradigm Shift?</b> . . . . .	49
7.1. Context . . . . .	49
7.1.1. Middle-class background . . . . .	50
7.1.2. Standardized education . . . . .	50
7.1.3. Easy schooling and education under influence . . . . .	51
7.2. From employment to entrepreneurship . . . . .	51
7.2.1. In the family business . . . . .	51
7.2.2. Reconversion . . . . .	52
7.2.3. Minut'Prod . . . . .	53
<b>Conclusion to Part 1</b> . . . . .	55
<b>Part 2. Marrying Two "Mindsets"</b> . . . . .	57
<b>Introduction to Part 2</b> . . . . .	59
<b>Chapter 8. Effectuation Vs. Causation</b> . . . . .	61
8.1. From beliefs to paradigms . . . . .	62
8.1.1. Predicting the future to better control it (old paradigm) . . . . .	63
8.1.2. Controlling the future to better prevent it (new paradigm) . . . . .	65
8.1.3. Saras Sarasvathy's effectuation theory . . . . .	67
8.2. From one mode to another . . . . .	71
8.2.1. Criticisms of causation . . . . .	71
8.2.2. The first principle . . . . .	74
8.2.3. The other principles . . . . .	76
8.3. From one world to another . . . . .	78
8.3.1. The raw unfiltered reality . . . . .	79
8.3.2. The operational team of a business unit . . . . .	81
8.3.3. Similarities and differences . . . . .	83
<b>Chapter 9. One Stage, Two Headliners</b> . . . . .	87
9.1. The distribution of roles . . . . .	88
9.1.1. The corporate open innovation structure as a stage . . . . .	88
9.1.2. Mr. X, in the role of a business unit employee . . . . .	90
9.1.3. Mr. S, in the role of the start-up's CEO... . . . . .	92
9.2. The difficulties of the script . . . . .	94
9.2.1. Mr. X and Mr. S, the millefeuille effect . . . . .	95
9.2.2. Mr. X and Mr. S, the swarm effect... . . . . .	95

9.2.3. Mr. X and Mr. S, the “not invented here” effect....	98
9.2.4. Mr. X and Mr. S, the “It’s up to me” effect...	99
9.3. The recurrence of obstacles . . . . .	100
9.3.1. One thing, multiple views . . . . .	100
9.3.2. The not guilty silences . . . . .	102
9.3.3. Those who decidedly didn’t understand anything . . . . .	103
9.3.4. The unwilling pirates . . . . .	105
<b>Chapter 10. Two Ecosystems . . . . .</b>	<b>109</b>
10.1. The ecosystems in question . . . . .	109
10.1.1. The external ecosystem (of start-ups) . . . . .	111
10.1.2. The internal ecosystem (of the large group). . . . .	114
10.1.3. External ecosystem vs. internal ecosystem . . . . .	116
10.2. Actors’ behavior . . . . .	118
10.2.1. Three attitudes or behaviors . . . . .	118
10.2.2. Some polemical illustrations . . . . .	120
10.2.3. Collaboration to oil the wheels . . . . .	122
10.3. Associated risks . . . . .	124
10.3.1. The source of risks . . . . .	124
10.3.2. Fiscal risk . . . . .	125
10.3.3. HR risk . . . . .	125
10.3.4. Security risk . . . . .	126
10.3.5. Compliance risk . . . . .	126
10.3.6. Purchasing risk. . . . .	127
10.3.7. Image risk . . . . .	128
10.3.8. Intellectual property risk . . . . .	128
<b>Conclusion to Part 2 . . . . .</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Part 3. The Mysteries of the Profession . . . . .</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Introduction to Part 3 . . . . .</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Chapter 11. Skills and Influences . . . . .</b>	<b>137</b>
11.1. “Hard” skills or situational intelligence . . . . .	138
11.1.1. Benevolent control . . . . .	138
11.1.2. Understanding the organizational microcosm. . . . .	140
11.1.3. Knowing how to problematize . . . . .	142
11.1.4. Tips and tricks to develop your “hard” skills . . . . .	144
11.2. Soft skills or people’s intelligence . . . . .	146
11.2.1. The art of advocacy . . . . .	147
11.2.2. The art of defining. . . . .	148

11.2.3. The art of motivating . . . . .	150
11.2.4. The art of building an identity network . . . . .	151
11.2.5. The art of changing norms . . . . .	152
11.2.6. Tips and tricks to develop your “soft” skills . . . . .	154
11.3. Acting with your skills. . . . .	155
11.3.1. Relative advantages . . . . .	156
11.3.2. Complexity. . . . .	157
11.3.3. Functional ambiguity . . . . .	157

**Chapter 12. Useful Resources . . . . . 161**

12.1. Useful human resources . . . . .	161
12.1.1. Human management. . . . .	162
12.1.2. Business developers. . . . .	165
12.1.3. Ecosystem management. . . . .	167
12.1.4. Digital communication . . . . .	170
12.2. Useful “non-human” resources . . . . .	171
12.2.1. The basis . . . . .	171
12.2.2. Going further. . . . .	172
12.2.3. The real false costs . . . . .	172
12.3. Misuse... . . . .	173
12.3.1. Misuse from start-ups . . . . .	174
12.3.2. Misuses from the large group. . . . .	176
12.3.3. Corporate open innovation, this human misuse? . . . . .	178

**Chapter 13. Operation Principles . . . . . 181**

13.1. Social operating principles (social functioning) . . . . .	182
13.1.1. Social principle 1: situational intelligence. . . . .	182
13.1.2. Social principle 2: people’s intelligence. . . . .	184
13.1.3. Social principle 3: the intelligence of moments. . . . .	187
13.2. Structural operating principles (structural operation) . . . . .	189
13.2.1. Structural principle 1: the “corporate network” dimension . . . . .	190
13.2.2. Structural principle 2: permanent iterations. . . . .	192
13.2.3. Structural principle 3: “learning by doing” . . . . .	194
13.3. Business principles of operation (business functioning) . . . . .	196
13.3.1. The events . . . . .	196
13.3.2. Satisfaction. . . . .	198
13.3.3. Direct values . . . . .	200

<b>Conclusion to Part 3</b> .....	205
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	207
<b>References</b> .....	211
<b>Index</b> .....	225

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Without becoming self-centered, this book, in retrospect, is probably also a way for me to thank myself for wanting to weather the storm....



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## Preface

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There was a time when, for the most part, start-ups offered “pure and hard” technological innovations. While this time has not yet come to an end, we have observed during the last two years, the appearance of other innovations (processes, HR, communication, marketing, legal, etc.).

All these innovations do not escape the appetite of major groups, which intend to maintain their positions. Developing relationships with start-ups has now become strategic for many of them. In the framework of such relationships, the impacts inherent to the innovations proposed by start-ups cover a much wider field than the mere question of integration into Information Systems. Indeed, these innovations are transforming large groups from within. We can now speak of integration in the plural form because there are multiple dimensions to consider.

Through observations, anecdotes, testimonies, it is a question of presenting the three major protagonists of the scene that is going to be played out before us. It is the corporate open innovation system that welcomes start-ups, and the two players from different worlds, the start-up CEO and the employee of a business unit (or business line) of a large company. We’ll see what obstacles stand in their way time and time again.

However, these obstacles can still be overcome by the action of the members involved in the corporate open innovation system team, who are true architects of interactions. Their skills, their involvement and their ability to dispose of useful resources can enable them, by manipulating the large group’s internal ecosystem as well as the start-up’s external ecosystem, to address the objective: to marry (contractually) protagonists from two different worlds (the world of start-ups and the world of large established companies/institutions).

Replacing the human being at the heart of the process, a process of bringing together start-ups and large groups is the challenge that needs to be faced. For this, it is a question for each person to become aware of his or her own environment, as well as that of others.

Enjoy!

Pascal LATOUCHE  
May 2020



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# Introduction

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What were you doing in November 2013? For my part, it was in November 2013 that I discovered a vocation of which I had not been fully aware until then.

A combination of circumstances put me in the shoes of someone who had to implement something that was unknown to many in my company: a corporate start-up accelerator. You will understand that I do not wish to go into more detail than that on the basis of circumstances, assuming that I owe myself a certain level of reserve as to what happens within the company of which I am still an employee. I pay tribute to this company, by the way. In any case, the story began like this and, as it turns out, would take me on many journeys....

Let's get back to the point at hand. So here I am, called to launch quite quickly (in three months), a corporate start-up accelerator. Do you know what this is? Without extending myself at this stage, I will just tell you that this is a type of open-innovation mechanism tasked with making internal teams within a company interact with external ones, for example, start-ups. I had previously worked a lot on marketing, sales, innovation from R&D (internal innovation) and with the world of developers (those who code). In hindsight, I guarantee you that this did not predestine me to hold a position as head of a corporate start-up accelerator and did not presuppose my ability to do it well. Indeed, I had never created a start-up and this ecosystem was quite unknown to me in fact.

## ***1.1. No obvious predisposition***

In marketing, I had never really designed products in digital format! However, I knew from all my previous experiences within the current company (Telecom) and from all my experiences before this company (Agro-Food), how to put a given product or service on the market (positioning, competition, price, preferred

channels, etc.). As a marketing expert, I recognized that I was, because I had been to the right professional (business) schools.

In sales, I had never held a sales position (too shy and unassuming, a lack of chatter, as we would commonly say, the person you don't notice). I don't know how to sell and I never knew how to sell myself (it's still true today)! My tasks have always concerned product argumentation. In short, writing down for salespeople what they needed to say to sell the product well. But you can well imagine that a salesperson sells more as they are rewarded for the sales in question. Not all products are rewarded. My sales arguments and other commercial tools were therefore sales aids and did not in any way presume the success of the sale itself. I rather like to consider my tasks in sales as a natural extension of my marketing expertise.

With the innovation coming out of R&D, my job in essence was to identify solutions not used to date (tucked away in drawers) and to evaluate what the company could do with them in consultation with the marketing and sales teams. This task was very interesting. I hadn't worked with pure engineering profiles until then. I admit that it took me some time to adapt to understanding what they were saying. By understanding, I mean knowing how to ask the right questions so that the expression of their technical discourse could become audible to the non-engineer that I am. It was also during this period that the scope of my tasks broadened, because technical products often require development. For those who experienced the 2010–2013 period, I think they would recall the emergence of the start-up weekend-type events. The latter were very badly labeled “start-up weekends”, since they were mostly developers who were in between pitching sessions, eating pizza and drinking cola! During these weekends, I really appreciated supporting, with my marketing and sales expertise, developers who on Friday evenings proposed their ideas and had the weekend to develop it. Developing an application in a weekend to hope to be the winner on Sunday night was very challenging. Modestly, I was making my contribution to these “techy” weekend warriors who have my total respect!

So, as I was saying, in terms of the profile for taking responsibility for a corporate start-up accelerator, I wasn't quite in the picture, as some would say. I've never created a start-up, and I've always been an employee. Thanks to my diplomas and a strong work ethic, I enjoyed working in relatively stable comfort. I say relatively stable because the sociology of large organizations sometimes imposes a balancing act on employees and we must avoid falling off. Finally, if you do it well, if you work well and avoid expressing too many sincere opinions, you receive your salary and finally, unless you have a social plan, you have peace of mind.

There is one point I will discuss, because it will be important for what follows. None of the positions I had held in the companies in which I had worked, or in which I work, existed before I was entrusted with them. In short, I have always

systematically forged my own job using the company as a kind of resource provider (a “business angel” in a way...). At the time, I was not aware of the importance of this point, which turned out to be an essential asset with hindsight. In any case, at the time I took over responsibility for this corporate start-up accelerator, I was not aware of this asset, so it was a bit like I didn’t consciously have it. Moreover, those who appointed me responsible for the corporate start-up accelerator to be created, knew nothing about it. Not being aware of an asset, or that your environment is not aware of an asset, can be problematic if you want to capitalize on it....

## **1.2. What’s this “thing”?**

Here I was, in charge of a corporate accelerator to be created in three months, from a blank sheet of paper in terms of objectives and implementation. I was not alone in this adventure; a long-term colleague was once again at my side to help me move forward with this new challenge. I say again because we’d been working together for a while and we really enjoyed doing it.

I had vaguely understood from this new challenge that the company was keen to support the world of young innovative companies and benefit from it at least from a brand image point of view. It was the time when the major brands in France (CAC 40 stock market index) wanted to show themselves, politicians and citizens their commitment to the times: digital technology.

What I learned from the school of life and from the school of the professional world is that when you spend money, you have to make money. I don’t know if I knew how to create a business for myself. But I knew how to do business with a product or service. In more elaborate terms, I would say that managing things could only be business to me. We had to do business with the start-ups. Moreover, communication is not my field (and I have a lot of respect for the many corporate communicators). It is on this unique “Business” conviction that I developed the objectives and implementation of the corporate start-up accelerator.

I can’t help but reiterate the reasoning that many who have heard me since in speeches are familiar with. Let’s go! In the digital world, there is a bloody war. Furthermore, digital technology has broken down the barriers between sectors of activity. In short, everything is in everything, because of or thanks to digital technology. An established company, in order to avoid losing its position on its markets, must therefore quickly provide innovative solutions to its clients to build loyalty, or even bring new solutions to market in an attempt to acquire new ones. We both know that producing innovation within an established company can take a long time.... Therefore, being able to capitalize on start-ups, their velocity, their innovations, can represent a significant competitive advantage for the established

company. At the same time, start-ups looking for clients are well advised to deal with established companies that have large customer bases. It is not over until the fat lady sings. This was to be the main objective of the corporate start-up accelerator: to make commercial partnerships between internal business units and start-ups. In short, it was necessary to “marry” start-ups and business units.

It is difficult to claim that this choice, which I can clearly state as having been an individual choice for the corporate accelerator at the time (with the consent of my company), is a choice of objective that can be generalized to all start-up corporate accelerators. It would be wrong to claim this, and I believe that many start-ups would certainly be able to confirm that there is a gulf between the promises of objectives made by corporate structures supporting start-ups and the reality. The constant is the communication about the relationship between the established company and the start-ups. Some corporate start-up accelerators go further in the sense that the objective is primarily business, communication being only the representative that aims to speak about the results obtained. This was my conviction from the first second of my mandate.

As for the corporate accelerator that I was responsible for launching with my employee, things were very clear. This choice would become the decision that would change the course of my life in a lasting way. It was easier said than done, and I’m weighing up my words, because that’s what’s making me write these ones....

### **1.3. How do you do it?**

I then asked myself and my colleague the question of how to do it. I met a lot of people, first and foremost external people working in the start-up ecosystem. My assistant did the same, and we debriefed each other quite regularly.

From all these interactions, and debriefings, I retained the following points from the outsiders (the people involved may recognize themselves). Here’s a small sample (because I kept countless notes of my appointments and debriefings from my colleague). This book could have been called “Journal of a numb person” (I’ll explain later).

– *“You’re a big company. You are expected to encounter problems and you will make the front pages of the web media if you botch it”* – A representative of a well-known web media company.

– *“Start-ups want business, not communication”* – A successful entrepreneur who has succeeded by sheer determination.

– *“Be careful to strengthen them while you accelerate them, you’re big and start-ups are small”* – An expert used to coaching start-ups.

– “*You know, your company, like a lot of big companies, doesn’t have a good reputation in its relations with start-ups. Stop pillaging ideas!*” – An entrepreneur who had had some unfortunate experiences with my company.

– “*You’re a great brand and you have a big role to play with start-ups, how can we help you?*” – A representative of institutions that promote start-ups under the aegis of the government.

It wasn’t just external actors we were looking at. Internal actors were also solicited. I’ve encountered internal colleagues at somewhat different points.

– “*Start-ups are no more innovative than we are internally*” – An R&D Engineer.

– “*Step forward and engage that corporate accelerator. Move the boundaries, even though we know you won’t just make friends*” – A Chief of Staff.

– “*Don’t make promises to start-ups that the company can’t keep*” – A top manager in innovation.

– “*It’s not clear what the risks are of working so conspicuously with start-ups. Identify risks and control them operationally*” – A Communication Manager.

– “*Business partnerships with start-ups? Why not! Make us some proposals and we’ll take a look*” – A Business Unit Manager.

This is a small sample of the exchanges. For the internal actor, as for the external one, the tone was sometimes positive, sometimes aggressive. But in any case, my feeling was that there was a real desire to face this mystery embodied by the universe of start-ups whose media were buzzing in our ears every day. Everyone was asking to see, some in an observing role, some in a potential inquisitor role, and some in a benevolent one.

What better way to try to succeed than to enlist the services of allies, as well as critics, both internal and external? That’s exactly what was going to be done. From the outside, we could expect pushing the best start-ups and helping us strengthen them in terms of structure and people. Internally, we were able to find the first “courageous” people who were at least committed to taking a good look at start-up cases and helping us to retain those that made sense. It was difficult at this “first” stage of obtaining firm commitments from commercial partnerships at the end. I was counting on the involvement of the corporate accelerator team to make sure we got there as much as possible. Shy, numb, no doubt, but I was not giving up.

Involving the actors, while taking final responsibility for the outcome seemed the right stance to me. If it worked, it would be thanks to all these actors. If it went

wrong, it would be because of me. This is reassuring enough for an organization faced with the unknown to be able to blame someone in advance in case of failure. It seemed to me a good way to bring the external “family” (of start-ups) closer to the internal “family” (of the established company). The corporate accelerator and its small team (two people including myself) had to and was going to enter unknown lands that had nothing to do with marketing, sales or even the idea that one had of business techniques.

#### **1.4. Design and launch**

A few rules were set (three months of acceleration), a few priorities for start-ups, a few legal frameworks, a few services to be offered to start-ups against the backdrop of a business objective clearly stated from the outset. In a way, the entire design part of the corporate accelerator was forged in a few days, two weeks at the most. The best way forward for me was to learn by advancing and systematically asking myself the following questions: How do I serve the purpose through what I do? How is what I do profitable/dangerous for my company and for start-ups? Do I have the resources to act? I never consciously questioned who I was, what my values were. However, we will see later on that this is important, even of fundamental importance, when we want to forge a structure.

A website, a Twitter account, a few tweets to announce and maintain the first call for applications, and in February 2014, the first season of acceleration was launched. This launch was, in my opinion, as much in the realm of improvisation as it was in the realm of reflection, and I am quite unable to say what was prevailing at the time. Action took precedence, with all the risks that this entailed and with confidence in our desire to succeed. In fact, I remember the launch day (with media support). Originally, neither I nor my collaborator were foreseen being in the “photo” or to telling our story.... A curious approach on the part of large groups to hide those who had done things in reality.

Since then, many seasons followed one another. The corporate accelerator even diversified its program offerings over the years. In addition to my national roles, I have even taken on a coordinating role in the world of corporate accelerators that have sprung up in many countries. Each corporate accelerator recruits start-ups at the national level for national business partnerships. The most promising start-ups are “exported” to other markets by being supported by the corporate accelerator of the market concerned. This is called cross-acceleration. We are now a network of corporate accelerators on four continents, a unique asset for my company and what I believe is unique in the world. A fine mechanism that all those who are proud of, wherever they are in the field, at headquarters or internationally, have believed in it not by words, but by action.

### **1.5. You (really) want to know everything!**

Let me share with you what you will discover in this book. This is the second one. The first one I entitled “Open Innovation, Corporate Incubator”, the fruit of my doctoral thesis, was, as I like to say, halfway between “the academic” and “the general public”. By that I mean that my point may have seemed a bit too elaborate. I’ll take it! The aim was to understand how open innovation works using the artifact (representation) of the corporate incubator. Theories were inevitably shared, but the expression of the field was favored (mainly managers of corporate structures supporting start-ups). For this second opus, you will judge for yourself the accessible nature of the work. *“Everything you always wanted to know about the relationship between start-ups and large corporations, but never dared to ask”* could have been its title in reference to Woody Allen’s film *“Everything you always wanted to know about sex, but never dared to ask”*. As you can imagine, my theme is somewhat different, although we’ll often talk about marriage.

In the overall system that a company and its environment constitute, managers of open innovation systems act as architects whose main raw materials are interactions. They have to forge and then manage the latter in order to contractually marry the protagonists of two different worlds: the CEO of a start-up and the employee of a large group. Each of the two protagonists will interact with their own personalities and beliefs. In addition, their respective “families” (mentors, etc. for the CEO, and colleagues, etc. for the employee) are also involved in this marriage.

The aim of this book is to explicitly describe the daily interactions that need to be implemented to transform these one-to-one, or one-to-many, interactions into tangible (business partnerships) and intangible (satisfaction in the relationship) values. Through my experience, I will try to give an account of the words and behaviors of the protagonists encountered during all these years. My observations will allow me to better understand the perspectives that everyone gives to each other in the interactions, to better understand the perceptions that arise from them. It is the reality of the interactions themselves that will thus be exposed in order to know how to get the best out of them. The conclusions will broaden the scope of reflection beyond the business world. Indeed, human interactions to generate value (in the broadest sense) are not only a necessity in the professional field but also in the personal field. The place of humans in any system is essential. They need to find it to move forward and generate value. On balance, it is our behavior towards others that is in question.

### **1.6. The three parts**

To introduce you to this world of corporate open innovation, and what the players have to do to make it work, I have structured this book in three parts.

The first part honors the protagonist that I consider the first solution: the entrepreneur. If there was no entrepreneur, there would be no corporate open innovation. The entrepreneurial journey will be revealed to you. There you will discover women and men, like you and me. Women and men that events have led to a shift towards entrepreneurship. But is it events that make us change our ways? Is it not rather our way of reacting and this little flame that each of us carries within us that acts? I'll let you make up your own mind. In any case, for me, starting out from these journeys is first and foremost a way of sharing a deep conviction: entrepreneurship is first and foremost a life project and an experience that should allow you to earn a living.

It requires a certain way of thinking. This is called the mindset. This is the subject of the second part of the book. It will be a question for me of drawing up for you, based on a concept known from literature (digest), the portrait of the entrepreneur. But not only that! Indeed, we will also talk about the portrait of a classic employee within a large organization. Are entrepreneurs and employees of large organizations alike? Besides, when these two protagonists want to work together, is it simple or complicated? What are the obstacles in front of them? And besides, entrepreneurs and employees of large organizations both have their own environments. How can these environments interact? The questions that this second part seeks to answer are numerous, as you can see.

I could add one more: what is the role of the corporate support structure for start-ups? Well, that simple question took me a whole section to deal with. This is the subject of the third part of the book. Who are these people who work in the corporate support structures of start-ups? What do they actually do and why do they have to act in a certain way if they want to succeed? I might as well tell you that I'm going to take the time to explain all this to you. It is not for me to tell you "that's the way it is and that's that". Everyone has their own experience. Mine, I just want to share it with you by starting from the reality of the field and by enlightening it with literary concepts (digestible I remind you). It's up to you to judge whether this advances the debate on the relationship between start-ups and large groups. For my part, I tend to consider that debates lead all the more to progress when we want to connect with the reality of these same things.

At the end of these three parts, I think you will have a slightly more precise idea of the experiences of entrepreneurs, the experiences of employees of large organizations and the experiences of those who are seeking to marry these two worlds. Not easy, but solvable, if we take into account one fact: the human! It is an obvious "given" ... and yet when you take the time to read articles on the relationship between start-ups and large groups, you are surprised to realize that you will probably hear more about innovative solutions, investments, technological



integrations and finally very little about these humans. In my opinion, they are the ones who do or don't do things, so they are the ones I'm interested in....



**My name is Pascal Latouche and as I write these words, I have a dual mission within a large French international group. On the one hand, I manage the group's start-up corporate accelerator in France, and on the other hand, I am also in charge of coordinating the international network of the group's start-up corporate accelerators, spread over four continents. I am a professional in open innovation ecosystems, marketing and communication, strategic management and business development. I am a graduate of Paris 1, Panthéon La Sorbonne, and have a Doctorate in Management Sciences from Paris-Saclay. It's factual in the present tense (as I write these words). Tomorrow will be another day, because right now it's just an illusion....**



PART 1

## Multiple Journeys

*Happiness is not at the top of the mountain, but in how to climb.*  
– **Confucius** –