



ENTREPRENEURSHIP LAB



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Introduction

The Israel Entrepreneurship Initiative is funded by a generous Pace University alumnus, Michael Dezer '68. Through this program, students to gain experience working for start-up companies based in Israel. This is the second year of the program and the two start-up companies selected were Voiceitt and EcoFusion.



Voiceitt is a mobile application development company focused on integrating voice recognition technology for people with speech disabilities into a tablet application. The app will translate the inaudible speech so that the person with disabilities can be understood.



EcoFusion is an innovative digital therapeutics medicine that intends to disrupt the health care industry. Essentially, this technology captures drugs in digital form to suggest behavior change modifications that can be applied to different health

needs.

Following my work with Voiceitt during the academic year, I had the opportunity to continue interning with the company for four weeks during the summer through the Michael Dezer Summer Scholarship 2016.

Leading up to the summer apprenticeship, I was eager to meet all of the people at Voiceitt with whom I had been working. In the months prior, the majority of the work that I conducted was through Skype. The duration of my summer apprenticeship in Israel would be from July 21st to August 18th. The apprenticeship would include both interning at the Voiceitt headquarters in Ramat Gan and at the MIT Enterprise Forum Israel located on the Tel Aviv University campus. I stayed in the Old North of Tel Aviv, only a 15-minute bus ride to the Voiceitt offices and the university campus. Here is a picture of the outside of the apartment:



It was truly a great location! The apartment where I stayed was also very close to the city-center, restaurants, and night life.

The work week in Israel is from Sunday through Thursday. During the week, I spent two days at the MIT Forum and three days at Voiceitt. This was an optimal schedule because it allowed me enough time to complete worthwhile projects for both organizations. Additionally, from Thursday afternoon until Saturday, there was ample time to visit tourist attractions and explore the city.

Even though I had traveled on my own before, this trip to Israel marked my first visit ever in the Middle East. Israel has garnered a reputation as the “second Silicon Valley” in the past couple of years because of the many start-ups that have successfully launched from the country and even made their way over to the US. For example, the Gett Taxi app was originally started in Tel Aviv before making its way over to US major cities like New York City. Since I am an Entrepreneurship major, this aspect of the business culture intrigued me the most and was something that I was looking forward to experiencing first hand.

Voiceitt

Talkitt is a mobile application created by the Israeli start-up company, Voiceitt. For the Fall 2015-Spring 2016 academic year, I was an intern for the start-up through the Dezer Israel Entrepreneurship Initiative. My position was the Market Research, Strategic Planning, and Financial Analysis Intern. In this role, I worked closely with the company CEO, Danny Weissberg, and Operations/Business Development Manager, Devora Mason to conduct market research for the target population of the app. The target population would be those with speech motor disabilities, such as those commonly found in individuals with Cerebral Palsy. Along with this, I looked into what technologies are currently in place for them to communicate and researched what people liked and disliked from the different types of communication devices that they currently use.

Since the app's goal is to help those with speech disabilities communicate more clearly, one of the projects that I was involved with while I was in Israel was helping to conduct the beta testing. One of the test subjects for the beta testing was a girl named Jessica. Devora and I would travel to her home or meet at a location and have her dictate words into the phone microphone so that the application, Talkitt, would collect and store the tonal information of her voice. This information would then be used to help improve the accuracy of the voice recognition technology of Talkitt. Below are some photos of the beta testing sessions with Jessica:



Additionally, from these sessions I was able to create some video promotional clips and marketing brochures for Voiceitt to use once they launch the official first prototype to the public.

Another project I worked on at Voiceitt was helping to create the first draft of the business plan. My specific contribution dealt with researching the process of getting new applications to be approved for use in public school special education programs. This education market is

important to the business development side of the technology because it could be a way to implement the application and also provide a means to further test the app's functionalities.

When I was in Israel, the company happened to be moving offices in Ramat Gan. The firm was originally located in the diamond district of Ramat Gan but was moving offices from a more collaborative space to their own private office, still located within Ramat Gan. From working in the office with the whole Voiceitt team, I got to see what it was really like to work in a start-up environment. Even though the team was small in number, we would all work non-stop, whether it was on research and development or on beta testing. Most of the internal work was completed during the morning hours, and the external business was conducted later on in the afternoon so that it would match up with the time difference in the United States.

When I was interning for the company remotely from the US, I did not realize the extent of the effort and time restraints that existed with hosting business meetings on an international time-frame difference. So not only did I learn about how to get projects done through online mediums such as Skype, but I then got to experience it from the other side of the correspondence, in working around the time differences.



Another important person from Voiceitt that I worked with was Sara Smolley, who works on business development. She was the person from the Voiceitt team who I primarily worked with daily while I was in Tel Aviv. In reality though, everyone at the office just helped out where it was needed, and the only real division of labor I saw was between the Research and Development team and the Business Development side. It was great to see that the theories I have learned about in the classroom, in regards to organizational structure of a start-up, are in fact true.

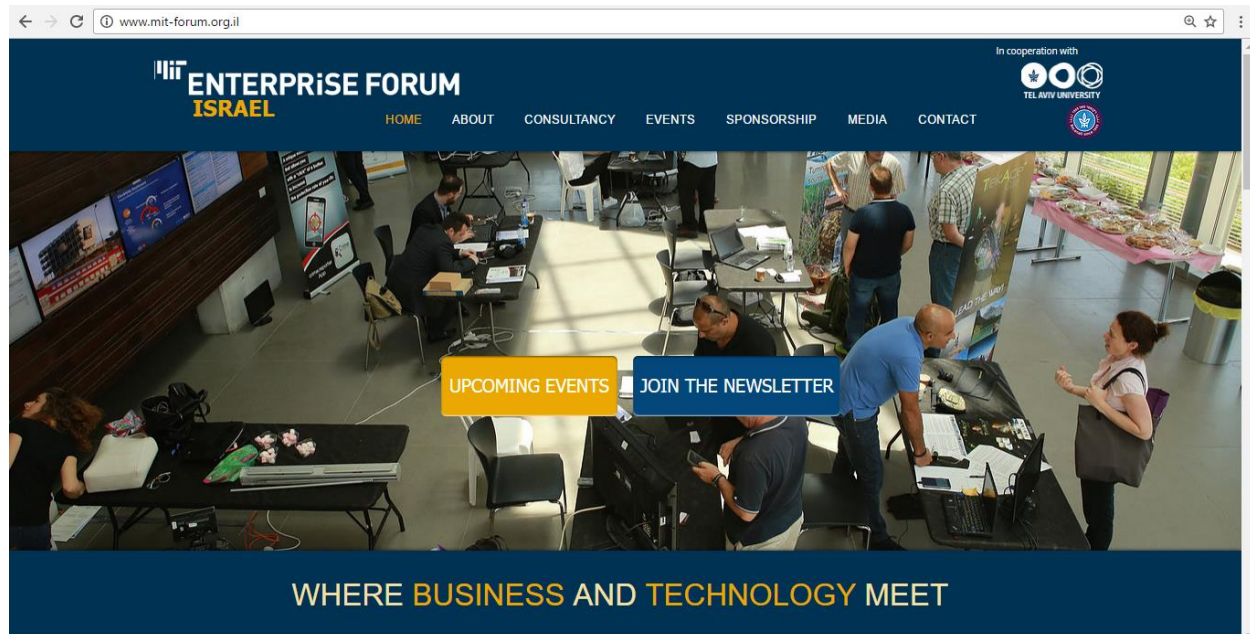
One of the most interesting events that I attend in Tel Aviv was the Massachusetts Start-up Challenge event held at the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. Voiceitt was part of the inaugural class of the competition, so I was able to join the team as they went to the expo of the 2nd year class of start-ups that were in the competition. At the Mass Challenge Expo there were all types of different companies, from high-tech eye-recognition sensors to vegan milk chocolate! It was very memorable and offered a lot of insight into the start-up community in Tel Aviv.

Working with Voiceitt was such an amazing internship experience because the whole team is really more like a family. The entire team is extremely passionate about the work that they are doing and the problem that they are trying to solve.

MIT Enterprise Forum Israel

Another important organization that I worked with while in Israel was the MIT Enterprise Forum Israel, located at Tel Aviv University. The university is located in the north of Tel Aviv, past the Yarkon River. Since I was staying in Old North, the university was a 15-minute bus ride away. This organization is part of the international MIT Enterprise Forum started by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1978. Its mission is to connect and provide resources for entrepreneurs. The Israeli chapter of the organization was founded in 1994, and has since acted as both a starting point and support system for many Israeli start-ups each year.

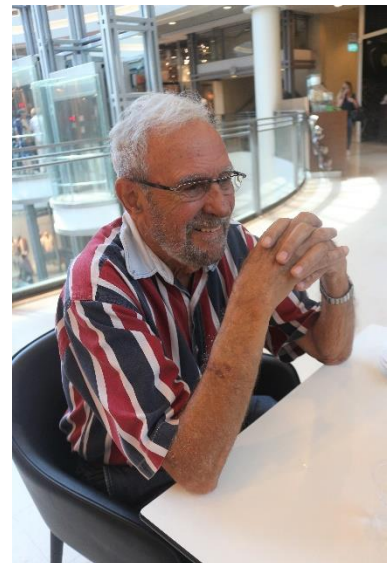
During my time spent at the forum, I worked with the executive director, Ayla Matalon, to design a new website for the forum. This would be the main project that I would focus on during my four-week apprenticeship. When I first assessed the project, the website in use was outdated and disorganized from the many events, competitions, and consultancies that the forum had hosted throughout the years. The platform that the MIT Enterprise Forum used was called Wix.com, which is a website design and hosting site originally started in Israel. The platform was easy to work with and allowed many new updates to the site. After a week of planning and consulting with the other members of the Forum executive team, we decided on a blue and yellow color scheme and a simplistic design for the landing page shown below:



The website was officially launched on my last day in Israel. It felt amazing to be able to positively impact the MIT Enterprise forum of Israel in such a relatively short period of time. A

new website is something that the organization really needed, and it was also a new challenge for me to be at the forefront of a website redesign. I had to take into account the user-experience that Ayla and the rest of the board wanted to create for a site visitor. This is why the two main buttons on the site are for “upcoming events” and “join the newsletter”; because ultimately those are the functions that we want site visitors and start-up companies to participate in the most.

Creating a streamlined website was my main project for the four weeks since I only spent two days per week at the Forum. There were three other staff members with whom I interacted daily. They were Guy, Stav, and Ido (who are all part of the executive team). Ayla was also kind enough to introduce me to the Chairperson of the MIT Enterprise Forum Israel, Ed Mlavsky, who is one of the founders of high tech startups and venture capital in Israel with his company Gemini. Ed, Ayla, and I were all able to have a meeting one day, and it was one of the highlights for my entire trip because of my personal interest in venture capital.



Tourism

Geographically, Israel is a very small country, comparable in size to the state of New Jersey. This size allows travelers to visit all parts of the country with relative ease by car. While in Tel Aviv, it was very easy to navigate because the street signs were written in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. In addition, most of the people who I encountered spoke English very well and were willing to point me in the right direction to a museum or restaurant that I was looking for. I was staying very close to Gordon Beach, so I frequently visited after I finished work for the day.

Some of the more well-known landmarks and sites were very heavily populated by tourists, but some of the local spots like Hayarkon Park and the Namal (seaport) were awesome places to explore that were not well-known tourist destinations. My month long stay afforded me to explore the country on a deeper level and really get to know the layout of the city. While I would not say I completely adapted to the culture or language, I was able to pick up some key phrases that allowed me to blend in much better with the locals. Hence, I will say that I was somewhere between the identity of a tourist and person who recently moved to Tel Aviv.

While in Israel, I was also to experience some of the historic and iconic landmarks and tourist attractions. For instance, I spent one weekend in Jerusalem in order to visit the Old and New City. While I was on the west side of the country, I also planned a day trip to the Dead Sea and Masada. This destination was probably my most favorite tourist site of the entire trip.

Here are some pics from the Old City in Jerusalem:



Here are some photos of the Masada:



Another trip that I enjoyed was visiting Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee. This location is in the very north of the country and was much less like a city and rolling landscapes. The town is also located on the mountain that overlooks the Sea of Galilee. For this attraction, I decided to go with a tour company so that I could take a tour bus to the city and see the sights on my own from there. It only took fewer than two hours to reach the city and it was well worth the trip. Some of the most spectacular views I saw were during this day trip.

Below are some pictures of Tiberias/Sea of Galilee trip:



There was so much history in every place that I visited and many of the sites I visited were thousands of years old. Important to note is that because many of the places that I visited were holy sites, so that is why I am wearing a long skirt and shall. However, in Tel Aviv the dress was casual, such as shorts, and comparable to what other Western countries would find appropriate for the summer months.

It was great to have the opportunity to experience the daily life of Israel in the setting of my internship, and then also explore some iconic tourist attractions. Tel Aviv in contrast to Jerusalem was like two completely different worlds. Tel Aviv was very modern and secular, and Jerusalem was decidedly traditional and religious. It was great to see the differences between the “old” and the “new” Israel. While I did not get to do everything in terms of tourist attractions, I came pretty close. One city that I would like to visit if I were to return would be Eilat, which is the southernmost city in Israel which borders the Red Sea near Egypt. Overall, it was such a wonderful and fun time getting know Tel Aviv and the rest of Israel!

Tel Aviv vs. New York City

The cultural difference between these two major cities could be seen right away, even when I boarded the plane. Most of the people on my flight were Israeli citizens. Those on the plane who were Jewish Orthodox were asking to swap seats with others on the plane because men and women who were not married or family could not sit next to each other. Another thing I noticed on the airplane is that many people were buying gifts on-board because they were duty free and exempt from the 17% tax for almost everything in Israel. When the plane landed in Israel, everyone on board clapped and celebrating that they had arrived home – something that has never really happened on any domestic US flight that I have been on. Upon exiting the airport, families were there to greet their loved ones who were returning to Israel. Incredibly, some of the people waited outside the airport with gift baskets!

To put into context the timeframe, my four week summer apprenticeship was July 21st through August 18th. This is during the very hottest months of the summer season in Israel. Due to the heat, most of the attire I wore was comfortable clothing, such as t-shirts, shorts, and dresses. The dress code for the offices in Tel Aviv at this time in the year was much more casual than I was used to in the United States, but luckily so because with temperatures in the 90's F° during the day, it would have been very uncomfortable wearing a blazer to work.

Another cultural difference I noticed, coming from living in New York City for the past 3 years, is that there was very little homelessness in Tel Aviv, even in the heart of the city on the busiest streets. I looked into this and asked my coworkers and there are extensive programs and support systems for those who are homeless so that they do not end up on the streets. In total, in Tel Aviv I could count on my hand the number of homeless people I saw, where as compared to New York City there are significantly more.

As far as transportation norms, most people in Tel Aviv ride their bikes everywhere. I would say that biking is the primary mode of transportation that people use to get around the city. I occasionally rode a bike to the beach, but my typical method of transport to and from the office buildings was bus. The bus system in Tel Aviv is very dependable and the busses are also very clean, in comparison to the NYC metro busses.

The food was very Mediterranean with an emphasis on hummus, eggplant, shwarma, and falafel. Surprisingly, about 30% of the population of Israel is vegan, so there were a lot of vegan options at restaurants and vegan specialty restaurants. Since Tel Aviv is (for the most part) a secular city in comparison to Jerusalem, most restaurants did not serve kosher food. Surprisingly, I found some of the bodega and salad places to be very similar to New York City cuisine. However, the salads in Israel contain very little lettuce and focus mainly on a mix of salad toppings. My favorite traditional Israeli food was shawarma with hummus. I still remember how good the hummus tasted! The hummus in the US does not even compare.

Final Thoughts

Overall, my summer apprenticeship was an incredible experience that I will never forget. It was a very unique opportunity to conduct business abroad as a student and has allowed me to grow so much professionally. In addition, through the Dezer Fellowship I have made lasting connects with the many people that I worked with at Voiceitt throughout the academic year and also at the MIT Enterprise Forum Israel. The people of Israel were very educated and many people I met had multiple degrees. Everyone who I encountered, both at the organizations and around the city, was extremely friendly and spoke English very well.

Traveling to the Middle East, specifically Israel, was a very eye-opening experience. Having been born and raised in the United States, I was aware of several common stereotypes that might be accepted as fact about this region of the globe. However, there are few that actually see what life is like in this part of the world first hand. I would recommend traveling to Israel for anyone who is looking to visit a place with unique history, friendly people, and great food.