

Closing the gap: Business incubators as key element of Empa's integrated technology transfer strategy

To bridge the gap "from science to business" is one of the hallmarks of Empa, the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research, one of the top-notch use-inspired R&D institutions for materials science and technology in Switzerland. Empa is pursuing an "integrated" knowledge and technology transfer strategy, that is, it is employing numerous routes to actively transfer its know-how and research results into the market (**Graphic 1**).

An important one – but by no means the only one – is the creation of business incubators on Empa's premises where Empa spin-offs and high-tech start-ups find ideal conditions through, among other things, intense collaborations with Empa staff scientists, coaching in all things related to entrepreneurship and administration, services, access to Empa's high-tech infrastructure and professional networks and, last but not least, support in finding (pre-)seed money. By promoting start-up companies – and entrepreneurial spirit in general – Empa contributes to creating value for the Swiss economy and society alike.

For more than 12 years now Empa operates the tebo technology center in St. Gall ("Technologiezentrum für die Euregio Bodensee"). Meanwhile, tebo houses a total of 33 companies offering employment for more than 90 staff members. In 2006, due to its outstanding reputation and an increasing demand for offices and lab space by new potential tenants, which Empa's edifices could no longer satisfy, tebo had to expand to a second location in close vicinity.

Recently, tebo got a "twin sibling" – glaTec, Empa's technology center in Dübendorf, on its main premises. Based in the Zurich metropolitan area – the hotbed of science and technology in Switzerland – glaTec is collaborating closely with the Technopark alliance and other start-up supporting organizations to help scientists-turned-entrepreneurs in "getting started". Besides Empa spin-offs, glaTec is targeted towards external start-ups that are expected to show a significant synergy with Empa's R&D efforts, out-sourced R&D departments of large (inter-)national enterprises and public-private partnerships such as the "Center for Synergetic Structures", which Empa established in 2006 in collaboration with FESTO to develop novel, light-weight support structures by using the "Tensairity"-technology.

The ETH Zurich spin-off "Optotune" is among glaTec's first tenants; the company develops adjustable optical lenses based on electroactive polymers – "artificial muscles", if you wish – a technology, that is also an area of active research at Empa. Having won several start-up awards such as "venture kick" as well as the ETH Zurich- and McKinsey-sponsored "Venture 2008", Optotune is now facing the most critical phase in the typical "start-up life cycle" (**Graphic 2**).

It is this financial gap between start-up funds and venture capital that Empa's business incubators are trying to bridge by entertaining a network of and offering access to a number of funding institutions such as foundations, banks, business angels and the like. What's more, Empa's extensive network of (industrial) customers and collaborators can serve as a door opener for start-ups to establish new business relations – and thus secure the long-term survival of the company.

So far glaTec is supported by the city and the canton of Zurich, the city of Dübendorf, the Zürcher Kantonalbank and CTI Start-up. Since the interest in moving into Empa's vicinity is increasing drastically, glaTec's executive director, Mario Jenni, is actively pursuing alternative/additional funding opportunities.



Materials Science & Technology

Empa

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| Foundation Year | 1880 |
| Mission statement (one sentence) | The leading use-inspired research institution for materials science & technology |
| Number of Employees | 830 |



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