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*Edited by Harald von Korflesch, Kornelia van der Beek &  
Christoph Müller*

**From the 100+ Ideas to  
the Start-Up Scene of Berlin**

*Nea Kekkonen, Aemal Sayer, Claire Zerwas, Kornelia van der Beek &  
Harald von Korflesch*

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## From the 100+ Ideas to the Start-Up Scene of Berlin

Aemal Sayer is not the first time in charge of his own business, but this time it is all different. Having not only a new partner but making it happen on a different continent in a completely new environment and having a goal of international business from the start. In time of writing the recently registered company of Afghan Aemal Sayer and his German partner Tim Budweg has turned from the first draft of an idea into a functioning start up, hungry for new bigger investors from the start up scene of Berlin. Sayers journey from his former technology businesses in Afghanistan to a founder of his new company in Germany has not been easy but now he is again closer to realizing his dreams.

### Entrepreneur life before Germany

When Sayer got into Germany two years ago, with a DAAD scholarship for a Master program in Koblenz-Landau University, he already had three businesses behind him. One of these successful, two failed. One of the two failures with notable financial consequences. The successful startup, Bitsoft, was his first own business and his workplace for over six years having 23 employees in its peak of success. With new ideas coming in, he started new businesses and moved the business of Bitsoft to others to handle. When the new ideas did not work out and the old business started to go severely down in the new hands, the nightmare of all entrepreneurs came true. Sayer was also working for a big company as an employee while running his business, but the stress of his own business crumbling down in front of his eyes took its toll on his performance causing him to get fired from the position. This left him more time to keep on trying to get sales with his own business, which finally led into closing a big deal that prevented a complete disaster when the businesses were run down.

*“Concentrating on two things full-time doesn’t work”,* he says about this period of his working history. Other big lessons gotten from failing with three businesses, he says, is realizing the importance of sales and communication skills and practicing them, and tolerating fear but keep on trying even though it might feel hopeless. *“I closed more than 200 deals in my time of Bitsoft. It was an important school for sales”,* he clarifies. In the

end, after all empty tries, he was able to close a big deal with a good client. That sale got him and the business out of the deepest pit and there was a possibility for a future again.

The thought awoken to leave for another environment and experience new surroundings. Sayer established Bitsoft during his bachelor studies and now he was willing to do a master's degree abroad. His first choice, United States, was out of reach because of bureaucratic reasons so he decided to apply for a scholarship in Germany. His master's in web science started in 2015. The new environment in the university inspired for a side project. What he did not suffer of, was a lack of ideas: *"I made a list of 100 + ideas that would make the life of people better."* He put up a survey with his friends to vote, which one of all the ideas on the list he should start working on. The winner turned out to be number 67, then Webaan, which has now developed into 24Geeks: the business that is taking Sayer and his partner to the city of Berlin.

### **The 100 + ideas pay off**

When starting at the university Sayer took part on an entrepreneurship course in the ZIFET-program ([www.zifet.de](http://www.zifet.de)) with one of his ideas on the list. To choose, he arranged a voting among his friends online. By shortlisting and crowdsourcing the choosing process he ended up with an idea he got full marks with from the course. Gotten a good start and inspiration with this early success, Sayer took the course project to the next level. He wrote a motivation letter covering his technical, professional and personal capabilities to carry the project. In the letter, he also described the idea briefly with some technical details and presented arguments and data in favor of the idea to be worked on. Writing the letter clarified the project for himself too, Sayer notes.

Then he crowdsourced again. The letter was sent to a large number of people including fellow students, friends, and professors with a request of getting feedback, critique and suggestions to come up with a better, marketable concept. He also started to present the idea personally to professors asking for a view. Many of these personal representations lead to new ones and the network of help, support and advice kept on expanding. These actions worked as his personal marketing: His name and character started to get familiar at the university and even in the start-up scene. *"I'm a very*

*shameless person, I talk to anyone*”, Sayer says, continuing by telling that networking is a gateway to the entrepreneurial life. *“I had no networks whatsoever in Germany before I got here”*, he notes.

Not only the motivation letter but also his list of 100 + ideas is getting some impressed feedback from his expanded circle of friends, fellow students, and professors. He is not ashamed to present the full list to people when asked and it seems to work also as a promoting tool for his ambitious and creative character among his newly emerged network. A standing proof of this is the fact that people that had been interviewed into several online publications and institutional blogs considering Sayer and his business bring up the story of The List of 100 + Ideas. This also happens when talking with people in his network about his work and himself. The list of 100 + ideas has become an inspiring story that represents desired and admired qualities but also is kind of a symbol of a classic “rags to riches with hard work and determination”-story.

Sayer adds, that the ZIFET-program ([www.zifet.de](http://www.zifet.de)) and the founding office in the Koblenz university had a significant role in the starting process. Not only by offering the entrepreneurship course he was able to attend but also by offering much needed advice and networks to a newcomer. Coaching, mentoring and support is what any new entrepreneur is in need of but the importance of it highlights when being an international student in a fully new social and cultural environment. *“It never ends there”*, he says adding that the mentoring, support and advising relationship continues even after you leave the campus.

### **Idea becomes reality**

After the motivation letter was crowdsourced developing process Sayer was motivated to take his side project further. A poster on the university wall turned out to be a big step towards the future not only for Sayer’s idea but for the new partnership. It was his future business partner, who sent a picture of the Startup Weekend Koblenz -poster to Sayer in spring 2016. At this point Sayer had already made it into a habit to talk to all people around him about his idea. Also to his future business partner Tim Budweg he had just met over a meeting considering a paper for a research group they were both

working in. Even though Sayer took part in Startup weekend on May 2016 with a team without Budweg, their meeting turned out to change both of their lives in the future.

Startup Weekend Koblenz is a 54-hour long idea and business contest, a part of a worldwide Startup Weekend program by Techstars Central LLC. The events are held in 150 countries to support new ideas and startups to start their business. The Techstars Startup Weekends are supported by Google and other big startup buyers in the tech business. The event itself includes networking, sparring and coaching sessions with local mentors, working on the ideas in teams and presenting the product or service to a panel of judges.

Sayer with his team won the contest, getting free office space, consulting hours etc. as a first prize. *"This kick started my project"*, Sayer tells. At this point, Sayer and Budweg started their partnership. Both had a strong background in coding and tech business and Budweg's experience in back end code work completed their skill set for the work they were starting together. Getting along well and their characteristics supplementing each other's, their partnership was close to perfect. From the company establishing point of view there was one more thing to make this specific partnership more valuable: Tim Budweg is from Germany.

One of the biggest challenges Sayer thinks he has faced so far on his journey of networking and becoming an entrepreneur in Germany has been the language. He speaks fluently four languages, but for now, German is not one of them. *"Having a German cofounder is a must. It is the most important thing to international startup founders"*, Sayer says in reference to his own experiences. In their company, Budweg is taking care of most of the bureaucratic and legal tasks, exactly because of the issue with language. Sayer tells he is studying basics of the German law and the customs of doing business in Germany with the help of his partner and mentors but it is smarter use of time to give the main responsibility of those tasks to Budweg for now.

With the new office space in hand the newly found business partners decide to take a semester off to seriously concentrate on their starting business. The semester is used for planning and developing the business model, coding their platform and the hard

work of finding early investors. Finally, they get to secure a pre-seed round for 5 % equity of their business with an investor from Sayers new networks.

The amount of the investment is 30 000 euros. Starting to pay a modest salary to each other, paying rents, and other expenses to get to concentrate fully on the business, the money starts running out faster than expected. *"We were scared that we will crash the company before our idea took off"*, Sayer tells. This realization got them to think for more financing methods. Their solution was establishing another company based on their professional skills: WunderGeeks, a company producing outsourced coding for clients and financing the business of 24Geeks.

## Teaming up

The 24Geeks team right now consists of five people in total. In addition to the two founders there are three freelancers working for their company on different areas of the business. *"We were looking for a third co-founder, a business based person, for months. We interviewed many people but could not find the right one so we gave up on that"*, Sayer notes about their team structure. He also adds that the basics of business and administration can nowadays be learned by studying online. Further, he agrees that many startups start with a far too big team and says the founder group is enough in the start. What he also notes is that when expanding the team, few get thinking about the resources handling that a larger team takes. *"Leading takes time and that should be considered when the team is growing"*, he tells.

Not only the cofounders but also their team is international: None of the three freelancers working for them is German. Their three freelancers work in marketing, google analytics and UI/UX design. Sayer says he wants to gather smart people around him to work with. *"I want to influence them, not tell them exactly what to do and how to do it"*, adding that with leading a competent team of smart people it is all about listening.

Sayer believes strongly in teamwork. Before his moving to Germany, he used to outsource coding work into India with Bitsoft, his first company. *"It's all about making a competent team"*, continuing that making those teams he had to have several people

on same technologies. *“Using independent freelancers was a no-go, it needs to be a company and a team”*, Sayers tells about his experience. He also adds that making a good team is not only about getting competent people in but mostly about leadership. The point is to get the team close, agile and motivated as a leader, he tells. *“I’m so proud of my [outsourced] team in India, when they work until late at night when there’s a deadline. They stay there not because they are forced to but because they want to. That makes me proud”*, he says.

His failures with companies in his past have thought him trust towards people around him. *“Crashing two companies have taught me trust and give in at times. I need to remember not to be afraid”*, he says about sharing responsibilities. Considering business partnership in a new startup, there definitely is a lot of responsibilities to share. Even though, Sayer and Budweg are not having strict boundaries on duties at their office but are flexible on doing each other’s tasks, sharing, and helping each other out when needed. *“Having strict borders is dangerous in the office environment, for possibility to escape responsibilities”*, Sayer explains.

A bit paradoxically but also supporting his words, he mentions that he thinks all decisions should be finalized by one person only. He justifies this opinion also with responsibility issues: when the decision making process is shared to multiple people, it can lead to a situation where no one is feeling responsible of the decision at hand. As an example, he is using some large companies where big mistakes have got public, but there is nobody who could be seen to have made those bad decisions.

Another challenge in partnership Sayer mentions is feedback. *“Giving feedback to employees is easier, they are not that close to you”*, he says. He feels that this a challenge and concern of many entrepreneurs working with partners. It is about position and badly given feedback might harm the bond between the partners. *“Working partnership is vital for the work”*, he clarifies adding how lucky he feels having found such a great partner. Not only their characteristics work together but also the similar skill and professional background counts. *“We speak the same language”*, he describes.

Finding the third partner, team members and networking outside the university have turned up to be difficult for Sayer not only because of the language. What has been

challenging is the cultural differences and facing a lot of ethnic biases. A bit sadly he tells, that whenever mentioning to a person he is from Afghanistan, they treat him differently. *“It’s like I’m being stamped”*, he says. Sometimes, they have agreed, it is easier to Budweg to take care of certain bureaucratic issues, presentations and negotiations not only because of the language but also because of the ethnic biases Sayer is facing.

He is not facing it everywhere, though. They already have many close mentoring relationships and friendships through the ZIFET-program ([www.zifet.de](http://www.zifet.de)) and in the startup entrepreneur scene of Koblenz. Sayer argues that networking locally, not only internationally, is absolutely needed. Not only for the mentoring and support net but for financing: *“First you can’t get financing abroad. The seed money is needed locally”*, he tells. What he also believes in, is face-to-face meetings over online networking. *“Face-to-face is more important”*, he says arguing *“Getting in personal contact leads into more contacts and enlarges the network.”* He himself is a living example of that.

Sayer and Budweg work constantly to enlarge their network and get publicity to their project by attending events. They are choosing events to attend by the theme of it but also by the popularity and by who is going to be there. Part of their marketing strategy or not, that is how they get to tell their story to a large number of people and especially people who matter.

## Continuous development

Developing the idea of 24Geeks has never stopped after it was picked from Sayers list. Last drastic changes to the model have been made just weeks before after a testing period with their old model. In the old model, they were concentrating on offering help to people with problems with their IT-devices and basic computer software. That model turned out to take too many resources with such a big variety of problems so they changed into helping out people who want to learn specific coding languages or need help with debugging their code. Now Sayer and Budweg are testing this new model and trying to find ways to polish it.

The Lean method has been playing a significant role in the developing process of Sayer's idea and Sayer admits being a fan of the method. He wants to add though, that the Lean method does have its defiance. *"People should be very careful not to misunderstand the method"*, he says continuing by referring to a phenomenon in some startups where things are not tested well enough before they are already abandoned. Embracing AB testing, he says, is one of the top things because it gives real data. After his experiences using the Lean method and seeing others use it Sayer has a clear view on the common missteps with it. *"Spend less hours on MVPs, do not fall in love with one business model, and dare to criticize and take critical answers"*, are the first three tips when asked for advice for lean novices. *"The market will tell you if it's right or wrong"*, he adds.

Sayer also mentions that they themselves did not start lean when developing the platform for what was then called HelpMe. Their plan was to code a flexible platform that could be used for several purposes if the first idea would not take off. Doing this kind of serious foundation work is not part of the Lean method but more against its base ideology with quick MVPs and modifications. Sayer is well aware of this fact, *"Maybe lean all along is not the best way"*, he says. Building the platform was in any case the enabler for the use of the Lean method in the future. *"We planned for a whole year"*, he says, but the planning again was made flexible. They wrote a business plan for Sayer's visa but he says he does not believe in the old-fashioned unchangeable business plans. For him a business plan is a developable set of information, planning and notes that with all its versions makes a documentation or the progress. *"It still is a bible of your business, but changeable"*, he compares, *"the results should lead you."*

Now after legally founding the company they want to keep on planning forward and developing. Sayer says the most important way of doing this is to follow the data their tests, platform, and users produce. It is all about using the data at hand efficiently and utilize data management tools available. *"Constant analysis is vital for progress. With the processed data emotion gets challenged with facts"*, Sayer mentions.

When talking about developing an idea Sayer remarks that not only the idea needs to be developed but the founders too need keep developing and educating themselves. Sayer emphasizes the importance of continuous development of the founders in addition to developing the idea. *"I have dyslexia so I will keep constantly educating"*

*myself through videos, podcasts and audiobooks”, he says noting that his reading difficulties have never stopped his desire for learning new. What he also sees important is not to read only for studying but also for inspiration and motivation. “Inspiring yourself is a vital part of your job as an entrepreneur”, he says adding that no one else can give you the motivation to go on and there are many things dependent on the founders keeping themselves motivated and inspired about what they do. To stay motivated in one’s business Sayer advises: “Do not work for money, money is a side effect. Do what people love.”*

Sayer sees their international point of view as an asset in the market for technology investors. They started their idea very German-based with the clients and service producers in the country. However, they quickly noticed the constraints of this decision and changed into English and international audience. *“In technology, the focus should be international from the start”, Sayer thinks. He sees that many all-German startups suffer from this fact by thinking their business only German-based instead of thinking internationally from the very start.*

Right now Sayer and Budweg are moving their business to Berlin. Their goal is to find more investors, develop their product and pricing, and achieve a place in the market for 24Geeks. Their second company WunderGeeks is producing outsourced coding projects to its clients and is financing the rise of 24Geeks. *“We are working 30 % of our time to WunderGeeks and 70 % on 24Geeks. WunderGeeks is a bread-and-butter business”, Sayer tells about the situation. Sayer with his team of 24Geeks is also applying for an accelerator program for startups but this time in Switzerland called Kickstart Accelerator. Sayer crystallizes his journey in Germany so far: “I’m not a product of Germany but I’m polished in Germany.”*