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Business Students Erupt on Scene in Whirlwind Competition

Two Western Michigan University students, Neil Hurley and Matt Olson, were recently accepted as semi-finalists in the CleanTech Open, a national entrepreneurial accelerator program. Only 200 start-up business teams were accepted into the clean energy and technology sector nationwide, with 30 of those teams coming from the North Central Region of the U.S. Hurley and Olson also represented WMU in the Michigan Clean Energy Venture Challenge where they received an award for ‘Most Disruptive Product’ to hit the market. They are both recent graduates of the WMU College of Engineering and currently enrolled in the Haworth College of Business. As founders of Revolution Winds LLC, they developed new wind turbine technology — the Vertical Axis Wind Turbine.

The Team

Olson reflected on his experience and how participating in a management course in the College helped the team move their engineering idea forward in the business world.

“It has always been my dream to become an engineer and WMU has helped me reach that goal and beyond. I am not only an electrical engineer, but I now am an entrepreneur seeking my MBA degree. It has not been an easy process by any means, but all the extra hard work and effort has been worth it. Neil and I have spent every waking moment designing and constructing our retro-fit VAWT for over two years and when we heard about the Michigan Clean Energy Venture Challenge, we jumped on it, not really knowing what we were getting ourselves into. But, with the help and guidance from Barcley Johnson, we were able to start turning our idea into a business and doing everything in order to prevent our company from failing. Neil and I were basically sponges trying to absorb every little bit of information we could get. We would not have been able to succeed without the help of WMU and its faculty.”
Within weeks of beginning this competition, Hurley and Olson have been able to tap into resources for funding opportunities and legal assistance. They have held weekly meetings to refine business plans and participated in programs with MI-SBTDC and MAREC business incubators.

The Competition

The CleanTech Open kicked off June 21 with the National Conference in Silicon Valley. Each team was allowed an open showcase to display their business and interact with hundreds of international investors, business people and industry experts in the clean tech arena.

“We made numerous contacts and connections in just those few hours with organizations around the world,” says Hurley.

The conference boasted presentations from the director of sustainability for Walmart, as well as top executives and venture capitalists representing Chevron, Black Coral Capital, SynTerra Energy, Dow Chemical, Claremont Creek Ventures and many others.

Just the Beginning

The conference was just the beginning of this adventure. The next three days were dedicated to the CleanTech Open National Academy. Each intense, 12-hour day was saturated with direct interaction, presentations and workshops with executives, venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, legal teams and financial and marketing experts from Silicon Valley and around the world.

“One of the most noted presenters was Steve Blank, author of ‘Four Steps to Epiphany’ and ‘The Start-up Owner’s Manual.’ Steve is one of the noted ‘gods’ of the entrepreneurial realm. His insightful and unrefined candor was simply delightful and inspiring. Steve held open Q&A with the Academy to refine his presentation on the essentiality of customer validation and customer interaction. He held no punches with anyone and freely shared his enthusiasm,” says Hurley.

Two of the major sponsors of this event were AutoDesk and Chevron Ventures. Each team was awarded a $10,000 AutoCAD software package from AutoDesk.

Several sessions with multiple venture capitalists and investment executives related first-hand knowledge and insight of what investors do and do not look for when seeking investment into a new company. Other sessions included risk analysis
assessments, investor pitching, strategic partnerships, patenting and IP protection, financial modeling, marketing and customer development.

**Speed Dating?**

The CleanTech Open events continue into this fall. Teams participate in weekly webinars through September coupled with continuing workshops and packages to help refine the overall business modeling. The best aspect of this program is the extensive mentoring network and resources that are within reach for each participant. The program is moving forward to investment pitches and awards for the North Central region in Minneapolis in mid-October. The national finals are held in Silicon Valley in November. At each of these events, each team will also be set up with one-on-one investor ‘speed dating’ sessions. The teams will make their pitches to top venture capitalist and strategic partner firms in the U.S.

For more information on the CleanTech Open.

For information on Matt and Neil’s venture—Revolution Winds.

**Joy Martinez, MBA ’10 – How Job Satisfaction Relates to Company Culture**

After completing an MBA and working as a marketing manager, Joy Martinez, MBA ’10, was living her dream but began to feel stagnant. To further develop her strengths and leadership skills, she enrolled in the Emerging Leaders Series through the Center for Community Leadership, a premier leadership resource offered by the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce. Her drive and passion attracted the attention of her current employer, LeanLogistics, and although she was not searching for a new job, she notes that making a move, “made sense and the timing was right.” She recognized a great opportunity and accepted a position as Marketing Programs Manager.

In this role, Martinez is responsible for supporting overall marketing strategy and maximizing sales by creating, executing, measuring and tracking individual marketing programs’ success, including webinars, email campaigns, tradeshows and other special events.

Martinez is thriving in her new position, largely because of the company’s culture, noting that company culture is a major contributing factor in job satisfaction. Learning from great examples of what to do (and just as importantly, what not to!), Martinez


lays out her top four trends of successful companies on how to keep employees engaged, productive and happy in their work environments:

1. **Don’t micro-manage:**

   “From what I’ve seen and experienced throughout my career, micro-managing is the number one culture killer. Organizations that embrace employee autonomy and innovation are the ones that succeed. If management allows employees to be open and creative, submit their ideas, and take ownership of their work and decisions, the employees are more satisfied. Instead of telling employees what to do and how to do it, management and leadership should focus on coaching their employees and developing the employees’ strengths. This type of coaching will build confidence in the employee’s ability to execute his or her job, to make decisions and to continue to grow as a professional and a person.”

2. **Engage in open communication:**

   “Many business leaders lack proper communication – not only within the leadership team but also across the organization. This lack of communication can derail overall company strategy, create frustration and confusion, and decrease innovation. Leaders should excel in open communication to ensure the organization is working toward a common purpose or vision.”

3. **Make ethical decisions:**

   “Dr. Ali Metwalli inspired me to be an outstanding individual in my community, my career and my personal relationships. During the time I was getting my MBA, I was working for a company that made me question their decisions ethically and strategically. It was interesting to see issues from both sides of the table and realize that I would never work for a company like that again. Sometimes it is just as beneficial to learn from a company that has it wrong as it is from a company that has it right. I learned a company’s ethical standards are essential to business success. Many believe being ethical is a choice; Dr. Metwalli taught me that it is a way of life and business.”

4. **Encourage continuous improvement to drive success:**

   “Success happens by looking at what I’ve brought to my role, how I’ve elevated the position or the company and by continuing to learn from the company and those around me. If I stop learning, I stop growing. If I stop learning, I stop making an impact. Success is about changing lives and pushing myself to maximize my strengths. Through continuous learning and by maximizing my strengths, I am able to
focus on what I do best which ultimately benefits the organization, drives success and contributes to an engaged company culture.”

What’s next for this go-getter? Martinez’s long-term goal is to launch her own business, drawing upon her passion for empowering students and young professionals to achieve success. She plans to foster strengths development, leadership and business skills. “All too often, we stay in jobs that drain our energy; we don’t follow our dreams because another path is easier, and we stay in relationships that stifle our growth. Instead of taking action, we sit on the sidelines. Believe that your life and your career can be full of passion, happiness and success!”

To learn more about Joy and her thoughts on personal strengths, career, business and leadership, follow her on Twitter at @joyvanoeffelen.

**Abby Knapp, BBA ’09 – On the Cutting Edge of Consumer Engagement**

Exactly one year from the day she graduated, Abby Knapp, BBA ’09, secured her dream job as an associate producer at ePrize, an interactive promotion agency that creates online games, apps and loyalty programs for clients like Coca Cola, Microsoft and HBO. ePrize has a staff of specialists that monitor trends in customer interaction, ensuring its clients have a leg up in the world of engagement. As associate producer, Knapp serves as the liaison between the client and her team, communicating changes in strategy and making sure important deadlines are met.

Flexibility is key in this role, and Knapp has learned a great deal already about prioritizing and quick thinking. Just one month after Knapp was hired, the team faced a problem with a large project when an unforeseen obstacle halted production. They immediately held a creative meeting to determine a way to meet the client’s goals in a more feasible way. Knapp crafted a new solution (one that the client loved!), and they moved forward with the online game she suggested.

When asked about the most valuable part of her education, Knapp responded about the lengths that the Haworth College of Business took to make the classroom mimic the real world. “We can learn so much from the past; it’s important to focus on actual problems and results of other organizations,” she says. Her time at the College also helped her gain firsthand experience during an internship abroad in London.
She was motivated to be successful by her advertising professors. She recalls, “It’s obvious that they are passionate about their field and that they love what they do. They inspired me every day in class to think and create outside of my comfort zone.”

**Fall dates set for Business Career Week events**

Plans are underway for the Haworth College of Business Fall Career Week scheduled for October 15-19. Mark your calendar now for a number of related events. Visit the Career Center website for a complete list of activities.

ISM Career Night - Wednesday, Oct. 17, from 6 to 9:30 p.m.

- **Location**: Fetzer Center, WMU
- **Agenda**: Employer presentations/networking event for students pursuing internships and entry level positions in supply chain management. Some employers will schedule on-campus interviews for Thursday, Oct. 18.
- **Visit** the Career Center Events website for further information.
  Questions: Call (269) 387-2759 or email linda.ickes@wmich.edu

Food and Consumer Package Goods Marketing Career Night, Wednesday, Oct. 17 from 6 to 9:30 p.m.

- **Location**: Fetzer Center, WMU
- **Agenda**: Employer presentations/networking event for students pursuing internships and entry level professional positions in Food Marketing. Some employers will schedule on-campus interviews for Thursday, Oct. 18.
- **Visit** the Career Center Events website for further information.
  Questions: Call (269) 387-2717 or email caroline.ray@wmich.edu

Business Career Day, Thursday, Oct. 18 from 2 to 6 p.m.

- **Location**: Bernhard Center, WMU
- **Agenda**: More than 100 companies will attend the fair to promote their organizations and recruit WMU candidates for co-op, internship and full-time positions. Some employers will schedule on-campus interviews for Friday, Oct. 19.
• Employers: Registration Link for Employers
  Questions: Call Leanne Snyder at (269) 387-2769 or email careercenter-oci@wmich.edu

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