

App will help scientists recruit participants for their research investigations

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Already affiliated with local hospitals, universities and research institutes, Toronto-based startup ParticipAid's goal is a worthy one, albeit ambitious in scope: to make it easy for the world to have a direct impact on research progress.

The idea for the [app](#), developed by University of Toronto Mississauga alumni Anthony Nazarov and Maroof Moral along with McMaster University graduate Erica Tatham, evolved to fill a strategic gap in the clinical research sector, which, as it turns out, is a global struggle for any research involving human participants.

All three founding members are research scientists who have had first-hand experience running laboratory studies in human research and are familiar with the struggles that come along with it. In fact, they did some market research and discovered that recruiting participants is the number one bottleneck of the research process.

Consequently, they've been trying to transform the way participants are recruited for medical studies, and stirring up public interest in the process. "There is a great deal of brilliant research happening in our city, especially at the University of Toronto and its affiliated hospitals and research networks," says Nazarov.

They also participate in studies themselves and believe that it should be a more popular activity among people of all ages and walks of life. Thus, they've made it their mission to diminish the stigma around research labs

and to show people how rewarding it can be to contribute to a good cause. "Participating in a research study is a great way to get involved in your local scientific community, give back to a noble cause, and maybe even help make discoveries that save lives," says Moral.

They believe that by creating a nation-wide mental shift on attitudes toward research, they can help accelerate medical discovery and scientific advancements. "We want to create a real, tangible place in the scientific community where research participants can feel they belong; we believe fostering that relationship could truly end up making a difference in the world," says Nazarov.

Gaining traction

When the trio heard about the University of Toronto's Tri-campus Hackathon BLUE3, an event offering workshops and sessions to accelerator members from the Scarborough, Mississauga and St. George campuses, they decided it would be a great opportunity for them to put their idea to the test. They pitched their concept in front of judges and were evaluated based on their presentation delivery, product demo and creativity. Unsurprisingly, the top spot went to ParticipAid, and the rewarding experience gave them the rare opportunity of feeling connected among all three campuses.

"We've had this startup idea for a year now and have been working on it in our spare time, juggling our studies and day jobs," says Moral, who has chosen to take a summer leave of absence from his full-time job at Deloitte Digital to get the idea up and running. "To know that our university supports and encourages this kind of forward-thinking, entrepreneurial mindset just adds to our inspiration and confidence to pursue our dreams."

Shortly after their success at the Hackathon, they presented their project

at the 2015 Intelligent Community Forum Summit, an international gathering of mayors, chief administrative officers, chief information officers and economic development officers from cities around the world, where they captivated listeners who seemed genuinely impressed. "It was an honour to represent student innovation at UofT during the summit," said Moral. "It was nice to get encouragement from such a wide-ranging, international audience."

For the most part, the response to ParticipAid has been encouraging. They've done usability tests on their prototype and have gotten positive reception and useful constructive comments, which have been incorporated in the latest iterations of the app.

They believe their business venture has sparked a lot of discussion because it is a worthwhile and exciting endeavour. "Everyone has been offering their viewpoints on what angles to consider and what areas to be careful not to overlook," says Moral, adding: "Our user experience is our secret sauce, so we want to make sure we're doing everything we can to truly delight our users."

What's next

With the aid of a couple developers, the group is currently in the midst of developing a minimum viable product. Here's how it will work: users will be able to browse for [research](#) studies in their area and sign up for ones that they like. Social and gamification elements will be added to keep people motivated and inspired. For instance, ParticipAid will come with a personalized newsfeed that displays a timeline of updates from all the studies in which a user has participated in, thereby visualizing the impact they are making in the scientific and medical communities.

The trio is also about to launch their crowd-funding campaign to help offset development costs. Additionally, they recently won a business

grant called the Regional Service Advisory Fund (RASf) from the Research Innovation Commercialization (RIC) Centre, a not-for-profit that supports local entrepreneurs and innovation. "This grant will go a long way in helping put our first product out on the market," says Moral.

After they get through the developmental cycle, they plan to release their first product in the fall.

"We're pulling out all our project management skills to get this show on the road," he says. "Our first app will consist of a small subset of functionality – really, just a fragment of our end-product – but it's more than enough to get users hooked."

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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