

On the 48th floor in Philly, Comcast kicks off startup accelerator with 10 firms

July 20 2018, by Bob Fernandez, The Philadelphia Inquirer

Over the last few days, they flew in from all over—Singapore, Munich, Toronto and Los Angeles—and one walked from University City to be there for Comcast Corp.'s new boost-up program for young tech firms.

"Over the moon," said Jeremiah Alexander of Singapore startup WiARframe, which aims to make prototyping easy, referring to the just-refurbished 48th floor of 1717 Arch St. that will be his work space for the next three months. "I was working out of my apartment looking out on a parking lot," he said.

Among the participating startups were those developing a wall-mounted console to play video games, a speech-coaching app based on Toastmasters teachings, and a personalized aromatherapy device to create the desired mood.

Comcast launched the startup accelerator, which aims to offer a concentrated burst of business teaching, mentoring, and networking over 13 weeks. Comcast believes that some of the startups could stay in Philadelphia when the program ends later this year—a potential shot of new blood for a lagging tech scene, but also a big if. An organization that runs about 40 accelerators around the globe, Colorado-based Techstars, is running this one, too.

The region is only the 12th-most-popular U.S. destination for venture capital investors, far behind Boston and other smaller metros, based on data from the National Association of Venture Capital, Inquirer business

columnist Joseph N. DiStefano wrote recently.

Rick Nucci, chair of the nonprofit Philly Startup Leaders and CEO of Philadelphia tech firm Guru, said he believed the startup scene is improving and the "brain drain" of young graduates leaving Philadelphia has eased. He thinks the accelerator will showcase Philadelphia as a place where cool things are developed, particularly with Techstars running it.

"I see this as a normal outgrowth of (Comcast's) being more open," said Paul Levy, president of the Center City District, which has called for a stronger white-collar economy in Center City. "They need lots of ideas, and they need lots of talent."

The accelerator was supposed to be housed at the new \$1.5 billion Comcast Technology Center. But construction delays pushed back the building's opening, perhaps to later this summer. Instead, the accelerator got off the ground Monday on a floor decorated with local artwork and conference rooms named after Philadelphia neighborhoods. The program is officially called the Comcast NBCUniversal LIFT Labs Accelerator.

While evaluating firms for the program, Comcast looked for those developing products on the connected life, streaming entertainment, next-generation marketing, the internet of things, and digital wellness.

One participating firm is Polycade, which was founded by Tyler Bushnell, son of Atari and Chuck E. Cheese creator Nolan Bushnell. Polycade has developed a wall-mounted gaming console for people to play old and new video games. "It's an arcade for the modern age," said Bushnell, 37, dressed in cream-colored sweats and a baseball cap.

The sole participating Philadelphia firm is Orai, founded by Drexel

University alums Danish Dhamani and Paritosh Gupta. They attended Toastmasters meetings to learn public speaking and then converted the experience into an app. So far the app—which is a free download but includes a \$10-a-month subscription for more learning—has been downloaded about 100,000 times.

Gupta, 22, an Orai co-founder, said he lives in the Drexel area and will walk to the program at 1717 Arch.

Helping manage and coordinate the project are Danielle Cohn, the executive director of entrepreneurial engagement at Comcast, and Maya Baratz Jordan, a Techstars managing director.

Comcast and Techstars received several hundred applications from startups in 38 countries, the company said. "We cast the net pretty far and we did a lot of PR to get the word out," said Sam Schwartz, Comcast's chief business development officer and the accelerator's advocate at the company's headquarters.

Jordan said that the 13-week program is designed to advance startup development by 18 to 24 months.

The [startup](#) workers here are expected to find their own housing. Most said they were within walking distance of the Comcast campus. They are paid for by a stipend for the program. Neither Comcast nor Techstars would say how much. "The program is 13 weeks, but we will not kick everyone out on the last day," Schwartz said.

Other startups in the program are:

- Alive5, based in Texas, which develops a chat software so that companies can text clients and accept payments.

- Eyecandylab, in Munich, Germany, which seeks to bring to market-immersive reality experiences.
- Pium, in Seoul and New York, which develops an internet of things device to change the mood of a room or house with smells.
- Portl Media, in Toronto, which develops an advertising and entertainment platform for ride-share vehicles.
- Tally Interactive, also in Toronto, which has a platform for interactive game shows.
- Thinker-Tinker, in Los Angeles, which develops digital and traditional play toys for children.
- Trapica, in New York, which uses artificial intelligence software to advance social media ad campaigns.

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Citation: On the 48th floor in Philly, Comcast kicks off startup accelerator with 10 firms (2018, July 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-48th-floor-philly-comcast-startup.html>

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