AN INTRAPRENEUR'S JOURNEY

Yael, Intrapreneur @SocieteGenerale: how I created a spin-off

Yael joined the Société Générale Bank 20 years ago, where she held positions in marketing and communication. Today, Yael is proud and happy to wear two hats: she is in charge of a new position in the company and the CEO of IT4Girls. Yael looks back on her journey as an intrapreneur in an interview for the Institut de l'Intrapreneuriat.

Good morning Yaël.

Good morning Sylvie.

Thank you for sharing your experience as an intrapreneur @the Société Générale bank. Would you please introduce yourself, mentioning when your intrapreneur's journey started, your role at that time and the position you hold today.

Of course! When this adventure began in 2018, I was a communication manager and a project manager on change management. It has been such a great adventure that it ended with the creation of a new position in January 2019 to promote "gender diversity" to start with and to later expand to "diversity and inclusion". I was offered the opportunity to lead this new position in the IT CSR department, I still hold today. At the same time, I am the CEO of *IT4Girls that* I built with the support of the Société Générale Group.
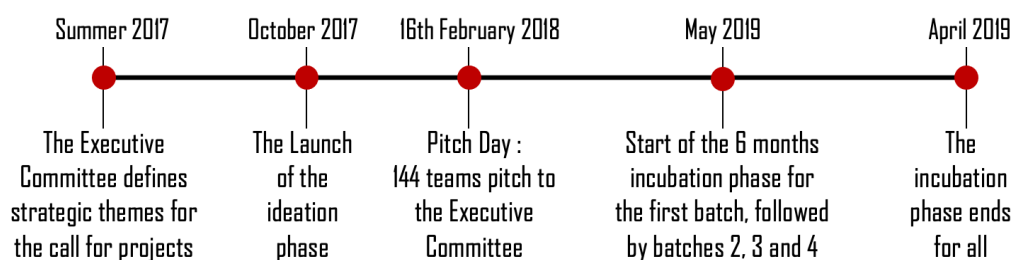
What is your project about and how did it transition from an idea to a startup?

I set up a start-up, *IT4Girls*, a platform providing coding workshops for girls. The idea came to me from the observation that there was a serious lack of women in the company's IT departments. I felt very concerned. I had the intuition that one or even two generations were already lost and that the number of women in IT departments would not increase anytime soon if nothing changed. I had to do something about it. When I feel this way, I get very energised, on the lookout for any possible solution.

In October 2017, Frédéric Oudéa, the Group's CEO, launched the *"Internal Start-up call"*[1], a large-scale intrapreneurship program calling for innovative projects and

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[1] *Press release from the Société Générale about "The Internal Startup call: the one-shot and large-scale program" (May 2019).*

Summer 2017	October 2017	16th February 2018	May 2019	April 2019
The Executive Committee defines strategic themes for the call for projects	The Launch of the ideation phase	Pitch Day : 144 teams pitch to the Executive Committee	Start of the 6 months incubation phase for the first batch, followed by batches 2, 3 and 4	The incubation phase ends for all

opened to all employees. I saw it as an opportunity to test my idea. Without delay I published my idea on the collaborative platform made available for this purpose: setting up coding workshops for girls as early as 7 years old, that is before gender bias sets in, with the goal in mind to prove that computers are gender-neutral and improve the number of women in IT in the more or less long term. Immediately, my idea got a lot of attention. It received many "likes" in the platform from colleagues, some offered advice, others support, others asked to get on board and join the team I had to build to participate to the next step: pitching the project to the Executive Committee.

Sorry to interrupt, but what was the role of the platform? How far did it helped in developing your idea into a pitch?

It was key! Being on the platform brought visibility to my idea and gave me direction. First, my project got a lot of attention and many advices on how to make it more concrete and useful for the company. I had to fill a very detailed project form on the platform, anyone interested could have access to the project advancement and contribute. When a top manager offered his support and become my sponsor[2] , it all become more structured. I could also refer to external coaches: 6 coaches from ISG and start-up incubators where at our disposal. The support could be online or at the office. *Makesense*[3] helped in building the team, *the family*[4] trained the team on how to pitch.

So, how did you recruit your team members?

It was very clear that the projects selected over the pitch Day would be developed in a start-up incubator. In other terms, the team who would pass the pitch selection would be detached for a 6-month period. So, I selected 3 team members from the pool of colleagues who asked to be part of this adventure and according to the skills I needed to make the project a success:
-   First, I needed a CTO. With the support received on the collaborative platform, my initial idea soon turned into a digital project: a platform offering online coding workshops to kids and women. Therefore, the role of a CTO was key. From the colleagues who applied I already knew *Marie*[5]. She was very concerned by the cause the project defended and wanted to contribute to showing that coding was gender free. Plus, we had already enjoyed working together in the past.
-   We also needed an HR: the platform we projected to create would connect kids to tutors. Therefore, it was key to have someone who was familiar with human resources management. I knew *Corinne*[4] and she was also very enthusiastic and committed to the cause. I was very happy to welcome her into the team.
-   Finally, we decided to complete the team with an administrator. When *Carla*[4] contacted us in the platform, none of us knew her. Participating to our cause was dear to her heart and she insisted so much, I ended up meeting her. Carla was so motivated to join the team, I was amazed.

[S]*Société Générale managers were given a bonus for sponsoring ideas in the collaborative platform*
[3] Makesense *(2011) has been creating tools and programs to social entrepreneurs to take action and build an inclusive and sustainable society.*
[4] The Family *is a fellowship of founders (2013) supporting start-ups from Day 1 to worldwide scaling.*
5 *Names have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality of personal information*

We were now 4, dedicating all our free time to the project. We started working on it, during lunch, after work, at coffee break… The same ritual started for us 3: any minute free we would connect to the platform. It was a very stimulating period. We were still employees of the bank, exactly as before, but we also had this exciting project on the side, that was ours. We were very proud to work on something meaningful. That was very energising. I remember we were obsessed, we even started to test it with colleagues. We were talking about it all the time: dreaming about it at night, eating it for lunch, for dinner…

You sound like you did not meet any challenge during this phase? How did your direct manager react? And what about your peers?

My manager said it all when I asked her feeling about this adventure: "The president wants it like this, so be it. Nothing else matters". By personally sponsoring the program, the president gave it a strong legitimacy. My department is still very proud to count me among the participants of this unique adventure.
As far as I am concerned, I don't recall any tension with anyone during this period. Maybe I was too much into my project to pay attention to anything else. I am not sure I can reply.

To sum up, you and your team developed your idea into the project you pitched to the Executive Committee with the guidance of a sponsor, the contribution of colleagues in the collaborative platform and the training of external coaches?

Exactly. And, in February 2018 the 16th, we pitched our project to the Executive Committee, along with 143 other teams. Each team had 15 minutes to convince. We spoke about raising awareness about programming and diversity in the group and we presented our platform proposing online coding workshops for the children of the group's employees, with a minimum target of 50% of girls per workshop, but also for women working in the company. We ended among the 70 teams selected to pursue the program in a start-up incubator for 6 months. We were thriving. We didn't realize how much this 6-month incubation period would affect our lives, but now I can say that from that day, all changed for us 4. From May to November 2018, we left the Bank to be dedicated to our project and make it a reality.

Where did you go? And how did it go?

Each member of the team received an assignment letter to be seconded at *Makesense*, an incubator focusing on" impact projects" (projects with a positive social and/or environmental impact). We have learnt so much there. As far as I am concerned, I have learned how to set up a company, I acquired skills in entrepreneurship, strategy and finance and more specifically in venture capital, and legal expertise. In all these aspects which were very new to me, I learned and grew up together with my company. Above all, I gained a major learning: team management in an agile mode. I learnt how to work with my team in a fast and efficient manner and with what we had at hand. At first, we had huge coordination issues. Each one in the team wanted to bring her touch and do her own thing. We ended doing things that were useless, wasting too much time on details. Also, I learnt how to take responsibility and fulfil my role as a leader. I have learned a lot about myself. We have also made a

few POC. When the incubation period ended, we were ready to go to market, but a fuzzy period started.

What do you mean by "fuzzy"?

Well, Société Générale did not really know what to do with our project. I mean there was no structure to integrate us, whereas they wanted the coding workshops for kids and women to continue. Also, it was impossible for us to go back to where we were before this adventure started. In many cases, the position of the intrapreneurs had been filled by someone else, and the managers did not really know how to deal with this situation, nor HR, to be honest. Others did not want to go back to their previous position. From our team, only *Carla*[4] reintegrated her previous position. For *Marie*[4], *Corinne*[4] and myself it was not possible to erase this period from our minds and act as it did not exist. We were going to the office but without being committed to our job. So, we tried to continue working on the project on the side, but it did not work.

Can you explain?

During this "fuzzy" period, we had to manage our full-time work at the bank and the project on the side, but this time without support, nor funding. It is difficult to sustain this level of personal investment over time. But I did not want to end the project. I called the team for a meeting and asked them what they thought: I told them I did not want to give up, even though I realised that continuing would require more work. I asked them who would like to continue the project. *Carla*[4] announced she was moving. At that time remote work was not an option. *Marie*[4] and *Corinne*[4] told me honestly, they no longer had the energy, the enthusiasm, nor the ability to carry on. They ultimately shifted focus to personal projects.
I decided to continue alone, and following the advice the incubator once gave me, I set up the start-up as an "auto-entrepreneur" and billed my first client, La Société Générale.
IT4Girls started its own life, approaching other companies willing to work on gender diversity and to offer coding workshops to their employees' children.
So, when the IT department offered me the new opening to promote "Diversity", I made it clear that I would accept the job only if it was ok for the Bank that I had this activity on the side. Of course, my role in *IT4Girls* has never impinged on my work at the Société Générale. I just wanted to make sure I would be able to organise my 2 activities smoothly.
At the end of the day, I am very happy I accepted this position: I felt it allowed me to capitalise on the new skills I had acquired and to express my talent. Plus, I got the impression to do something meaningful and useful: The IT department in the Société Générale only counted 26% women while the group counted 58%. I understood immediately why the CSR manager from IT opened this position and contacted me.

Looking back, what are the benefits of your project for the group and for you?

Société Générale was *IT4Girls*' first customer and remained a loyal client. Our last mission for the group consisted in organizing coding workshops in the group's offices for *Year 10 pupils* [6] who come to the Société Générale to complete *a "company*

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[6] *Year 10 in the English school system = 3ème in the French school system (14-15 years old)*

discovery" internship [7]. In these workshops, children learn about coding in a spirit of co-creation and through games where they contribute to creating a better future, protecting the environment. *IT4Girls* thus contributes to the Group's influence and image.

As far as I am concerned, I have benefited from the Group's intrapreneurship program and managed to set up my own business, something I had never done before. Having Société Générale as my first customer, helped me open the doors to other large companies. Finally, I had a great experience as an intrapreneur: I got energized, acquired new skills and learned a lot about myself and my abilities. I learned how to build on my strengths and leverage the expertise I had acquired as an employee _such as managing and promoting a project, communicating on social networks and other media_ as well as my corporate culture, allowing me to have a good understanding of my potential customers since I shared the same codes, references, problems and spoke the same language.

According to you, what are the benefits of this intrapreneurship program for the organization?

This program has stimulated innovation within the organization, as intended, and all the projects created from it have brought something to the group. As far as I'm concerned, I believe my project has enlightened the group on gender and diversity aspects. As I explained earlier, after completing the program, the group created a new position to promote diversity in the IT department, the position I hold today.

What advice and learnings would you like to share with other intrapreneurs?

"Fake it until you make it", this is my motto. What does it mean? At start, there is just an idea. I tested mine among colleagues only, with no evidence it would work. But it did, and mainly because I believed in it. Having no track record should not stop you from moving forward. You need to believe in your idea, go ahead and roll up your sleeves. You should not wait for making it big. In fact, you need to start acting on it as if it is already big.

Also, share as much information as you can rather than keep it to yourself and meet other intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs even if they are potential competitors. You never know, you can learn a lot from others and find beautiful surprises on the way. Listen to your customers, address their needs, adapt and improve constantly as quickly as possible. Keep learning continuously and collaborating with all stakeholders of the project.

And finally get familiar with social networks and digital marketing.

Tell us more about the support you received and the challenges you faced.

The launching of the program was very stimulating. It gave me the opportunity to express an idea I cherished and the conditions to transform it into a project. The collaborative platform encouraged cross-functional cooperation: I benefited initially

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[7] *In France, Pupils in Year 10 should complete a mini internship of 2 to 4 ½ days in a company as a first contact with the business world.*

from the protection and advice of a sponsor and the help of my peers to complement my knowledge and skills.

The incubation period taught me many new skills and lean start-up methods. It also helped me develop my self-confidence. It has been a great adventure. Overall, the assistance provided by the program has been crucial: I went from being an employee to an entrepreneur. I gained leadership, determination and drive!

The landing of the program has been more challenging. What happens to employees at the end of the incubation period? what happens to the project? The company does not always know how to reintegrate projects and people; this is a very stressful situation for the intrapreneur. As far as I am concerned, I put an end to this uncertainty with a lot of courage by deciding to create my own start-up and look for clients outside the group, and it worked! In the end, I reached an agreement with Société Générale that gives me the flexibility to keep running my business on the side while remaining an employee and being promoted to a position corresponding to my concerns.

Today, I have a sales director (my son), a CTO and a HR (his friends): 3 young and brilliant men committed to making *IT4Girls* a success. I count among my client's large groups such as HSBC, ArcelorMittal, AXA, Bouygues, CA, SNCF, Natixis, IBM, Schneider Electrics, Lagardère, etc the list is long, and we are all 4 very proud of it. We have delivered over 200 workshops. We have more than 63% of girls in our workshops, overpassing our 50% objective by far! We reached 100 K€ turnover in year1 and despite the pandemic, 30K€ in 2020. We skyrocketed our KPIs, without imagining it possible! With the new team, we think big and we are already scaling up by building coding workshop for children from deprived environments or with disabilities: it is still a secret but *IT4Girls* is about to become *Diverse-IT*!