

# Start me up

ERT visits the Central Research Laboratory, which is helping UK tech start-up businesses and inventors to develop the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the commercial world

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● By Sean Hannam

**IN a workshop in west London, hi-tech gadgets such as robotic gloves, submarine drones and digital drawing systems are being developed.**

But this isn't James Bond's Q Branch, it's the Central Research Laboratory (CRL) – the UK's newest 'incubator' project for start-up businesses – and it's based at The Old Vinyl Factory in Hayes – the former record pressing plant and R&D lab for EMI, where inventions such as stereo sound, airborne radar and the first CAT scanner were pioneered.

In September 2015, the CRL launched a pilot scheme in partnership with London's Brunel University and the Higher Education Funding Council, which saw 11 start-ups, chosen after an application and pitching process, begin a 12-month development programme, during which the CRL would work with them to develop the skills and knowledge needed to turn a start-up into a scalable business.

Speaking to *ERT*, James Nettleton, programme director at the CRL, says: "Our goal was to bring back the spirit of collaborative innovation that used to be here. What does that model look like now? Where are those incredibly, impactful innovations going to come from in the future? We're pretty certain that it's not going to be from the R&D division of a global technology giant and that some of the really interesting things are going to come out of start-up hardware businesses. A lot of the really disruptive innovations have come from new players. We've seen some really exciting businesses that I think are going to last for years to come."

Adds the CRL's operations director Ashley Sayed: "What we're trying to do is to build businesses – not just products. The programme that we have is really tailored to creating successful, scalable businesses



Developing the Deep Six submarine drone



**Where are impactful innovations going to come from in the future? It's not going to be from the R&D division of a global technology giant**

that have physical products, but most of the 11 teams are at the intersection of both hardware and software. It's a real mix – we haven't focused on one sector. When we asked for applications last year, we had over 100 applications via our website. There were key criteria. Everyone had to have a working prototype and they had to have products that were of value and could make a difference, rather than being commoditised. We didn't want just another selfie stick, or an accessory.

"The final thing was that they had to be committed to the programme – being here and being part of the community. We're trying to turn these early-stage start-ups into investable businesses and we're focusing on key areas – to get them to think about

their business model and define their strategy and route to market and to work with them to understand who their target markets and customers are. We cover everything from marketing to branding, IP strategy and design for manufacturing."

The CRL's first start-ups included Digital Kinematics, which has developed an electromechanical learning hand that interacts with a virtual world, a modular walking aid and the Deep Six submarine drone. There was also The Woodpecker from Those – a digital drawing system that can draw and write – and even tweet – with pens, pencil and paint.

In May of this year, the CRL launched the new application process for its second programme for start-ups, which will see up to 12 new companies entering a nine-month scheme from September 2016.

Each of the participants will receive fully-funded access to the CRL's high-end prototyping labs, a 24/7 workspace, a £5,000 living costs grant and expert help with commercial and product development. In return, the CRL will receive a six per cent stake.

Talking about last year's successful applicants and their businesses, Mr Sayed says: "We're now trying to get them in front of angel investors and partners."

Adds Mr Nettleton: "We could see some of the start-ups growing through venture capital or crowdfunding and some would be really interesting acquisitions for larger corporates. We're lucky to have an amazing prototyping lab here and great facilities, but it's not about bringing manufacturing back to Hayes – it's about what 'made in Hayes' would mean in the 21st century."

● For more information visit:

<http://www.centralresearchlaboratory.com>