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MIT high flier wowed by BT research team

Wednesday November 11th 2009. Posted: 08:00

When the cream of the cream chooses BT for its research secondment, it's clear the company's university programme is reaping big dividends which will feed through into commercial possibilities for BT.

Tanya Goldhaber, 21, is by any standards a high flier, being an undergraduate in mechanical engineering at the world famous Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).



Tanya with Cambridge Philosophy PhD student, Tom Simpson

She was one of a chosen few selected by MIT for its Gordon Engineering Leadership programme, designed to enhance the education of MIT undergraduates and give them management experience.

She chose a secondment with BT - which is fitting recognition of the company's growing global reputation for innovative products and services, explains BT head of the university programme Jeff Patmore.

Creative people

"Tanya's project set about examining how TV could be made a more of a social experience. She also looked at how the wide range of options now available can be made much less daunting by designing an interface that combines TV and internet," he said.

Tanya really enjoyed her eight weeks with BT. "To say that my project was interesting, engaging, and creative is an understatement," she said. "In fact, I found an area of research that I wish very much to pursue in my career, and it is that of inclusive design, or designing for maximum usability."



Tanya with leading researcher Aaron Sloman from the University of Birmingham

She found BT's people to be stimulating, creative and very supportive.

"I had the opportunity to be creative in ways I never have before, and to have the experience of leading my own project within a company, which was immensely valuable," she said.

Valuable insights

The research stimulated much debate and discussion in BT in areas such as: 'Trust in recommendation systems' and 'The future of TV'.

Her work is now feeding through into longer term research which will help BT extend commercial possibilities, particularly in areas such as BT Vision and various interactive online services.

Tanya says what makes BT's research group special is the collaborations it has with universities.

"Most companies would find it hard to justify hiring a full-time anthropologist or philosopher, but that does not mean those people do not have valuable insights into a research project," she said. "BT's strategy of collaborating with those academics through their institutions adds an amazing amount of value to BT's research programme."

Mutual benefit

While she was on secondment she also had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time at Cambridge associating with professors and graduate students from the university's Engineering Design Centre, from its anthropology and philosophy departments and the Judge Business School.

"I had incredibly interesting conversations with these people, the feedback they gave me on my research was also very valuable and greatly influenced the way I thought about and proceeded with my work," she said.

The secondment proved mutually benefit to BT and MIT as Tanya was also able to collaborate with Wanda Orlikowski, a professor at MIT's Centre for Information Systems Research during her time at BT.

"I wrote a diary about how I used technology on a daily basis, which helped Wanda's research into how technology is used within companies," she explained. "This diary of my technology usage gave me a record of good ideas I'd had about how to effectively use technology."



Tanya presented on 'social TV' during a Travelling Geeks event at BT Centre

Strong links

Head of the university programme Jeff Patmore says Tanya's contribution is just one example of how the programme is proving essential to enhancing BT's reputation as global leader of research and innovation.

The programme will continue to focus sharply on key institutions such as MIT and Cambridge, where the greatest collaborative benefit can be enjoyed by BT.

The handover of the keys to the new BT-sponsored Lab at MIT, before it is opened next April, will be another milestone in the ongoing development of links between the two organisations.

Jeff said: "The programme enables us to benefit from some of the best minds in the world," he said. "For example, at The Judge Business School we gain access to many MBA students from all over Europe who carry out projects for BT. We're also established strong links with Tsinghua University in China where high calibre students will also provide valuable support in many research areas."

Key clients

Another strand of the programme is the Key Clients initiative, where BT researchers meet three times a year with senior BT people across the business to gain real insights into the commercial challenges faced selling to and serving BT's customers.

"By working closely with our key clients we are able to focus the academic power of our partners both on business critical issues today and research which will enhance our company in the future", Jeff added.

Information provider: Group Communications

Review date: 11/11/10