

# Let others do the thinking

A University start-up is seeking answers to big questions. This is the place where researchers discover what they are looking for - as well as mothers, despairing of their children's questions.

By **Emil Bischofberger**

If intelligence had a scent, this place would smell of it. In the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (AI Lab) of the University of Zurich in Oerlikon, it does not take long to notice that bright people are constantly generating clever ideas. Apart from the students, only three of the around 40 people who work at the AI-Lab are from Switzerland. One of them had an idea which he drove forward with such vigour, that he gave up his well-paid job at a bank and became manager of a start-up company. Starmind, this is Pascal Kaufmann's brainchild. The idea behind it sounds rather astonishing, as it's both complex and simple at the same time. Kaufmann came up with the idea when noticing more and more that the daily 24 hours were not nearly enough for his needs. The 30 year old's solution is outsourcing. Specifically: «What is worth more to me: To spend an hour googling in the internet to find the answer to a question, or to spend the hour with my girlfriend?» Exactly. In order to gain an hour this way, you have to be willing to pay something in return. On Starmind you post a question and define the maximum reward you are willing to pay for it.

## Time increases a question's value

The longer a question is online, the more the reward rises. If a question is answered quickly, the reward is minimal but guaranteed - if question solvers wait too long, they run the risk of someone else beating them to it. The idea behind this strategy: For a low reward only an absolute expert will answer a question, as it will only take him a few minutes. This guarantees Starmind a unique positioning compared to any other internet forum - on the level of universities. «In future a researcher will not have to answer all his questions by himself, but above all asks

the right questions» Kaufmann explains. «It's better to let a Nobel prize winner solve my problem than to read all the books he's read - leaving less time for the actual research.» Similar arguments are used by Monika Seps, who is writing her master thesis at the laboratory and - as do about a dozen others - works for Starmind. «With Starmind a lot of time and money can be saved. If I have a question at work, I can ask 30 co-workers of whom none might be able to help me. Through Starmind however, I'm more likely to find a person who can.» Seps, repeated Swiss Chess Champion, draws major comparisons: «I hope Starmind will become as popular within the next three years as MySpace is now. This would be a dream come true.» For this she acquires question posers and question solvers in the chess scene, where there is not exactly a lack of intelligence. Starmind-founder Kaufmann's comparison even goes a step further. «In future, whoever has an

important question shall not google the answer, but post it on Starmind», he says. In order to achieve this, Kaufmann gives speeches at numerous universities. «We need questions!» This is not a cry for help, but a demand. Even though the focus lies on Universities, there is no such thing as a «stupid» question. «Trivial questions are allowed - as long as you are willing to pay 5 Euros for the solution. Yet seldom is a question for which one is willing to spend money a trivial one.»

## How many leaves does a tree have?

Kaufmann himself asked about the cheapest Maldiv Islands holiday offer - even Kuoni came up with one. He also wanted to know: «Is there a proof of God's existence?» And a member of an association of highly gifted people from Cambridge sent him such a short but clear answer that this matter now is closed for Kaufmann. Further, a mother

who did not know the answer to her little daughter's question contacted Starmind: How many leaves does a tree have? At the other end of the spectrum a private bank asked for an expansive sales strategy and received - mainly from HSG students - numerous solutions that have been successfully translated into practice. Do question solvers not feel underpaid? «Such a solution is the best letter of application», Kaufmann states, «and there is no use in keeping my knowledge to myself.» Currently almost 200 questions are waiting to be answered, with more than several thousand potential question solvers at the other end of the line. Kaufmann's aim is exponential growth. And before the end of the year, he wants to know the answer to his crucial question: «Is my idea profitable?»

[www.starmind.com](http://www.starmind.com)

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«Is my idea profitable?»: Monika Seps and Pascal Kaufmann at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in Oerlikon.

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