MapQuest Founder Joins Tech Launch Arizona

Tech Launch Arizona
September 2019

One of the founders of MapQuest, the web's first commercial mapping service, is the newest member of the Tech Launch Arizona [1] team.

Barry J. Glick [2], who earned his doctorate in geography from the State University of New York at Buffalo, founded a software startup company in 1988 to apply locational data and map visualization to address needs in business and government. He developed a strategic partnership with R.R. Donnelley & Sons Co. in Chicago to address the challenge of generating maps and routes on-demand for customers. After an investment from Donnelley and merging his business with an internal mapping group, he led the resulting spinout, GeoSystems Global Corp., raised venture capital funding, and positioned his company to bring MapQuest to the internet for consumer use.

In early 1999, the company went public. In December of that same year, AOL announced that it would acquire MapQuest for $1.1 billion. The transaction was completed in 2000.

Since then, Glick has successfully founded, grown and exited a number of software and data-focused startups. Now, he is dedicating the next phase of his career to helping UA-born startups chart their best routes to success.

In this Q&A, Glick talks about his decision to join TLA as a software mentor-in-residence.

What drew you to technology commercialization at the University of Arizona?

I really do enjoy helping get ideas realized into actual successful businesses that can make a difference in the market and the world. To me that's the most exciting thing you can be involved in. I've been doing that on my own informally with companies I've been helping, and it just seemed like with everything going on at the UA, this was the ideal place to get involved. It was a great fit. I still have a little bit of a hankering for running a business myself, which is what I'm used to doing, but I'm really excited about helping entrepreneurs.

What excites you most about working with early-stage software startups?

Number one, I love putting together a team to take things forward. I love everything related to taking an idea and translating it into a product, a marketable solution that people will want to use. Figuring out who to work with and bringing in all the practical kinds of things that I've learned over many years that help in that journey. That's what gets me excited. I love product, I love marketing, I love team building, and even some of the financial, the more blocking and tackling of stuff. Not so much the bureaucratic stuff; that's a necessary evil.

A really fun challenge is getting people to focus and impose discipline on their thinking. Since I started here, I've already had a few meetings with inventors. They're full of great ideas and their minds are brimming, so it's great getting that honed down to what we're really going to do
and for what kind of customer.

If you had one piece of advice to give to an entrepreneurial software developer, what would you say?

It's a fairly easy question. It's been repeated in every meeting: Keep asking yourself what is the problem you're solving with this. Software is very amorphous, unlike equipment or hardware or even biological materials like cell lines. You can make software do whatever you want it to do, so it's important to know and stay focused on the end goal. At the end of the day, what are you trying to build? It's like designing and building a house, starting with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. It can be big, small, high, rambling. What are your materials? What are your constraints? Who are you building it for? All that needs to be baked in from the beginning.

What attributes make for a great software entrepreneur?

It's important to have all the practical answers but having a vision that thinks way outside the box is key. A great entrepreneur takes a creative approach to a problem. In software, a lot of the easy, low-hanging fruit is automating something that's not automated, like a process. You can have successful startups that do that, but the person who looks at the problem and ignores today's solutions to consider a totally new approach is the one who is going to be a breakout success.

A version of this article originally appeared on the Tech Launch Arizona website.

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