



Stanford eCorner

An Entrepreneur's Take on the Non-Profit

Jeff Hawkins, *Numenta*

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Launching a non-profit organization is just as much work as starting a for-profit business, says Numenta Founder Jeff Hawkins. Many of the issues and struggles of leadership are the same, including concerns about funding, building, mission statements, staffing, etc. Hawkins recalls that the Redwood Neuroscience Institute, focused on neocortical theory in the field of neuroscience, was so successful that they were forced to think of their next steps after just three years in operation. A friend showed him how to plot the institute's theories into mathematical planning software, and Numenta, a for-profit entity, was born.



Transcript

Let me tell you, starting a non-profit is just as much work as starting a for profit business. You got all the same issues. You got money issues. You got building issues. You got people issues. You got mission issues. You get all the same stuff going on. What we did, we started the Redwood Neuroscience Institute, which is a very unusual institute. It was a single task institute that focuses on neocortical theory. We have 10 people working there.

I ran it for three years. 10 people working there and now three years we have 120 visitors from around the world. It got to be a hot place. It got to be at a point where neuroscientists around the world were saying how come I haven't been invited yet to RNI? And we actually had a lot of success there. It was very unusual the way we ran it but ran it sort of a combination of corporate and science. So the sciences could do whatever they want but I put some sort of structure around it where everyone had to go to join a club and everyone had to do this, and we will pick topics to study collectively and so on. Anyway, we worked on neocortical theory and we made a lot of progress on that. What happened was eventually we had so much ahead what to do next. And what happened was a friend of mine, one of my colleagues, Dileep George, he was at the time a graduate student at Stanford. He was hanging around RNI and he basically was following these theories and read a copy of my book and he basically figured out how to take these biological theories and turn them into a mathematical formulation and show that we can make software.

And so Dileep basically said I've been talking about this for so many years and he showed me how to do it. And I was like, what do you want to do? He said, "I'd like to start a company on this thing." "Oh great, another company. It's a lot of work starting a company. Are you sure you want to do that?" He said, "Yeah." At this point I couldn't back out because I've been talking about this for 25 years and I said we're going to do this and now we're doing it I can't say no, and I do really want to do it. But it's not like "Oh wonderful, let's go start another company!" It's like "Oh, it's a lot of work."