

POLAND'S TOP 500 INNOVATORS



The [Top 500 Innovators Program](#) was launched in 2011; by the program's end in 2015, 500 of Poland's brightest young scientists will have completed two month programs at top U.S. universities. The 2012 edition sent Poles to UC Berkeley and Stanford University in California. We spoke with an academic director, an administrator and a participant to learn more. The Embassy facilitated the program set up at both universities, and these interviews were made possible thanks to an Embassy delegation visit to Silicon Valley during the program.

PIOTR MONCARZ is a consulting professor at Stanford University. He holds a PhD in Civil Engineering from Stanford, and works as an engineer at Exponent. He is the Academic Director of Stanford University's Top 500 Innovators program.

What's the Top 500 Program?
The Top 500 Program was created by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education to bring skills to Polish scientists, academics and people involved in technology transfer – skills that make the transfer of intellectual achievement of Polish universities to industry easier. We know that Poland has excellent science and academic programs, however, very little of it trickles to the Polish economy. The program selects applicants who are mostly PhD, post-doc assistant, associate professor level, and people who work in technology transfer offices at universities. Teams of 40 [go] to leading universities in the world for professional development.

They learn designed thinking, intellectual property management and protection, marketing skills, and not just how to speak smoother and more elegantly but also how to prepare yourself for that speech –

what market study you should do before you consider taking your idea into a product effort.

Does the program also teach the participants how to have innovative ideas and bring them to life?

They are from schools of medicine, engineering, electronics, mining, environment. We cannot teach them how to have ideas in their areas of specialty, but we can teach them how to evaluate the idea, whether it is ripe for implementation in the commercial world.

There's one more very important aspect: teamwork and team building. When they come for nine weeks with us, we really work hard to make a group of 40 people on the same team. The ultimate goal is, of course, when the Ministry is done with the Top 500 program we are going to have in Poland a team of 500.

Has the program changed over time?

We learn with them, there is no doubt. We know for instance that what they really need is a maximum of workshop environments. They need to come back to Poland and implement – they didn't come here to get a certificate, they came to get tools they can immediately use.

MOLLY NAGLER is the Director of Strategic Alliances at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business.

How would you rate this program with similar projects?

This is the most complex and longest program we've ever done. The Top 500 is part of our customized portfolio, where we work with specific organizations and design something for them. The customized programs certainly can be longer than five days, [but] any given module is never longer than ten days. This is definitely a complex and exciting and high-profile and long program.

How would you rate the participants, their knowledge and skills, and their involvement and interest levels?

They're definitely on the high end in terms of interest, and expertise in their field. They're a joy to work with; they're articulate, they're ambitious, and they have boundless energy. They're very good natured and happy to be here. They certainly are learning a lot about the American way of doing business, and how informal things can be here, especially in California. Risk-taking has been a big learning curve for them, and

celebrating failure. That's where I've seen the biggest improvement in their skills, and recognizing the importance of the ingredients of innovation, and thinking about how they can take this back to Poland.

What's the most rewarding part of this program?

For us, it was seeing the participants blossom over the nine weeks, and enjoy themselves. We're in the business of changing lives and delighting customers. And I feel like we were able to do that, where people learned a new way of life and expanded their idea of what's possible in the world. I hope that their lives will change when they go to Poland and moving forward. And that's the next big question for everyone: What's next?

LUKASZ KUTRZEBA works for the Jagiellonian Center of Innovation in Kraków, Poland. He holds a double Master's in Biology and Environmental Biology, and a PhD in Political Science. He completed the Top 500 program at UC Berkeley on Dec. 14, 2012.

What was your favorite part of the Top 500 program?

I learned that a personal network based on relationship and trust is absolutely crucial. You can collaborate, you gain an ability to listen to people, you develop sharpness in starting innovation.

How do you plan to take what you learned in California and apply it to what you do in Poland?

An important part for JCI is to become more collaborative on a national level, more recognized through building that network, and my personal goal – to reach out to more people, to be more present at the universities. To preach, I would say, to young scientists and young entrepreneurs that we are all valuable. We are able to contribute to global change. I know that as Poles we have great potential, we need to trust each other and believe in ourselves. I'm pretty positive that change begun some time ago, esp. in the younger generation, will continue and become more and more present in the scheme of innovation.

What did you learn knowledge and skill-wise in the commercialization of development?

We don't have to be ashamed that we are not innovative – because as Poles, we are innovative. What we need to change in our mindset as Poles is a global perspective. We tend to think about our Polish market, our customers. Thinking on

a global scale and that we can really contribute change to the global society is something that we need to realize. We are capable. We have a lot of bright, intelligent people in Poland.

Today is your last day at Berkeley, right?

Yes. We are doing our group presentations today. We were assigned projects by the Ministry. My project was on leadership. Can you shape leaders in Poland? That was quite exciting – whether there's any difference in the U.S. and Poland, and a bigger question is, are leaders born or are they made? We came to the conclusion that leaders can be made, can be shaped. Lots of different mechanisms, but in general it happens through personal development or development with the help of others – coaching, classes. If you have a good background in terms of starting early, making decisions, being visionary, being goal-oriented, then you can build on that. Leadership is a constant learning process.

What about people without good backgrounds, can they still be leaders?

Yes. For some people, certain knowledge or skills come easier, and some people need to put more work into it. For some, learning math is a piece of cake. The same is with leadership – you may have some basics to build upon, and some people build these basics themselves. It all comes down to motivation. Like we discussed in groups, oftentimes leaders appear in times of crisis. If you have hard times to go through, and you want to contribute to change, or have significant input into your community, that's when leaders appear.

What about motivation – can that be taught? Decades of communism in Poland wiped out the notion of motivation – can that be re-taught?

We came to this same conclusion, that communism wiped out leaders, because being a leader was very badly received and it was punished. People can be motivated through coaching; coaching meaning shaping / helping someone to develop themselves. Motivation comes with inspiration – leaders motivate others by giving them examples.

– Justine Jablonska, the Embassy's Press Advisor, conducted the interviews.

PHOTOS

1. 2012 Top 500 at Stanford
2. 2012 Top 500 at Berkeley