

Julia Wache



It is estimated that there are over 30 million blind and partially sighted people in Europe, with 90% of these over 65 years of age. With roughly 1 in 3 older people affected, and the population of Europe ageing, the challenge is clearly significant. As Northumbria University's Lynn McInnes explains, 'the more physically active a person is, the greater their likelihood of ageing successfully becomes.'

It is into this space that 2017 EIT CHANGE Award nominee Julia Wache has emerged. Julia's company, feelSpace, created in 2015, was also a family affair: Julia teamed up with sister Susan and two of her colleagues from the University of Osnabrück to create a tactile belt to help the visually impaired orient themselves, and therefore retain a healthy and independent lifestyle.

Their story began when Julia enrolled on a PhD programme in the Italian city of Trento that worked with the EIT to provide entrepreneurship training alongside the ICT focus of the programme.

'In this programme, you learn some basics of entrepreneurship, and you have a chance to look outside of your research bubble,' Wache explains. 'It's an environment where I could learn all of the key aspects of becoming an entrepreneur without any major risk.'

At the end of the PhD programme, participants are given funding and support from the EIT to help turn their knowledge and expertise into a start-up. Concurrently, Susan and the two other founding members of feelSpace were studying in the Cognitive Science PhD programme at the University of Osnabrück where they focused on examining the impact of vibrating compass belts on the sensory experience of the wearer. The idea for feelSpace came about, and the team worked to turn their knowledge into a business.



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Finding the way

The technology, which is primarily sold in Germany so far, consists of a belt fitted with 16 vibration units designed to provide vibrational feedback to the wearer and help them understand the direction they're going in. Together with the feelSpace app, users insert a location they wish to reach and receive tactile signals to help them get there safely. Additionally, feelSpace provides an API to allow connectivity with other specialised apps.

The belt is not designed to replace existing visual aids, such as the cane or guide dog, but rather to supplement them by providing vibrational support to help each user orient themselves more easily and efficiently. The response from the market has been extremely positive.

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'Users really like it and use it in conjunction with their cane or guide dog to try and explore new places or new routes to popular destinations,' Wache says. 'As a blind person, you often count the number of steps to particular points in your journey. With the belt, you can relax your mind, as the belt takes care of it.'

As well as the educational foundation provided by the EIT, feelSpace benefited from funding after they won the EIT HeadStart competition in 2018, which secured them EUR 50 000 in prize money to grow the business. This investment has helped to develop the product and invest in business development to grow the customer base.

Building the network

The pan-continental ecosystem provided by the EIT has also provided invaluable insight into the importance of networks to the success of any start-up, with feelSpace developing a number of vital connections via the various EIT Community events.

'One of the most important things as a start-up is that you're connected and have a network,' Wache explains. 'You have to be able to ask for help and be willing to accept it. Being an entrepreneur is not just about having an idea but having people you're willing to work with.'

This is particularly important in healthcare, where each country has a unique provider and reimbursement framework that can take time and effort to both understand and penetrate. Such support is vital if Europe is to develop start-ups to match those in other innovation hotspots around the world.

'For Europe to be an innovative and flexible business location, it is important to support start-ups, because they represent the future,' Wache adds. 'To help them thrive, the EU should invest in funding and create network opportunities so that new entrepreneurs can easily connect with important players in their markets.'



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Innovation Community:
EIT Digital