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PARADOXES OF SUCCESS

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Universities making use of science parks

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Paradoxes of Success

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Success always has lot of fathers. This we know from experience and looking at the world around us.

It is even truer where innovation and technological development are concerned.

In order to be successful, innovation needs disruption. Very often, disruption is not politically correct.

On the other hand, universal recognition is not good either as it indicates a lack of innovation, a lack of disruption.

How to deal with it? How to keep a successful project still innovative and creative going forward?

That is the challenge that Sophia Antipolis today is meeting and conquering.

To recall, Sophia Antipolis, based in southern France on the Cote d'Azur near Nice is the first and largest Science and Technology Park in Europe. Launched 43 years ago by Senator Pierre Laffitte, today more than 30 000 Sophipolitans (high-skilled "knowledge" workers) populate the Park across 1400 entities comprising large enterprises, startups and public/private research centers.
More than €5.8 Billion annual turnover is generated by the High Tech sector in the "Alpes-Maritimes" Department of which €3.5 Billion in Sophia Antipolis alone. This compares favorably against the Tourism Industry of the entire Cote d'Azur which generates €5 billion annually today, but which 40 years ago was the only industry in the region.

Let's review quickly the ten paradoxes of success of this pioneering, innovative project and how it not only became "number one" but is staying "number one":

Paradox number 1 – The Element of Time

Today, everywhere there is a pressure to get immediate results.
Sophia Antipolis, a forty-year old experiment started from scratch, delivered its first result five years after the first investments. So you need to be patient and as we say in French "donner du temps au temps" (Give time to time).

Paradox number 2 - Thinking out of the Box

How to integrate innovation in a project that day by day continues to give more and more positive economic results? How to reconcile the short-term results against the future considerations to continually innovate and be creative? Criteria for measuring success needs to be identified very carefully and not at the expense of the integration of new ideas and new blood.

Paradox number 3 - Innovative projects are like Computers

The hardware is the visible part. Hardware is easy to understand, to touch, get started. But a computer does not work without software. And software, an immaterial investment is less easy to recognize and invisible by its very essence.

Paradox number 4 - Small is Beautiful too

The first tenants of Sophia Antipolis were big companies, e.g. L'Oreal, Searle, Dow Chemical, Amadeus, and well-known public research institutes, such as the CNRS (Centre Nationale de Recherche et Science). At the beginning, Sophia Antipolis was only pine trees and rabbits. Everything had to be created and the large companies and publicly financed research institutes were those who had the money and could come and help create the base for Sophia Antipolis to grow.
Two decades later, those tenants gave way to medium and small companies from which came new jobs. Today, we are now seeing the third generation of companies, "Start-Ups". Some of them die, some of them boom, some of them just live. "C'est la vie". It is the successful combination of the large, medium and small companies coupled with the public and private research institutes – the Cross Fertilization – that defines Sophia Antipolis' unique character and success today.

Paradox number 5 – Local/Global

If Sophia Antipolis at the very beginning was a kind of UFO for the local people, now the community has integrated completely the phenomenon and is proud of it.

Yet, even with a difficult name to impose at the beginning, Sophia Antipolis is much better known abroad in Silicon Valley, Russia and China than in France.

This international recognition of the Sophia Antipolis "brand" represents tremendous added value. Indeed, it became the flagship of all Science and Technology Parks throughout the world when Pierre Laffitte started the International Association of Science Parks in 1984, thus giving way to a truly international network around the world, iasp.ws/fr.

Paradox number 6 - Leadership

The Sophia Antipolis experience demonstrates the importance of Leadership, "Volens nolens".

Without Pierre LAFFITTE, the true father of Sophia Antipolis, the five thousand acres of Sophia Antipolis, would be covered today with Club Mediterranée, touristic resorts, golf courts, etc. For when LAFFITTE started Sophia Antipolis, tourism was the number one industry in the region, not as it is today high-tech and knowledge-based industries.

Vision, Charisma and Credibility are key factors at the beginning of any project. Going forward, it is always necessary to have the keeper of the flame to keep true to the vision and ambition of the initial idea. Senator Pierre Laffitte still carries that flame at the wise age of 88, all the while inspiring others.

Many people have contributed to the Sophia Antipolis success and projects like these need social and political cohesion behind their champion.

Paradox number 7 - Criteria of Success

Each project has to review its results and impact on its environment. Sophia Antipolis has delivered amazing results. With its 1 400 entities and more than 30 000 high-skilled workers, 900 jobs have been created on average per year during the last decade. In addition 148 companies with foreign capital represent 11% of the businesses and 25% of the jobs. 70 nationalities inhabit the park with 4 000 researchers in the public sector and 5 000 students.

All of this can be and has been evaluated in figures: acres of land sold, square meters build, number of tenants, investments, jobs creation, etc.
But this evaluation should also be qualitative: creativity, new patents, start-ups and their life expectancy, social and cultural innovation. How are these new ventures changing the value skill of a given community, i.e., social implication, non-profit associations, cultural and social adhesion, Business Angels, etc.

Paradox number 8 – Anti/Polis

The Greek word “Anti/Polis” may sometimes be seen as an “anti-city” with a strong commitment to the environment.

Usually, when politicians want to plan the future, they ask urban planners and architects for a master plan. But it is dangerous to put any kind of master plan on the skill board without defining from the start the most difficult part -- the content.
From the start, Sophia Antipolis was very pragmatic – building one step at a time and instilling and defending basic values of cross fertilization, quality of life, entrepreneurship, development and the respect of nature and the universe.

Paradox number 9 - No Specialization

One of the main concepts and strengths of Sophia Antipolis is and always has been its diversity. When Sophia Antipolis was first started, there was no Internet. Today, a strong presence of IT elements in university sectors, research and companies co-inhabit the park with other sectors like pharmacology and biotechnology. Situations change and innovation often appears at the intersection of different specialties. Thus diversity is key to innovation.

Paradox number 10 Networks

The most important asset of Sophia Antipolis is its international "network of networks" consolidated by numerous companies, organizations, associations and countries around the world-- all feeling part of the project.

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Three years ago, a Russian delegation came to visit Sophia Antipolis to try and understand some lessons for developing similar innovation projects in Russia. We took time to explain them the story but at the end we concluded, "Forget everything we have told you and now go and do your own thing!" For while success may have many fathers, there is no recipe for success --only people and talent will make the difference.

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