

Melanie Kovacs

Cofounder / Master21

Lots of entrepreneurs create companies to fill gaps they've experienced themselves. Melanie Kovacs is a perfect example: when she couldn't find enough female entrepreneurs to fill a startup weekend, she started the Aspire association to foster diversity in the tech and entrepreneurial space. And after becoming frustrated with the classes she'd taken, she founded her current company, Master21, to make programming education more hands-on.

How did you initially get involved in the entrepreneurial community?

I was interested in entrepreneurship from university on. I participated in a Startup Weekend with a business idea, and afterwards my friend asked me, "Hey, should we pursue this business idea after graduation instead of applying for jobs?" I was skeptical at first, but then I thought, "Why not?" I saw it as a learning opportunity.

So right after the startup weekend in 2013, we started our first company. We didn't register it as a company; it was just a project we worked on in an accelerator. Then I got into organizing startup weekends, and I noticed there was a lack of women taking the stage in Switzerland. There were women participating as attendees but not many who were confidently pitching their ideas. We didn't know a lot of female entrepreneurs we could invite as mentors or judges. That's why I cofounded the Aspire association to foster female entrepreneurship. We did an exhibition where we portrayed twenty-seven female entrepreneurs in Switzerland, and afterwards we did a mentoring program for aspiring female entrepreneurs where we connected them with established entrepreneurs as mentors.



But after that, you spent some time working for an established company. What prompted the change?

After doing many different passion projects that didn't pay my rent, I wanted to have a full-time job in a cool company, so it came in handy that one of the entrepreneurs we interviewed offered me a job in a digital agency called Ginetta. Ginetta is self-managed and offers a lot of chances to work entrepreneurially.

That's how I got into the digital agency business, and then one activity just led to the other. I never planned to work in a digital agency, but I'm glad I received this opportunity. That's where the idea for Master21 was born. All of a sudden, I was around developers, but I had a business background so I had no idea about computers and coding and so forth, and I wanted to learn more. So I signed up for a part-time course at university. The class was super theoretical and instructor-led, just eight hours of typing whatever the instructor was teaching, and the professor had spent all his life in academia. It was not the best learning experience.

I thought it was a really important subject and I was really motivated in the beginning, but in the end, all my colleagues were saying, "Computer science, programming, that's not for me; I'm too stupid," because they couldn't get into it that way or they thought it wasn't fun.

I don't think everybody needs to become a programmer nowadays, but it helps to have a certain understanding of computational thinking. That's how the idea of Master21 was born. We wanted to teach these critical twenty-first-century skills in a more hands-on way with teachers who were actually working in the industry and who had relevant experience.

You've done a lot of work to promote diversity in tech. Why do you think there's not enough diversity in tech?

It's a tough question. There are two different aspects. One aspect is that women in tech and female entrepreneurs in general are missing role models. What you can't see, you can't be. It's a famous saying, but I think it's true. At around age four, kids start to correlate careers with gender. And if they don't see women entrepreneurs or programmers, they think they don't belong.

Once girls and women are attracted to tech, the "how to learn" aspect is important. In terms of learning, there aren't a lot of options in Switzerland at the moment. Either you study computer science at university, which takes three years, or you do an apprenticeship.

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But with both options, you don't program a lot. It's primarily the theoretical computer science part. People don't really learn programming languages. Most people learn to program by themselves. You can do an online course, but as a lot of studies show, there's a high dropout rate. So there are not many options for how to learn: it's either at a university, which is super theoretical; or online, which requires a lot of patience and discipline.

Everyone who wants to do a programming boot camp at Master21 tells me that they've tried to learn programming online and it didn't work for them. It's the same as doing sports: if you get a gym membership, you pay and commit and get to know the people and have a regular schedule. It's social and there's a structure, so it's easier to keep up. With an online course, you're by yourself, and if you encounter a problem you can find the answer online but it might take forever.

How did Master21 grow after you founded it?

I started it in 2016 when I was still employed at Ginetta. I kept talking about this idea in my head until my boyfriend gave me a kick in the ass. He said, "Let's build a website and take it live and see if people are actually interested." I guess I was kind of annoying him! So we took the website live in August 2016 and did the first boot camp in October. We offered two different programs and did pilots of both. We wanted to put one course out there, get the feedback, improve it, and go from there. And that's pretty much what we did for all of 2017. For all the courses we offer, we improved along the way all the time. We'll keep doing it that way. It's essential to keep getting feedback from attendees and to continuously improve.

What's been the hardest part so far?

Really just starting. That was the hardest part. The other hard part is that there are endless possibilities. Nowadays you can do anything but you can't do everything at once, so you have to decide where you want to go and really focus on that. You have to be clear on what you want to do, and that's not always so easy. A lot of people approach you, and you have this opportunity and that partnership, but you have only limited time and energy. Focusing is always a struggle.

Have you seen diversity improving?

Yeah, it's great. In our courses, about 70 percent of our students so far have been women, even though we only did one program so far that was exclusively for women. In the beginning, we didn't intentionally focus on that; we just kind of attracted a lot of women. I don't know why. It could be because I'm the head of it and I'm well connected in these networks. It could also be just because it's a time when a lot of women want to do something and are ambitious – they want to learn and grow.

What advice would you give to people getting into tech or founding their own companies?

Just start. For me at least, if you overthink it too much, you see more and more obstacles, and people will try to talk you out of it. The goal seems higher and higher and harder and harder to reach. But if you start, you get these little “yay” moments – these small successes – and you build confidence along the way. You can grow and continue that way. It’s impossible to foresee everything at the beginning, but once you’re on the way, you see lots of opportunities that you didn’t see before.

But maybe start small. For example, I hear a lot of people say, “I want to open a restaurant,” and I think, “Why not have a pop-up shop or a food stand or something to experiment with first and see if you like it?” In the end, you’ll invest a lot of time into this, so you need to like this kind of business. It should suit your strengths and interests. Start small and experiment. That’s what I did with the first company I started right after business school, and with the Aspire association. I didn’t know what to do after business school, so I worked on different projects, and as a result I got to know a lot of people and learned a lot. In the end, I decided I wanted to work in a small company and do something with communication and working with clients. The job offer in the agency suited me really well.

How is Zürich as a place to found a company?

It’s a great place. I see a lot of potential in Zürich. It’s always a bit slower than other cities, but there are a lot of people with potential, a lot of ideas. And I love working at Impact Hub; it’s an important part of the ecosystem. It’s a great community and it has supported us from the start.

[About] **Master21** wants people to thrive in the twenty-first century. To achieve this, Master21 creates transformative learning experiences where people learn skills like coding, critical thinking and creativity.



What are your top work essentials?

A quiet space, a Kanban board, and lots of Post-its. And obviously my MacBook.

At what age did you found your company?

I founded Aspire at twenty-five, and Master21 at twenty-eight.

What's your most used app?

Things and Basecamp

What's the most valuable piece of advice you've been given?

None – I prefer to think for myself.

What's your greatest skill?

Connecting the dots – connecting people and topics.

