

The Media Lab Europe research and innovation facility has its fingers in projects ranging from digital mirrors to gesture-controlled PDAs. **Keri Allan** talks to managing director **Simon Jones**

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TRANSATLANTIC CORRIDOR

Simon Jones joined the Dublin-based Media Lab Europe in the summer of 2003 as managing director. He came from an academic background, working his way up the ladder from research lecturer at the University of Wales, Bangor in 1986 to dean of engineering and design at the University of Bath in 2002.

"I was approached by MIT," says Jones. "They had a mid-term strategic review and decided that the role of the organisation would be a research and innovation centre rather than something purely spinning off companies into venture capital. They wanted somebody who had a background in academia and yet had still worked with a significant number of organisations in the high-tech sector. I fell into that category and when MIT knock on your door and ask to speak to you, you open the door and let them in."

The European arm of MIT's Boston Media Lab was established in 2000 when the organisation decided it wanted to increase its impact in the European and Asian sectors and take advantage of a more multinational perspective. A not-for-profit company, MLE has kept strong ties with the Boston Lab in part by having three directors from MIT on board, plus the use of its own invention – social video-conferencing.

"There is certainly a lot of cooperation between the labs; there isn't a week that goes by where there isn't someone from MIT over or vice versa," Jones explains, "and we have our own 24-hour social video-conferencing, which is basically windows into rooms at MIT. They're on all the time and have been for the three years the organisation has been going, so you can look in as you're passing with a coffee and say hello to someone, just like you're walking down their corridor."

MLE is very different from most research outfits, with a very unique way of working and end result. For a start Jones likes to highlight that it is a research and innovation lab, and not a research and development facility. It focuses on the high-risk speculative work, the 10-to-one or 20-to-one chances, looking for the potential that there might be.

The funding mechanism is a subscription model where companies – or 'partners' as they become known if they sign on – pay a minimum of €300,000 a year for unlimited non-exclusive access to all the intellectual property that comes from the Lab. "The proposition is," says Jones, "how do you watch out for ideas that might disrupt your business without spending an

awful lot of money on long-term, high-risk research? The answer is you pool that risk by sharing with other people and you rely on your own capacity to take that technology and run with it faster than the competition. It's not a standard proposition and undoubtedly some companies have problems coming to terms with it, or think it's the wrong model, but others don't."

One of the characteristics of the MLE model is that it doesn't do any kind of directive research. In fact, Jones says that, if people come to them knowing what they want to do, then the MLE is the wrong place to turn to. "We're actually the people you should come to if you're not sure what to do," he says.

MLE's current partners include BT, Ericsson, Orange, AOL and Intel; big technology names. Less familiar are companies such as Essilor, a French business that manufactures spectacle lenses. There are also public sector agencies, such as the Highlands and Islands Development Agency, that come on board looking for a way to use innovation as a means for accelerating the growth of their small and medium-sized enterprise base.

Looking forward, Jones is certain that the business model of pool subscriptions for collaborative research is there to stay at the Lab although, undoubtedly, as EU and other money comes in, that will also be an element of its funding. "Our main goal is to continue to produce ideas that delight, surprise and astound our partners. The demo culture will also definitely stay – I'm convinced that's an absolutely essential thing," says Jones. "And we want to be seen as one of the premier laboratories in Europe for research and innovation – and it's the innovation bit, I think, that's crucial." ■

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