Advertising feature

The innovation experts

If you are a young innovator hoping to change the world, Leave a Nest offers grants, funding opportunities and links to a seasoned network of experts and entrepreneurs

Leave a Nest

It started with a paper cup. That was the only prop Atsushi Shimizu used to pitch his idea for an unusual, cylinder-based wind turbine that, unlike other wind turbines, can not only withstand hurricanes but run on them. Two years later, Shimizu's company, Challenergy, has installed the first 3-metre-tall prototype on the Japanese island of Okinawa, which experiences hurricanes every year.

The speedy progress from paper cup to working wind turbine couldn't have happened without Leave a Nest – a Japanese company that supports innovators with ideas that could change the future. "We believe in the advancement of science and technology for global happiness," says Shohei Michael Maekawa, president of Leave a Nest UK.

Now, Leave a Nest is offering the same opportunity to innovators in the UK. Young scientists and engineers with big ideas are invited to pitch, develop and grow those ideas with the company, which offers funding, networking and support.

Leave a Nest was founded in 2002 as the brainchild of 15 Japanese graduate students. At the time, the group wanted to connect children with adult scientists – people who might inspire them to prepare for a career in science. The team launched a "Science Bridge Communicator" scheme to train young researchers to deliver science workshops to schoolchildren and so equip the next generation with the skills and understanding to make sense of science. Since launching, they have reached over 90,000 children this way. The company also publishes a series of publications for teachers, middle and high-school students, graduate students and adult researchers in Japan and the rest of the world.

Fourteen years later, with a staff of 60, Leave a Nest has built another successful side to its business – nurturing fledgling innovations at any stage of their development towards commercial success. The company focuses on "real tech" – technology that requires physical development such as biotech, agritech and robotics rather than software-related technology such as e-commerce or game development. It then works with "super factories" in Japan to create physical products.

Would-be entrepreneurs need only the earliest shoots of an idea, says Maekawa. If it's a potentially world-changing one, Leave a Nest will help them create business models, brush up their presentations and connect them with big companies and super factories that can offer additional advice and funding.

To this end, Leave a Nest has partnered with over 300 Japanese companies, along with universities and government bodies. The result is a vast network of knowledge for new start-ups to tap into. This is how Challenergy and many other companies found their feet. With help from Leave a Nest, they were able to attract investment from large Japanese firms, as well as the Japanese government.

Leave a Nest's philosophy is based on a unique entrepreneurial cycle. First, it identifies important Questions and addresses them with Passion, as a Mission and with Innovation: the company calls this its "QPMI cycle". It is also able to draw on a wide range of expertise it has built up over many years to create a "knowledge-based platform" that is a key element of Leave a Nest's success.

Challenergy, a start-up backed by Leave a Nest, is harvesting energy from hurricanes

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Take Shimizu, for example, whose driving question was how to find an alternative energy source for Japan. Conventional wind turbines cannot cope with hurricanes, partly because they are unable to adapt to rapid changes in wind direction. Shimizu's design is based on cylinders rather than blades, and can respond to unpredictable wind patterns. "Shimizu didn't have any team members, or a prototype, when he pitched his design," says Maekawa. "It was his passion that won the judges over."

Leave a Nest helped Shimizu develop a mission – one that involved recruiting other like-minded people with various skill sets to work with him to develop his idea. As funding came in, the team worked on innovative ways to develop their concept with super factories, first as a 1-metre prototype, and then as a 3-metre device – the latest version that has just been installed on location in Okinawa. The turbine has already begun to generate energy for the island.

Shimizu was the winner of Leave a Nest's first TECH PLANTER competition, which Maekawa describes as a "seed accelerator programme". As well as funding and networking, winners are trained in how to present their ideas and attract support and new team members. "The aim is to create a real tech ecosystem," says Maekawa.

Other previous winners include a team from India that designed a device to diagnose typhoid disease using tiny magnetic beads, and a group from Thailand exploring the use of gold nanoparticles in wound healing.