



Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

ETH Zurich - Department of Computer Science - News & Events - Spotlight - Battle of the Brains

Battle of the Brains

Two computer science students in the ETH winning team

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From June 8 to June 10 2006, the University of St. Gallen (HSG) and ETH *competed against each other in the fifth edition of the traditional case study contest „The Battle of the Brains“ in Ebnat-Kappel (Canton of St. Gallen). The event is organized by the Swiss business magazine Bilanz and the consulting firm Monitor Group. The battle was won by one of the two ETH teams with the participation of Nikhil Bakshi and Michael Breitenstein of the Department of Computer Science. An interview with third-year CS student Nikhil Bakshi.*

How did you learn about "Battle of the Brains"?

I had seen several posters announcing the competition at ETH but I didn't really know what it was all about. I thought it was an event aimed at business students rather than engineers. However, when I visited the booth of the "Battle of the Brains" co-organizer Monitor Group at this year's "Polyparty", I was told that computer science students could participate as well, the actual aim being to bring together students of different departments. I handed in my resume and a letter of motivation and was told one week before the competition that I had been selected!



Nikhil Bakshi

How were the teams composed and who were your team members?

There were two HSG teams and ETH teams, respectively, of five members each. The participants of HSG who study business and related subjects all knew each other while those of the ETH teams met for the first time. Apart from me, there was a second member of the Department of Computer Science, Michael Breitenstein, who just finished his studies and will start his dissertation at the Computer Vision Lab of the Department of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering in the fall. The other members of our group were students of physics, electrical engineering and mechanical engineering. Actually, we were quite a diverse crowd!



Michael Breitenstein

What was the case study you had to solve about?

When we arrived on Thursday evening, we received two reports written in English about Google but were not given a concrete task. The texts were full of business terms, therefore we studied until 2 am! Fortunately, our team coach was present and gave us some good advice. The next day, we were given the task to develop a medium-term business strategy for Google for the next one to three years. The question was actually quite general. In addition, we received a thick folder with information about Google and a laptop with internet access. Then we set to work to come up with a concept by the end of the day.

How did your team approach the task?

We found out quickly what Google's problem was. In our opinion, the company focuses too much on online advertisements which actually is almost their only source of revenue. To determine how Google should proceed in the future to obtain other sources of income, we did a brainstorming and came up with about 15 different ideas. However, all in all we were a little unmotivated at that point because we had the impression that the HSG teams knew much more about strategy management than we did. After lunch our coach came and told us that we would have to speed up a little and decide which ideas we wanted to present. That admonition really woke us up, and from that moment on things went much more smoothly.

Which ideas did you eventually decide to present?

Actually, the deadline to hand in our ideas on paper to the Monitor office, which was supposed to turn them into a PowerPoint presentation, was 7 pm. However, at that time our concept still had some significant gaps. Our coach advised us to present several ideas, and after some back-and-forth two ideas crystallized. The first was to develop an „online office package“ to compete with Microsoft Office. The second idea was about a Google browser for mobile phones.

How did the presentation go?

After a more or less sleepless night I held the presentation with one of the other team members. We presented in English because we thought that would suit a global player like Google better. We were a little nervous, especially because the jury consisted of eight renowned CEOs of Swiss companies and university professors. Fortunately, we were the last group to present our concept, so we had a little time to practice in the morning. The presentation went quite well and I think we had the right answers to the critical questions of the jury members. Nevertheless, we did not think at all that our team would win the competition. That was really a big surprise!

ETH has won the "Battle of the Brains" four times out of five. Do you have any idea why?

I think the biggest advantage of our team was that two of us study computer science. We were therefore able to judge what kind of suggestions would be realistic and feasible for an IT company like Google. If the task had been to find a solution for a bank we would probably not have been as successful. All in all, I had the impression that what counted most in the competition was the idea and not necessarily all the details behind it. What also plays a role in my opinion is that the members of the ETH teams have different majors and backgrounds which leaves much more room for imagination and creativity.

Did you win a prize?

Our winning team got a huge bottle of champagne, and each of the team members a digital camera. As far as I know, the other teams also received a reward.

Was "Battle of the Brains" a good experience for you?

It was very exciting to collaborate in a group because every time the rest of the team were lacking ideas and motivation, one of us took the lead and managed to carry the others along. Moreover, it was interesting to see how a potential employer like the Monitor Group is organized and to have the chance to talk to the other teams.

However, something that needed getting used to was the picture session in the end during which we had to wear the suit we had worn during the presentation. None of us prospecting engineers had ever taken part in such a photo

shooting and none of us knew how to tie a tie! The HSG students were much more experienced in that respect.

For further information about "Battle of the Brains", please visit:

<http://www.thebattleofthebrains.ch>

<http://www.ethlife.ethz.ch/articles/news/battlebrains06.html> (in German)

