Forging Fellowship: Pascal Marmier, SF 2008

MIT Sloan Fellow merges science, technology, and entrepreneurship for climate change.

Interviewer: Pascal Marmier, welcome. Pascal is an MIT Sloan Fellow and he’s part of the Fellows flex program and he’s in Boston working for Swissnex Boston. Pascal, can you tell us a little bit about Swissnex?

Pascal: Sure, so Swissnex, I think, is little bit of a new initiative for government. It’s the idea of bringing innovation to the forefront of what’s going on in the international world for Switzerland. We were the first probably in the world to kind of have the idea of establishing a science and technology consulate. And that’s what is, that’s basically the idea of bringing science and technology and creating an entity that’s a collaborative entity between Switzerland and the greater Boston area in our case around all kinds of science, technology, education, and research fields. I might just add that this started in 2000, I was already there and kind of part a little bit of the founding team. But since then the network has grown to include San Francisco, Shanghai, Bangalore is on the joining line, and then Singapore. So what’s very interesting is that we start to have a little bit of a network of these places here in the U.S. and obviously also around the world, which kind of fits well with the, I would say global scope of the Sloan Fellows program.

Interviewer: So was Boston the first effort?

Pascal: So Boston started in 2000. and it was really, at the time the idea also of trying to find I would say, a first overcome if you’re one if the brain drain that Switzerland was experiencing. We have a lot of talents that are coming here. I think since then we don’t talk so much about brain drain but more of brain circulation, but we’ve been very active ever since in terms of getting to know the community here, especially the Swiss ones, and opening new areas of collaboration and cooperative opportunities with Switzerland.

Michelle: And the main focus of those initiatives are sustainability and climate?

Pascal: So it’s one part of it. I would think that in recent years and especially this year 2008 it has become more important. What we’ve done this year is also kind of expand from our base here in Boston to include also our colleagues in the other concerts and organizations we present in Switzerland to kind of add sustainability and clean technologies to their activities. So maybe from anywhere of kind of taking some of the content of what we’ve created here. We’ll have a wonderful climate trail at the Washington Zoo to also having panels that kind of fluke a little bit at the state of the green buildings and the differences between Switzerland and the U.S. all the way to simply
inviting key decision makers to also visit Switzerland and have kind of sustainability as a first experience when they go there. So I would think it’s one of our activities and it’s definitely one that’s very large now. But we’ve done anything from internet voting, to behavior health finance, we also have sometimes science and cultural events that take place together. So we have a very broad mission and kind of a very broad if you want definition of science and technology.

**Interviewer:** And what specifically is your role in the effort?

**Pascal:** So my role has been from the beginning to really think a little bit about the innovation part. We had a colleague, he recently left, who was in charge of more of the academic. I try to think about innovation and what it represents for Switzerland, both on a public policy level, what should the authorities know about the innovation, what should the universities think about in terms of innovation. So that led to some thought and some projects of having for example internal venture capital funds in some universities. And on the other side it has been working with entrepreneurs on both, I would say, the educational and the business development levels. So the educational level, every year we have about 20 Swiss entrepreneurs that come to the Boston area for boot camp and we really train them in the U.S. style, model of innovation and entrepreneurship. On the business development side, we here in this building, the Cambridge innovation center is just above and we’ve helped entrepreneurs kind of make sense of the area here of Boston in terms of starting and growing their U.S. presence.

**Michelle:** Has your time with the Sloan Fellows and at MIT enhanced your knowledge of entrepreneurship and the way that it works in Boston and in the United States?

**Pascal:** Tremendously, tremendously. I think that true level is the knowledge level. It’s really being able to understand better the structure of entrepreneurship, what it means, the kind of, the growing pains also that go with growing ventures, the different also financial marketing structures that I needed. So I feel much more confident talking to these entrepreneurs. So I would say this is the former knowledge, but then maybe even more importantly is the kind of informal knowledge and the network that comes with it, who to talk to, the best person who can help with a specific issue, and then just the understanding of how networks are important when you’re building companies and the way that VC’s and others are kind of reacting. So this has been really tremendously valuable in my activities.

**Interviewer:** Why did you apply to the MIT Fellows program and why the flex options?

**Pascal:** So why did I choose MIT? I had been trained before as a lawyer in Switzerland and I noticed in 2000 when I got very excited about this venture with the Swiss government that I would not be using my legal background so much. So what happened was I really kind of learned on the job if you want, and I came to a certain point where I needed to get a better understanding of, I would say the interaction of management and technology. And I think MIT is an obviously place for that. There’s no better place probably in the world about how do technology and management interact, what are the points of collaborations that are needed, what are some of the science and
technology, also bridges that are going on with the school. I think it provided me with a very solid understanding of all these parts and for me it was very natural to turn to MIT. Now towards about the flex options, I was not in a point I think where I wanted to necessarily take a break. For me I also saw this experience at MIT as kind of a deeper continuation of what we were already doing with MIT from a business perspective. So if you want, it was providing me kind of an insider view of what’s going on within MIT was the idea that I could try to use some of the classes to work on the projects and then use some of the projects at work to also enrich the classes. So that’s why I chose the flex options and being literally on campus has made it really worthwhile.

Michelle: Have you found the balance between the work that you’re still doing with your company and the classwork, has it been difficult?

Pascal: So there’s been different points I would say. At work they’ve been very generous in terms of letting me explore as much as possible the academic requirements. I think it ebbs and flows because your classes can be different and obviously your work is different. I would think that this part, which is the final part of the program, I’m doing a master thesis, it’s definitely a little bit on the busier side. And something that’s a little bit paradoxical but I saw that this summer was actually the first summer when you got this, I would say, very intense experience of being out of work, where basically you don’t do work, I thought was actually one of the best parts because you had your mind just set up on one and not two parts of your life basically.

Interviewer: Now my perception is that one of the strengths of the Fellows program is the cohesion of the class and the fact that you’re working intensely with your classmates and develop a rapport and you feed off of each other’s experience. Do you find as a flex student you’ve still had that?

Pascal: So I think there’s basically, there’s two parts to the Sloan Fellows, which are the two years. I think the first year I felt totally integrated into the cohort in part because the summer that we spent together. So I think that’s what really also solidifies the esprit de corps that you are describing. And then because you go on every trip and you’re kind of involved in the social life. It’s true that the second year, you see it a little bit differently because you don’t go to the core classes and it requires extra efforts to probably try to get into the social, I would say, life of the Sloan Fellows. So what I’ve seen is, I’ve seen that working on some projects or helping some of the classmates in their events or just kind of gathering on some specific topic allows you to kind of recreate some of what you have seen the first year. It’s definitely to a lesser intensity and you don’t have the same branch of people, but I’d be very happy about the, kind of rapport I have done also with the second year experience and this new cohort if you want.

Michelle: Have you had a chance to interact with anyone from the MBA class and things like the sustainability lab and any of the entrepreneurship type activities?

Pascal: Absolutely, so I think the sustainability part has been really for me the part that has brought me in contact with most of the MBAs. Last year we started this
discretion group among the Fellows that we call the sustainability initiative, the social impact group last year. And what happened is that right from the beginning we started interacting and kind of networking with the other MBA groups that were interested. So that led to some discussion, not necessarily only about some of the events that we did together, but also, I would say, more, kind of, thought-provoking discussion on what the career paths should be for some of these people, some of also the mentoring between the Fellows and some MBAs that were interested in sustainability careers or sustainability projects. So this has been one of the great points of interaction with the MBAs and then obviously the elective classes have been another one.

Interviewer: Is a sustainable career a viable option for people now?

Pascal: I think it is, it probably has been all the time but I think what’s happening now is that we’re at a little bit of a time of transition and you can feel it when you study I would say the practitioner’s response to sustainability. If you look through the annual reports on sustainability, if you attend some of the conferences, it’s just one of these transformational moments for companies. They need to understand not what they should do in sustainability but more, how should they implement sustainability. And I think there I see it also from IT’s is, it basically interacts and touches all parts of a company. Your finance is going to be changed, the marketing, the way you interact with your consumers, and I think for MBAs other business school people, these are wonderful opportunities to be part of this organizational change. So in terms of the kind of business and society interaction I would think that they are great opportunities now. The second one that I see is just the value of an MIT education around the world. I saw that when we were traveling. Also I see other Fellows, but I also saw that for some of the sustainable business lab or the global entrepreneurship lab. I think that there’s a wonderful value and definitely you can build some great experience, probably get some even earlier management experience by kind of taking the risk to go abroad and kind of establish yourself in some of these circles.

Michelle: Now the social impact group that you’re a part of, I understand that they have the philosophy that giving back to society is less about self-sacrifice than it is about commitment. And I think that some people would find that unique. Can you explain a little bit more about that?

Pascal: Right, I don’t think we really defined that as the mission statement but what we saw as the opportunity to get together is really kind of spending some of our time here to kind of a little bit increase the general knowledge of what we know from all different countries and different industries. So the idea was that we have people from I don’t remember how many but probably more than 25 or 30 countries. And these are people that come with them well-equipped to tackle some of the sustainability parts that they know. Then we have industry expertise ranging from oil to other, I would say, industrial perspective. And the chance, or the opportunity we saw there is creating a forum where we could explore some of the interactions and then help whoever in the MIT community would need this help. So we’ve been working on some projects, some discussion. And we’ve also basically passed some contacts to some project.
**Interviewer:** So as part of Swissnex you do focus on a little bit of sustainability. But is sustainability a personal passion as well as professional interest?

**Pascal:** I think it is and it’s hard for me to pinpoint to where it started exactly. But I think coming into Sloan and just realizing the power that, kind of understanding business can have in a different environment, I think really kind of triggered my thinking. It might of started with how, you know, kind of government places would be I would say well advised to use some of this thinking, but I think it also continued by saying that, again we have some of these transformations that are coming and I’m fairly well aware of protection of the environment, social justice, and how these issues could also be embedded in the strategies of the company. So I think it’s definitely a personal aspect of having seen that and it’s mostly through the discussion that you have here. I think it’s also, one thing that I would underline is you’re going to be here on the MIT campus as Sloan Fellow and it’s just going to be almost 24/24 that you’re going to meet some people. And early on I had the chance to meet some people that were Sloan Fellows that had exciting experiences abroad and I think it shaped a little bit my interest in digging a little bit more on what’s going on.

**Michelle:** Now you said you’re working on a thesis. Is that optional or required for the Fellows?

**Pascal:** So as far as I know, at least for my cohort and the ones that were here before in the last years, this is only optional. The idea of the thesis for me was to get a little more of a deeper insight into the implementation of sustainability and I had the chance that Richard Locke helps me in this. So I think it’s been very exciting and it also links again to the general, I would say, focus at Sloan on sustainability. There’s a research group that gets together every week and I’ve received wonderful mentoring and advice from this group that includes both faculty and students. So this is optional, but I think for me it was an option that really led to a lot of various interesting things.

**Interviewer:** And will the thesis have relevance to your work?

**Pascal:** Not directly I would think. I think the thesis has really been for me kind of an eye-opening experience in understanding better, I would say, corporate and organizational changes when faced with an external environment. Now is it still, is it the same case for the government? I’m not sure because the environment is different. I’m sure I can relate to some of the lessons I know now from resistance to change and organization, this kind of thing. But before anything else I think it’s really kind of providing me an individual opportunity to kind of pursue a little bit this field of interest and this was a company called Nestle out of Switzerland. So this is also kind of providing good links into the companies. So who knows, it might be providing a professional opportunity in terms of collaboration with others, but at its core it’s really going to fill personal interest to dig a little bit deeper in this field.

**Interviewer:** Is Swissnex unique among governments?
Pascal: As far as we know I think it’s pretty unique. What’s happening is that the idea of I would say being active in science and technology is well known among all countries. And if you look around here in Cambridge you’ll find other places that have incubators, you’ll find some places that have science attaché, even some of that will call some people their innovation representative. So I will not say the idea is unheard of. I think where we’ve been really kind of creative is in creating a space. It’s not only having the people but it’s also linking it to a space and it’s the same everywhere that we have a Swissnex office around the world. And this is kind of an open-source place if you want, it’s being shaped by the community that is there. So we really I would say to a certain extent the kind of chief of orchestra but then we let a little bit the people organize the various activities there. And this is basically both a window of Switzerland, it’s all very nice offices that kind of tries to promote a little bit the brand of dynamic in innovative Switzerland, but it’s also kind of a community space where we try to foster, I would say better connections and better relations.

Michelle: As you head into the final stretch of your Sloan Fellow studies, what do you think will be the biggest takeaway for you when you’re all done?

Pascal: So I think the two takeaways, the first takeaway is I would say, what I would kind of gather from the class is, and this is just a stronger and deeper understanding of anything that has to do with the ways businesses and large organizations are run. I have to admit that this was probably one of the biggest takeaways in the sense that I had not had a lot of exposure of business, or at least large businesses, through my activities. So this is one of the key takeaways if you want. The second one, and I think it’s equally important for me, has been more personal reflection. It’s going through a little bit, what do I want to do, where are my strengths, what are some of the mental models that I’ve basically built. Which ones should I keep, which ones should I change, and it’s been a little bit of hope sending me up on the path of learning for the future. So what I will take away from this on a personal level is a little bit the kind of capability if you want to continue learning through the next steps of my careers based on some of the ideas, based on some of the people, based on some of the relationships that I’ve been able to develop over these last two years.

Interviewer: So you’ll be continuing on with Swissnex after the program?

Pascal: Yes, so that’s a good point. I heard the news recently that I had been appointed director and that means also Swiss counsels, that comes with a nice diplomatic posting. And this will start right at the end of the summer. So I’m excited about this part that means that I’ll be able to kind of help grow, continue to grow the network and kind of think a little bit about where we want to go with all this and kind of hopefully also continuing as I said the learning, but also bringing some of what I learned together. So the next phase of my career will definitely be with Swissnex Boston and then I think for the years after we’ll see what happens. But I really like this idea of being in an interdisciplinary role for once, something connected to my home country, and then something that’s very international, is fast paced. So we’ll see what the next future will bring me.