

Alumni Entrepreneur Profile:
Frédéric Mazzella 07D
CEO of BlaBlaCar

The logo for BlaBlaCar, featuring the word "Bla" in green, "Bla" in blue, and "Car" in red.

Winner of the 15th Business Venture Competition at INSEAD

Frédéric had already started his company on a small scale before beginning INSEAD in 2007. He had designed a website for sharing rides in France. However, he soon realised that just having a cool website wasn't enough - he needed to have a business plan if the idea was going to be successful!

"INSEAD taught me the skills to build a business model for the site. I chose INSEAD primarily because of the entrepreneurship classes that were offered. I had actually wanted to start a company when I was 21 but then got distracted by working for NASA!"

Prior to gaining an MBA from INSEAD, Frédéric studied physics at the prestigious French science school Ecole Normale Supérieure.

"Most people who study there go on to be serious researchers for CNRS [the French National Scientific Research Center]. However, I enriched my curriculum by studying three out of the four years at Stanford where I earned an MSc in Computer Sciences."

He went on to work at NASA for three years in the US then returned to his native France and worked in Paris for an American software company.

Frédéric discovered ride sharing during his student days at Stanford in the late 1990s. Every morning he shared a car with three friends driving down the Route 101 or 280 to university. There were several incentives offered by the state for people who shared car rides. "Between specific commuter hours in the morning and evening there were empty lanes for people with more than one person in the car – known as carpool lanes. The carpool lanes were thus the fastest way to move around during peak hours. In addition the bridges were toll free if several people were in one vehicle. It was the first time I'd ever heard of ride sharing."

It was on his return to France that Frédéric began to think seriously about the

BlaBlaCar is making travel social, money-saving and more efficient all across Europe. It is now possible to travel from Porto to Moscow just with BlaBlaCar, and to discover a bunch of different nationalities and cultures during your trip!

As BlaBlaCar's philosophy is to stay up-to-date with the local needs of our community, we have local teams in seven offices across Europe: Paris, London, Milan, Madrid, Warsaw, Hamburg and now Moscow, too.

www.blablacar.com

possibility of introducing a ride sharing system in his native country. It was Christmas 2003 and he wanted to return to his home town in the Vendée region of France.

“All the trains were full when most cars were most probably empty. So I looked on the internet to find a website with a list of seats available – there were no actual search engines only announcements like advertisements that were not efficient enough to find people. I ended up getting a lift with my sister but the idea was in my head then - I didn't sleep for 72 hours because I had so many schemes and plans zooming around my head – I needed to do something! Today I have still only done about 10% of what I actually wanted to do.”

His vision was to create a ride sharing service that would be synchronized via the internet and mobile phones allowing routes to be shared throughout France – not just with family and friends.

Frédéric coded the first version of the website himself. *“The idea seemed so simple I couldn't believe it didn't already exist.”* The site included Google Maps and user preferences with symbols such as animals, cigarettes, music and Bla-Bla that indicated what the co-traveller should expect (animal, music, smoking and chat). People could choose their type and say they were “Bla”, “BlaBla” or “BlaBlaBla” thus indicating to their co-travellers if they should expect to talk a lot or not. The parent company, Comuto, (later changed to BlaBlaCar to reflect international expansion) was created officially in September 2006. Also in 2006, Frédéric met Francis Nappez who would become BlaBlaCar's CTO. Francis was a top web architect who had worked at the start-ups Free and Meetic, two of the most successful start-ups in the French internet world. It was only after graduating from INSEAD in 2007 that Frédéric could recruit Francis who agreed to significantly lower his salary in exchange for shares of the new born company.

The name of the first French website was “Covoiturage.fr”. It worked in a similar way to an online travel agency with the departing cities and destinations listed with dates etc. The public service was free of charge. In the early days, the company made its money through selling ride sharing solutions for businesses.

“What made us different from our competitors was that we didn't forget the end user when designing the model. Other companies focused on the B2B side where they thought they could make money but they forgot the actual user of the service. For our competitors it resulted in them developing software that wasn't really user friendly. Good news for us as we soon had 85% of the C2C market share. For the B2B we sold software licenses to companies which allowed their employees to share rides together on their intranets. It was a SAAS software (Software As A Service) that was rented rather than bought and installed.”

In August 2008 Comuto launched the 2.0 web community Covoiturage.fr with new revolutionary features. *“It is now a site that combines travel and networking – Booking*

meets Facebook!” The following two years BlaBlaCar branched out into Spain with BlaBlaCar.es (<http://www.blablacar.es>). They also launched many new services including a widget free download, release of iPhone application and a mobile application for Google Android. By June 2010 BlaBlaCar had more than 600,000 members with over 10 million page views per month. With flights cancelled due to the Icelandic volcano eruption in April BlaBlaCar had seen its customary daily 30,000 passengers increase to 60,000.

The same year the company launched a new product “Agenda”. Festivals, concerts and other occasions could create their own page to facilitate ride sharing to and from the event thus decreasing the number cars going to each event and reducing carbon emissions for any event (80% of the carbon emission for most festivals and events actually come from ground transportation to and from the event itself).

The UK was the next target for expansion with INSEAD alumnus Nicolas Brusson setting up operations in London. This was followed by Italy and then Poland. Since then the company has gone from strength to strength and now has operations in 12 countries the latest of which is Ukraine and Russia. There currently over 6 million members.



For the first few years Frédéric used his own savings to survive together with a loan of €70K. In July 2009 he finally paid himself a salary. He also raised money from angel investors amounting to €600K in 2009 followed by a further round of funding at the end of June 2010 of €1.2million followed by a \$10million closed in January 2012.

“Nicolas Brusson who had been involved from the start and is cofounder along with myself and Francis was key to securing the later rounds of funding and eventually gave up his job in venture capital to work full time as COO at BlaBlaCar.”

Frédéric has had great support from his INSEAD friends as well as Nicolas Brusson, Jean-Bernard Escoufier, Tracy Goh and Francois Bracq from the 07J and 07D promotions. They helped him with negotiations.

“I met the right people at the right time who believed in the project. INSEAD gave me the vocabulary and the credibility for investors and clients. When you have been through INSEAD people are confident you know what you’re talking about and you are too.”

BlaBlaCar has been awarded over 50 prizes and honours since its creation, including most recently a special prize from the *Le Figaro* for “Best place to work: fun and performance.”



In February 2014 Frédéric was among the small group of start-up entrepreneurs that was invited by France’s President Hollande to accompany him on his US trip to visit Silicon Valley and meet with American entrepreneurs. This was the first time in 30 years that a French president had visited California on a US state visit!

Company metrics

- Over 6 million members
- 12 countries
- over 1 million members travelling with us every month
- over 2 million trips available in the future at any given time
- over 2 billion miles shared
- an estimated £216 million saved by our drivers every year
- an estimated 700,000 tons of CO2 saved
- average car occupancy 2.8 people (vs 1.6 average)
- over 2 million app downloads
- [1,000,000 Facebook fans \(all Facebook pages together\)](#)

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Revised April 2014