

Setting Up Shop - One Pioneer's Advice to Just Do it

The Halve Maen initiative encourages innovators to cross the bridges of soft landing in the US together. By diving into the stories of these front-line doers, we reveal tips and tricks that extend the resources of this network by folds of encouragement and insights.

Meet Roos Hofland from Innovation Booster. Sitting in the midst of dozens of innovators gathered for Halve Maen's first official networking event, we begin chatting all things experience, personal quirks, and NYC intrigue. Roos most recently attended Lund University where she received a Master's in International Business Management. She then returned to Amsterdam where she joined Innovation Booster to write her master's thesis; ultimately leading to joining the team full time. Fast forward one and a half years with the company and now three months in NYC on its behalf, she's taken lead on setting up international shop and navigating the challenges of the American work space.

Tell us about Innovation Booster:

Innovation Booster was founded five years ago. We started as an innovation platform, providing smart IT solutions, and after two years in business, transitioned to delivering innovation consultancy services. We help corporations in traditional industries such as banks, publishers, etc. engage the full creative and entrepreneurial potential of their employees and prioritize, initiate and execute business innovation and innovation transformation. Basically, we work to keep them in business by improving their organization operations because they need to change in order to adapt. We want to double the life expectancy of the fortune 500 companies because the big changes are still done by these corporations. Corporates have the power to scale, and they can impact the majority of our world.

How many people are working for Innovation Booster?

We are about 40 people total, and there's just 1 (me) in NYC.

How did you end up here? How did you take the step?

Here in the States people focus more on hierarchy, but in the Netherlands, we operate with a very flat organization. I had been with the company for just one and a half years, and they offered me the opportunity to go to NYC. Now I'm here for the long run!

Knowing that nothing about this experience is really normal, what's a "normal day" for you?

My days all point to setting up the innovation lab. I wake up around 6:30 and start with emails, LinkedIn, and all correspondence. I then get ready and either head to the offices of my existing clients where I'm currently coaching on innovation, or to meetings with prospective clients. It's a lot of meetings. A lot of pitching. And a lot of networking.

Seems you're required to be a morning person- What's your morning jam to get you going?

Happy music. Only happy music. Put on some Etta James, and I'm ready to go!

Networking is huge part of what you need to do right now. Assuming that's why you're here at the Halve Maen event?

It's so cool to hear from both Dutch nationals and other entrepreneurs going through the same thing. They're here to share their experiences and best practices, and hopefully when I'm successful here, I can do the same.

What's been the hardest part of the process for you?

Getting accustomed to the American way of doing business. The culture is so different from the European market. Americans like the pitch, but we really want the conversation to really get an understanding how we can help. Usually in the Netherlands, we take a coffee and start with small talk. Here the conversation is rarely over a coffee. I reached out to one Executive Director and sent the calendar invite for our meeting "Coffee with Roos" and this confused him like mad! But it worked out really well. We took the conversation in the cafeteria, looked over a nice view, and it was less business in the initial exchange. Since we had already broken that barrier, I was able to identify their needs instead of them just asking for the pitch. Holding true to this method is tough, but I always try to build a relationship instead of only focusing on a business exchange.

Your relationship with coffee- need it to function?

Surprisingly, I'm definitely not an addict. I only actually starting drinking it when I started working. So only when working, or maybe as a social thing. What's been the most rewarding thus far? When you get into a sales conversation with a potential client and you really feel that they like it and they get it. It's been a struggle in the beginning- finding the right needs and if that fits with what we can do, but it's rewarding getting good feedback because then we know there's a market here for our product. When we get in conversation with the right person/ company, knowing we have their solution means we are on the right track.

Let's talk about Americans vs the Dutch

Americans are peaches, you can easily get in and talk, but it's difficult to get to the core. Then you have the Dutch, a tough coconut. Difficult to get a first conversation, but when you're in, you're in, you've made it past the shell. This really plays into the differences in doing business. Americans, you have contracts, contracts. Americans do exactly what's detailed in the contract. Nothing more, nothing less. You've hit the outer shell of their core. In the Netherlands, at some point people just trust each other and you build on that kind of relationship. You don't put that in the contract. You're simply doing business together. You've made it in their coconut and not navigating around a hard core.

Did you know this coming in?

They tell you, but then you really get it when you see it happening. Here, it's all about taking advantage of opportunity.

Speaking of opportunity, in NYC, you have the chance to eat at a different restaurant every day and never have to repeat. Do you have a go-to lunch?

In the Netherlands, every organization has a restaurant on the first floor. We go and get a sandwich with cheese. That's just what we do. In NYC, it's totally different. I can go anywhere and have anything. There's so many things here; too many things here. I'm just not so picky. I'm a fan of poke bowls. I love Chopt- an amazing salad place. The only thing is, I don't like to choose. If I have to choose, I get lost. While New Yorkers need to pick everything in their salads, I pick from the pictures. So, a place I don't have to choose and I can pick from the picture = my perfect lunch option.

What's a piece of advice you would give to someone starting up?

I wonder, a lot of people say be prepared, but I'm not so sure if that's really it. The big things I've really learned here are as result of when I've gone out and just did it. I think people should stop over preparing at home, but rather get here, try, fail, learn, and go again. When something is going wrong, find the courage to go again- this will teach you more than anything else. You learn from those first conversations. You get that energy to move on and often that means stepping above your pride.

What's the plan for expansion and what do you look for in people you hire?

As we continue to set up shop, we will land and run projects, and we will need to hire full time employees locally to manage those projects.

In the people we hire, it's all about mindset. Are they bold? Are they bold enough to do the work we do? Do they have the courage to really get into an organization and say "let's do this different, let's make change happen." Most of the time our clients are traditional, and we have to disrupt their system. You need to have balls to do that. As we say in Dutch, "you need to have hair on your teeth." Meaning, you need to be strong.

Who's someone you would like to have a 30 min meeting with?

It would be a woman for sure. Maybe someone actually very close to me and ideally for much more than 30 min. I have a colleague within my organization who has really inspired me to do this kind of work. I would love to really get into her life, understand her movement, and understand how she does what she does. Who was her mentor? What has been her venture that's led her to her current position? I would love to pick her brain about these things.

What do you do when you feel uninspired? How do you keep up this positive and infectious energy?

I walk into Central Park and I call my friends. Friends from long periods ago- from university, from home. Most times, they are doing something completely different from me and they give different insights. And I need this. It puts my feet back on the ground. Being in New York- what gives me so much energy is going to Union Square. I first go to Whole Foods and grab a bagel and then I just sit there and observe for 30 min or so. Union Square is the spot that brings everyone together. It's a hub for the locals, and NYC locals are diverse and inspiring.

What are you working on now that you're most excited about?

Literally “setting up shop” and everything that comes with that. The main chunk to focus on now is sales- we need sales to remain in business. But overall, I’m working on understanding the needs of American companies and how they do business. Coming to understand that excites me the most.

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This conversation has been edited and reduced for clarity.

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