

Where Do We Go if We Start from Shibuya?

A young Tokyo start-up CEO is heading to take the internet to space. Out of this world? Emails from Mars? She gives us further directions.

Warm and friendly, with a big smile and even bigger ideas, Naomi Kurahara is out to change the world—and beyond. The 37-year-old satellite systems engineer is co-founder and CEO of Infostellar, a Tokyo-based company that is currently laying the groundwork for creating a global network that will connect satellite operators with antenna owners around the world. Eventually, Kurahara's goal is to help bring the internet to space.

From her office in Tokyo's busy area of Shibuya, Kurahara explains how she used hard work and perseverance to take Infostellar from an idea she had over 10 years ago, to a full-fledged start-up with a total of 860 million yen in investment so far.

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“During our seed round of funding, I sent so many emails and contacted tons of companies through their websites, and then a friend of mine introduced me to venture capital,” Kurahara said.

“I eagerly tried to make appointments with dozens of companies, and some of them actually met with me. Of those, three of them invested with us: one angel investor, one VC, and one regular business firm.”

This earned her and her partners an initial 60 million yen to get their project off the ground in 2016. The following year, they raised 800 million yen more through Series A funding, with Airbus Ventures, the venture capital arm of the multinational aerospace company, as their lead investor. Kurahara knew from the start that an investment model such as this was the only viable way to realize her ideas.

“Our business combines a sharing model with the space industry,” she said, alluding to the fast pace of the industry. “So if we had used a bootstrapping method and built it up little by little, it would have taken much longer and we would have missed our chance.”

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Looking into the future, Kurahara sees potential for Infostellar's success in helping other businesses—

as well as the space industry as a whole—to develop.

“Businesses could take advantage of improved remote sensing from satellites; for example more accurate weather forecasts for farmers or more accurate fish movement data for fishermen. IoT from satellites could provide suppliers with more data about the use of their products, which could be used to improve their service. Infrastructure is needed to implement these kinds of ideas. Whether this infrastructure exists or not will greatly affect the probability for success,” she said. “So for us, by building a platform that will facilitate this infrastructure, we will be able to help the space business to grow.”

Infostellar aims to let satellite owners share antennas around the world.

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Kurahara now leads a team of over 20 staff hailing from around the world. They are developing a platform called StellarStation, which will allow antenna owners to sell their idle time to satellite operators via a sharing system. The idea stems from the fact that there are far more satellites in space than there are antennas on the ground that can communicate with them, and the usage rate of many antennas is very low.

“Now there are people making satellites at universities. There are even some high schools and junior high schools making them. As more people in more countries make satellites, the business has begun to look much more viable,” Kurahara said, adding that the infrastructure on the ground lags behind, which is where Infostellar comes in.

“In Tokyo there are more and more people, even students, who are interested in working for start-ups, and there are also a lot of people who are currently working for start-ups. So this has made hiring easier,” she said.

Kurahara has found Tokyo to be a supportive environment for entrepreneurs. In addition to rent, cost of living, and personnel costs being lower than in Silicon Valley, she said she has not found it exceptionally difficult to hire talented staff, even as a new company. The young executive said that for her, establishing her company in Tokyo was a no-brainer.

StellarStation: the satellite antenna sharing platform

