

BRAINPOWER

Have you got a Starmind?

Don Berry on how he discovered a rapidly-growing website community which pays its users for intelligent answers

It's not every day that a student at Cambridge receives an invitation to join a website from his supervisor – but then again, it's not every day that one comes across a concept like Starmind. If it hadn't come so highly recommended there is a chance I wouldn't have bothered to investigate. As any computer-literate person knows, advertisements and invitations that purport to make their users rich – all too common on the internet these days – are almost certain to be a scam of some sort. And as Mensans, we are all too wily to fall for these old tricks.

However, there was something that intrigued me about the Starmind website. Full of bright colours and interesting graphics, the concept behind it seemed decidedly simple; out-sourcing problems of all kinds to a network of solution providers from around the world.

Based in Switzerland, the website has its roots in the artificial intelligence lab at the University of Zurich. As far as I could tell, all that members did was to log on, choose a problem from the website's large inventory that they knew something about, and write a corresponding solution. In exchange for their submissions, they would receive not community points, or vouchers to an over-priced in-site shop but would be paid for their efforts in cold, hard cash.

Sound too good to be true? I thought the same at first myself. I was one of the first solvers to join the project in February, having heard about it early through the University of Cambridge.

When I signed myself up there were lots of well-rewarded questions being asked by the actual members of the team that ran the website – some of which were obviously designed to get the ball rolling. The questions were listed under the three categories of 'Business', 'Science' and 'Daily Challenges'. I gathered that the plan was for questions to be generated by the users of the website themselves, so that a community of question-posers and question-solvers would develop. There would be user profiles detailing



■ PROBLEM-SOLVER: Don Berry

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individual performance, and a sophisticated rating system that would ensure fair play between all members. Eight months down the line and this idea has very much become a reality.

As a Cambridge mathematician and a puzzle-hungry Mensan, I browsed through the questions to see if there were any I could do off the top of

my head without investing too much effort. To my delight I found a few questions just requiring some easy mathematical proofs, for around five euros each. It wasn't long before I'd polished these off and received the rewards.

However, I had also noticed a few intriguing sounding questions on another subject I knew a little something about too. As well as my experience in maths I had, over the previous few years, developed a taste for philosophy.

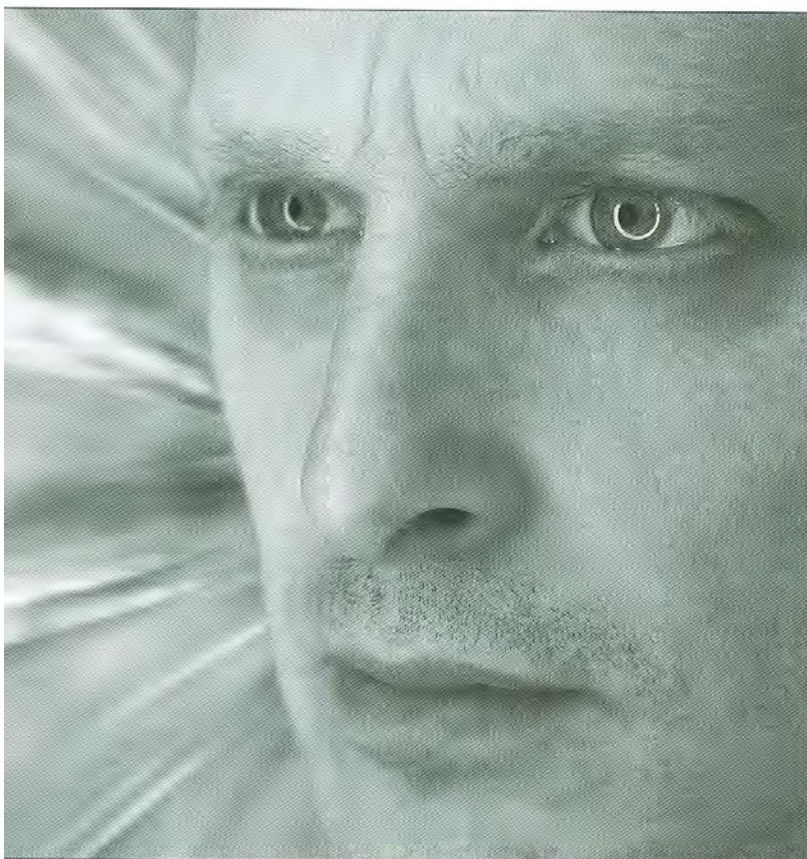
The rewards were high, so I tried my hand at a few of these too, starting with the problem of free will and determinism.

In the months that followed I became a regular visitor to the website, and an avid question solver. I looked forward to the e-mails I would receive from Starmind, notifying me that new questions had been posted onto the site in the fields of expertise I had listed.

I now had a range of solutions under my belt, and my confidence as a writer and thinker had soared. I'd worked through the physics of the forces that caused a plane's wing to keep it balanced in the air. I'd written a computer program that mimicked cumulative evolution by natural selection. I'd put together some research and original ideas about the ethics of genetic engineering. All in all, I had answered over 30 questions across such diverse fields as mathematics, philosophy, science, English and business strategy; receiving up to 35 Euros for each solution. The steady income this provided helped finance student life at Cambridge. And more importantly, I had learned a good deal about a wide range of subjects.

I also had constant opportunities to practise my writing, which would eventually lead me to my current vocation: a graduate student in Philosophy at University College London.

By now I had persuaded several of my friends to join the website – a service for which I was handsomely paid by a mechanism that rewards 'Starminds' who invite successful solvers.



But when invited they always seemed to respond with the same initial question: why would anyone want to pay for an answer to a problem that they could get for free by doing the research themselves, or by just asking the question an internet forum?

To an experienced solver this was obvious: one did not simply type the question into google and see what came up. My solutions were carefully crafted and diligently researched essays of several pages each, forming a marked contrast with the kind of one-liners in the free question-and-answer forums elsewhere on the internet.

We provided a valuable service on demand. My Mensan intelligence was a commodity that others would be willing to pay to access.

And when I later began posing my own questions, it was apparent that the calibre of problem-solvers on the site had reached an impressive standard.

The community had developed to a point where I had access to cutting-edge technological know-how and expert scholarly opinion – if I was willing to offer the right price.

Through answering several of his questions and suggesting a few improvements to the

functioning of the site in its early days I had come into contact with Pascal Kaufman, the Starmind CEO and brains behind the initiative.

After corresponding via e-mail over the weeks and months he eventually suggested that we met up the next time he was over in England.

In August I had the honour of being made the 'Question Solver of the Month' for my numerous contributions, and later that month I found myself meeting Pascal at Euston station in London. We went to a nearby restaurant for dinner and more discussion about the future of Starmind.

It soon became apparent that 30-year-old Pascal, the founder of the Starmind network, was a truly exceptional individual. Dynamic and driven, his combination of passion for academic pursuits and business acumen was a force to be reckoned with.

I was impressed to learn that a few years earlier he had been senior sales manager and director at Julius Baer, the largest private bank in Switzerland, before retiring to complete his Ph.D. Prior to this he had been the top salesman across the whole of Europe for a renowned and well known insurance company. Needless to say, the dinner was on him!

He explained how he had come up with the idea for the Starmind concept, and where he saw the idea going in the future.

"As a researcher at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the University of Zurich I am faced with a lot of scientific challenges. Starmind allows me to get in touch with brilliant minds all over the world and to obtain inputs on our research challenges. It turned out also that companies, researchers and students started to use the Starmind platform. On Starmind you can trade the most precious resource there is – human brainpower and ingenuity."

Recognising our society as a potential source of excellent solvers, Pascal approached Mensa International with ideas for collaboration and several months ago contracts with Mensa Switzerland were signed.

As well as special privileges for Mensans, planned new developments for Starmind include giving the question poser the ability to publish solutions on-site, once they have purchased them, and so making their money back.

We are all familiar with websites such as Wikipedia that provide a wealth of user-generated content, but the unique appeal of Starmind is the financial rewards involved. This means that, rather than being just a hobby, users can afford to dedicate considerable chunks of time to solving interesting and challenging questions.

As question posers, they can use the site as a platform to success in many areas of their careers – whether by supplementing their creativity, or just speeding up efficiency by outsourcing tasks to those with the skills to accomplish them faster and more easily.

Starmind has the potential to provide a fast and effective transfer of brain power from all over the world and the scope of enquiry is limited only by the imagination of the user.

More information on Starmind can be found at www.starmind.com