

Hey Gianni, what's next? | A researcher's story

February 20, 2019

Gianni Barlacchi tells us about his PhD work at FBK under the helpful guidance of Bruno Lepri (MobS Lab) and Alessandro Moschitti (University of Trento). Sharing lessons learned to provide a tip for prospective doctoral candidates

From *pane sciocco*, the Tuscan salt-free bread, to the Dolomites

I come from Tuscany, and anyone can tell right away! I completed my university education in Siena obtaining a degree in computer engineering. During my master's degree, I landed in Trento, first at FBK, where I was granted an internship in 2012, and then at the University, where I worked for my thesis that dealt with an automatic crossword puzzle solver. After my experience at FBK, I returned to Trento as a liaison for a collaboration between the University of Siena and Trento. I like the mountains, I play drums and I play soccer, all the little things that have allowed me to keep a pretty active social life outside my studies.

The “training novel” at FBK

Driven by the desire to make an experience away from home, in 2012 I moved to Trento for an internship at FBK under the supervision of **Sara Tonelli** and **Emanuele Pianta**. That was, without a doubt, the summer that most changed my life. After that positive experience I decided to come back to Trento, this time to the University, to work on my thesis in the group of **Alessandro Moschitti**. From that moment on, it was clear that Trento would be part of my training and not only. In fact, after a year of doubts, I decided to apply for a PhD scholarship sponsored by **Telecom Italia**. Since then, alongside Alessandro Moschitti, I had a new advisor, **Bruno Lepri**. I still remember when I first wrote to Bruno asking for information. I introduced myself as his roommate as we had shared an apartment for three days, a time certainly too short for him to remember me, busy as he was during his post-doc at MIT in Boston. It's funny to think how small encounters can have a huge impact on life. I then joined his lab where, for four years now, I have shared every day with wonderful people who, from just coworkers, have become good friends.

PhD = Knowledge traveler

FBK is undoubtedly a unique place in Italy, both for the skills of the people who work there and for the opportunities it offers you. I started my doctorate and, at the same time, I founded, with some former college mates, a food startup that we called **Appetitoso**. The first year was hard as I had to carry out my research work and take care of the startup that, in the meantime, was growing: we had raised funds from investors and had found ourselves under the national spotlight thanks to some newspapers articles that reviewed it as one of the top 10 among food applications. It was nice to see that the work done yielded its fruits, but after a while, as often happens in these adventures, when you have to focus on prior commitments and run out of cash, we decided to kill this wonderful experience, and went back to our primary activities: in my case, the doctorate. When I started, I had set myself the goal of spending some time abroad and, thanks to FBK, I managed to experience a number of research centers around the world. I started with **Telefonica in Spain**, then I moved to **IBM in Ireland** and then to **Amazon Alexa in Seattle**. Finally, I will spend a short time at **MIT in Boston**, working on some of the joint projects we have with them. At the end of this experience I decided that it was time for me to try something else, and will move to Berlin to work as an applied scientist for Amazon Alexa.

A piece of advice for an aspiring PhD student today

It's hard to say anything about the future. A bit like when I started my doctorate, when I could not be certain of anything. I kept asking myself, "Will it turn out to be the right choice?" Only now can I say with certainty that it was. When you start a PhD, you are hardly aware of what you are going to run into. The way I experienced that phase, it was quite a challenge. In all this, if I look back, I can say that there are few research centers like FBK, in Italy but also in Europe. It has played a crucial role in my training and is an undoubtedly valuable center of excellence either if you want to do research in Italy, or if you want to grow and then live an experience abroad. For this reason, **the only advice I feel I can give to those who want to take this path, is to look for the right advisor and for a place that, as FBK was for me, can guarantee a great growth path. In the end, no matter how good anyone can be, the people who guide us during these years and the environment in which they are trained really make the difference.**

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