

EXIST funding for xenko start-up team at Ulm University Virtual health platform to encourage more physical activity in the working day

The start-up xenko has been awarded an EXIST grant of 143,500 euros from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. The team of founders from Ulm University is developing a digital health platform designed to encourage more physical activity in everyday working life through virtual reality. This development is of interest to companies with occupational health management schemes and, in the long term, to the physiotherapy sector as well.

A height-adjustable desk, a fruit basket in the office kitchen and discounted gym membership: companies have recognised that their employees' health is a valuable asset and have therefore been promoting various initiatives for years. These are often bundled within occupational health management programmes and are promoted as incentives, for example, when recruiting staff.

The young Ulm-based start-up xenko is addressing precisely this need: it enables companies to provide health services digitally and flexibly, which employees can use regardless of their location or working hours. At the heart of this is what is known as Extended Reality (XR) – the enhancement of the environment through elements of virtual reality, which are then visible through VR headsets. The range of activities on offer extends from mobility exercises, Pilates and yoga to meditation and recovery sessions. A training plan, the virtual environment and an avatar can be individually tailored to the user's needs. "Through real-time whole-body feedback, the user's own movements are transferred into the virtual environment and linked to those of a trainer avatar. A detailed digital muscle model can also illustrate which muscle groups are involved in a particular movement. In this way, we aim not only to make exercise an experience, but also to make it easier to understand," explains CEO Dr Jana Funke. Funke completed her PhD at Ulm University under Professor Enrico Rukzio at the Institute of Media Informatics and has combined her enthusiasm for exercise and sport with cutting-edge XR technology. She researched how exercise programmes should be designed for XR and investigated their effects on users, including training success, acceptance, 'motion sickness' and the impact on emotional states. Together with the other founders – Nadja Pirchheim (responsible for marketing and product design), XR developer Benjamin Bayer and Dr Jessica Seyfried (content development) – the idea for xenko was born in 2024.

All the founders had previously received a Woman-EXIST scholarship via the University's Entrepreneurs Campus and have now successfully secured an EXIST start-up scholarship from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWE) via the start-up network, covering three full-time positions. The clear goal is to set up a company. "We specifically seek out scientific findings that hold entrepreneurial potential, and empower the people behind them to turn these into real-world applications and embark on the path to the foundation. The Entrepreneurs Campus is the place where scientific excellence and entrepreneurial courage come together – and that is exactly what we are here for," says Melanie Kamrath from the Entrepreneurs Campus. The Entrepreneurs Campus, which also advises the founders of xenko, is the central contact body for people at the University interested in starting a business and, in addition to providing inspiration and qualification, offers a strong network for anyone wishing to act entrepreneurially and create innovations.

As part of the EXIST funding programme, the xenko foundation team is receiving a total of 143,500 euros – divided between three full-time grants for Dr Funke, Pirchheim and Bavaria – as well as 30,000 euros in in-kind funding and 5,000 euros for coaching expenses. The funding period runs from 1 September 2026 to 31 August 2027.

Press release

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Source: Ulm University

Further information

- ▶ Ulm University
- ▶ Xenko