**Template for Interview with Marco Righetti,**

**iUP Founder & CEO**

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If you think that the world of smartphone contents doesn't have anything to offer or discover anymore, well, know that you're plain wrong. There are still several areas that are substantially unexplored. Yet, they can evolve through research and experiments, broadening our smartphones' range of use towards new and never before seen possibilities.

Indeed, as explained to us by iUP Founder Marco Righetti, audio messages are one of such possibilities.

Although these messages entered the daily routines of billions of people worldwide, today, they're just simple vocal recordings without any scope of customization. This is where the intuition behind 2REC was born, meaning the birth of an app capable of revolutionizing this old paradigm, introducing a customization level capable of completely revolutionizing our current concept of voice messages.

* **Hi Marco, how did iUP's adventure start?**

iUP was born in June 2018, although there was a phase of pre-establishment activities, as is the case with all startups. At this point, me and then Daniele, our other operating co-founder, wholly dedicated ourselves to studying and analyzing our market of reference. To best prepare for a step as important as the launch of an enterprise, we matured our first tangible experiences in developing structured projects, then created a network of professionals where an activity role would be assigned later on.

At the end of January 2020, we successfully completed a round of fundraising, thanks to the contribution of a prestigious investor, who, despite the markets began seeing uncertainties due to the COVID-19 emergency, still kept on believing in the project's great potential, not only providing us with new financial resources but also allowing us to use his precious and broad network of professionals and know-how.

* **What comes next in your story?**

Following our victory as best startup in the "Incubatore d'Impresa 2018" tender, promoted by Como's Camera di Commercio and ComoNExT, we have set up our operational headquarters in Lomazzo (Como) at the ComoNExT Scientific Technological Park, a MiSE (Italian Ministry of Economic Development) certified incubator acting as a reference point for all innovative companies on our territory.

For two consecutive times, we passed the selections for the "Global Startup Program," a coveted initiative of the MiSE promoted throughout the country, in which hundreds of startups are involved every year. In 2019, this allowed us to take part in a three-month acceleration path in Silicon Valley at the Plug & Play Tech Center headquarters, one of the world's most renowned accelerator hubs. However, starting from May 2021, we'll enter a new incubation period, also in the United States, at the "Mind The Bridge" accelerator.

Furthermore, the Italian agency ICE (Agency for the Promotion and Internationalization of Italian Enterprises) has called us twice to represent Italian innovation within this sector at the "Mobile World Congress" in Barcelona, the most important mobile technology fair globally. After its 2020 session (unfortunately canceled due to the COVID-19 health emergency), iUP will participate in June 2021. In collaboration with ICE, we were also part of GITEX Future Stars in Dubai, the most important event of the year for IT companies in the Middle East and South Asia, and of CES Las Vegas 2020, the most influential technology event in the world.

On both occasions, we had the opportunity to present the 2REC project to an international audience, meeting partners and many other startups, professionals, innovators, and experts in the tech world.

* **Please tell us something more about Silicon Valley: what was it like?**

I'd say it was a necessary experience under many aspects: first and foremost - because we had the opportunity to know the dynamics of the American market that we consider as the cradle of digital technology, which may very well be regarded as the pioneer all over the world. Secondly, we had the opportunity to meet dozens of young and brilliant entrepreneurs, with whom we discussed and further expanded upon our idea and vision. This circumstance has allowed us to obtain numerous feedbacks, including plenty of appreciation and, as expected, also some criticisms. This comparison then extended into all other areas that make up the growth and affirmation of a startup: from market launch strategies to marketing promotion, from the search for collaborators to an international team's remote management.

It was also useful and fascinating to meet some of the most critical digital corporates of the world, all of which have at least one office in Silicon Valley. It may sound strange, but it's not that hard to sit down with one or more managers of one of these IT giants and discuss your business idea. Well, you definitely need to be able to capture their attention and intrigue them, but they're quite open-minded people, persistently looking for new solutions. Specifically, I had the opportunity to relate with managers from Google and Facebook, among others.

A particular mention goes to the valuable network created between companies participating in the "Global Startup Program." In particular, we shared the adventure in Silicon Valley side by side with the eight startups, and we formed a cohesive and open group through which information, proposals, and advice can be shared.

* **What was the influence of this experience on the vision for the 2REC project?**

During our stay at the Plug and Play Tech Center, we were followed by tutors and mentors of extraordinary competence and experience daily, who helped us observe the 2REC project from a new angle, allowing us to refine our development strategies and identify our first objectives to focus on.

In Silicon Valley, we understood the truth of the iconic imagery describing this location as "the land of great projects," where everyone seems to follow the "Do it big or don't do it at all" motto. This is a philosophy we fully embrace: indeed, since the beginning, our approach has always been based on implementing the true essence of a startup able to propose an innovative product, one capable of scaling rapidly. From this point of view, the choice to develop a smartphone app is not accidental since it allows reaching millions (or even billions) of people and impact their lives, no matter its incidence. Such a possibility is already fascinating in and out of itself and requires the presence of a huge market.

* **A mission that you took upon yourselves ever since the beginning.**

Our ambition has always been to create exciting services that can help as many people as possible, improve their smartphone experience, and gain user appreciation.

* **Can you please better explain to us the 2REC project?**

When 2REC's basic idea was born, we understood that we were on the right path and found the perfect product to entirely turn our vision into reality.

We are surrounded by tools made for editing and personalizing visual content. At the same time, we have basically nothing that does the same for the audio field, although voice messages are already established in our daily lives and play such a crucial role in our lives. Especially, the voice allows us to interact with others and expresses a very strong emotional component, managing to stimulate intense sensations and evoke deep memories.

Our challenge began precisely from this "void": we wanted to make sure that everyone could fully exploit the potential that the sound sector can offer. We like to call this the (R)Evolution of voice messages.

* **What is this "new era" of voice messages?**

The (R)Evolution develops on two parallel paths: we define the first one as "fun," and it aims to re-propose the same level of gamification that the visual content has reached, with which everyone can have fun and express themselves uniquely and creatively, creating images or customizing photos. 2REC offers these possibilities in the vocal field, allowing you to insert filters in the voice, background bases (musical or environmental), and sounds within the recordings (as if they were audio emoji). Let's suppose you forgot about an anniversary; with 2REC, you can now conquer your sweet half's forgiveness by sending a voice message with a beautiful romantic song in the background. A dad away for a business trip may also let his son know he can't wait for them to go to the cinema during the weekend to see the latest Star Wars episode, ending the message with the iconic lightsaber sound. Or rather, a guy might choose a beat trap for his voice message to invite his friends to a club party.

As for the second path of innovation, we are focusing on those who use audio notes in professional and study-related activities, which effectively employ what we define as the "smart" features. We offer a complete and useful tool for our everyday lives, with many different features: a quick and structured service for saving and archiving the tracks, immediate and unlimited conversion of said tracks into text, a multifunction editor, and indispensable cloud backup.

Voice messages are used daily in many workplaces because they're undeniably more convenient and faster for those making them and less invasive than a phone call for those who receive them. Yet, these messages certainly lack something, and for this reason, many people end up establishing a love-hate relationship with them. We can wonder how many of us ended up wasting so much time scrolling through chats and listening to all the notes within them while trying to retrieve some important information. Or rather, what do we do if we get an important audio message and we're unable to listen to it immediately? We brainstormed through all these needs and possibilities and developed several solutions to satisfy them, therefore, optimizing the use of audio messages.

Besides, vocal notes are also efficient for writing down things: organizing ideas about a work project, preparing for a speech or a simple meeting, remembering commitments, etc. 2REC introduces new and unprecedented possibilities, which are not even limited to simple vocal recordings; specifically, each track can be associated with text notes, images and tags. Therefore, 2REC is a complete instrument that fares much better than many other apps offering features for recording and taking notes.

* **How are you communicating 2REC's services to your audience?**

To present the project's two souls, we use parallelism with a science fiction set in space. The "smart" soul, the technical, competitive, and efficient part of 2REC, is represented by astronauts conquering new planets by developing innovative tools and technologies, paving the way for further discoveries. Instead, the "fun" part is represented by aliens: they come with their extraordinary and unusual charm, one that astonishes, fascinates, and amuses us. The context of space perfectly expresses that idea of infinite possibilities and absolute freedom that 2REC desires to represent.

* **What's your business model?**

Our project is an ambitious one. It is aimed at the global market and has a consequent need to reach as many users as possible - from young ones to adults. This last condition is crucial for the project to become concrete.

For this reason, 2REC was developed for both iOS and Android. It is distributed free of charge and will be translated into 15 languages, 5 of which are available at launch, to facilitate its diffusion. All of this is in line with our mission, which aims to ensure that 2REC impacts many people's lives.

On the other hand, however, it is our genuine intention to carry out a project that is not only sustainable but also profitable. In this sense, we have evaluated many solutions until we found the best compromise.

According to our business model, profits will come from the PRO version upgrade and the sale of "extra contents" directly from the internal Store during the first stage. This is a proper eShop conceived for easy and quick browsing.

Upgrading to 2REC PRO allows for unlocking and adding services intended for "smart" use of the application. The "extra contents," instead, adds up to over 400 effects and are designed to expand the app's customization and sharing potential. These contents are explicitly created for the app by expert content creators and sound designers.

Afterward, as soon as a sufficiently broad community of users is reached, we'll go ahead and rely on "Reward Marketing," a widely spread form of promotion with verified efficiency, which stands out for its less invasive nature and is consequently more appreciated over usual ads. The underlying principle of this form of advertising is the offer, from the advertising firm, of a gift that the user will receive in exchange for its attention towards an advertising content. In our specific case, the user, following a "tap" (redirecting towards a website or social network profile), will receive a credit to be used in the Store to download additional contents.

Indeed, this strategy's performance is even more relevant today with our current saturation of advertising spaces, with the inevitable "drop-in attention" from the audience. For this reason, we need to do something more to stand out and have a significant impact in the eyes of users. In this sense, offering a "gift" as scheduled with Reward Marketing is a trump card and the future of advertising.

Furthermore, in the declination we studied, this method of advertising proves even more incisive. In fact, in its most common application, the user (or customer) is rewarded with discount codes, which can be used only for purchases in e-commerce or a physical store. 2REC, however, introduces something new that exponentially increases the effectiveness of this technique: the "reward" is recognized immediately and independently from any condition. The user does not have to perform any other action, and most importantly, he doesn't have to spend anything. Just one single "tap" is needed to receive the credit. After that, the partner company is certainly free to offer further discounts, special offers, or gifts to increase value for the reward further.

* **Is there a target audience?**

Given that 2REC offers itself as a precious support for all messaging apps and all social networks, we can say - in a somewhat provocative way - that it has the possibility of reaching anyone owning a smartphone.

Thanks to its "fun" approach to content creation, apparently destined for young users but actually designed for everyone. Thanks to the "smart" audio note management features that extend the target to professionals, 2REC has the concrete ability to attract people of all ages.

We're also pretty optimistic about triggering users' interest who are usually not involved with the world of social networks and who don't feel the need to create endless custom content. After all, we all send Christmas gifs or pics to family or friends. What about creating a voice note with your own voice, coupled with a Christmas jingle? Or rather, why not prank your friends with the simulation of a zombie voice?

With this being said, we believe that our primary target audience is made up of youth, or rather the very young, with their unique and entertaining freedom of expression and, therefore, their higher eagerness for using an instrument with these features. As is almost always the case for digital mass products, we hope that teens may act as a "battering ram" in the market and trigger the viral flame, thus allowing us in time also to reach older users.

* **Can you tell us something more about your marketing strategy?**

The period after the launch of 2REC's beta version was used by us also for conducting several promotional tests, with the target of establishing which platforms, methods, and contents were most fitting and efficient for intensifying the app's spreading. This is how we were able to mature a clear and precise vision of the strategies to be adopted to obtain better performance while also limiting investments.

Promotion within the AppStore and Play Store proved to be immensely profitable since there is obviously no better place to advertise a product than directly inside the store where it's sold.

Simultaneously, we have experimented with promotional campaigns on many social networks. From these tests, it emerged that the most suitable platforms for us, and subsequently, the ones on which we will focus most of our energy, are Instagram and TikTok. These social networks, due to their intrinsic nature and users, are perfect for meeting our target. Alas, we will also have campaigns on Facebook, YouTube, Spotify, and LinkedIn. The latter is the ideal platform on which we highlight the management functions purposed for more professional users.

In operational terms, we are working to create impactful, provocative, and hilarious content, owing to the considerable advantage of being an app that was born explicitly for fun. A bit like a comedian making a commercial in the role of a character who will then be the protagonist of his show, 2REC's contents will be the ones capable of generating fun promotional sketches for all kinds of channels.

Furthermore, we will also be active on offline channels, taking advantage of the Italian state's necessary incentives to support traditional media. Although it's been apparent for some time that communications have become digital, paper printing continues to play a crucial role in enhancing the growth path of a company. Any story becomes way more captivating with some "behind the scenes" knowledge about those who believed in the project, shared its vision, and worked tirelessly for years to make it as efficient as possible. Thus, we intend to invest in parallel in "iUP branding" to acquire the credibility needed for persuading other important players within our industry into discussing further synergies by reinforcing our image.

* **When was 2REC launched?**

As is commonly done with digital startups, an early beta version of 2REC was released last summer with the strategic objective of probing the market's acceptance of the product and obtaining valuable feedback from end-users.

Such feedback, together with other metrics for user behavior within the app that are collected in a completely anonymous manner, thanks to a backend software of our creation, provides us with precious insights for further improving our app.

At the moment, we are developing the "final" version, perfected in terms of functionality, optimized in performance, and with a graphically more appealing user interface, to be launched in early 2021. We don't consider this version as a point of arrival, but far from it: 2REC is a structured project, conceived to evolve. Different additional features have already been identified and analyzed, which will enrich and enhance all those services available to users and be gradually introduced.

* **What will be the next steps for such an ever-evolving application?**

We will also use the same data to drive the product's technical evolution. With 2REC, we're already offering a complete service, full of innovative features, but there's no way we're stopping at this point. Ever since its very beginning and concerning its technical development, we set up the project to upgrade the app, improving it by integrating further services within it. We have a long term vision, guaranteed by the limitless range of uses for audio technologies. Additionally, we're always on the lookout to intercept any possible developments that the industry's innovations may introduce, among which Augmented Reality.

The idea on which we'll immediately focus is the implementation of VoIP video calls. Recently of increasing popularity, characterized by the specific variations of the app, some of these services are more entertainment-oriented (single or group calls with "live" insertion of all of the app's effects) and others for management (recording and archiving of work calls).

Despite all this, many other functions have already been analyzed and validated in terms of technical feasibility. For example, our ambition is to introduce the same freedom of customization for the video format, thus providing users an even more exciting and unique creative experience. We will also create an additional keyboard soon, through which it will be possible to send 2REC contents directly from within messaging applications or social networks.

Or rather, we're studying the implementation of an internal chat developed explicitly for enhancing the audio messages' features, as well as for allowing users to exchange vocal notes directly in 2REC. Of course, the goal is not to replace text messages and compete with the most popular instant messaging apps but to offer users an additional service capable of making the creation and use of voice messages more efficient.

* **How important is the synergy between companies**

To speed up our growth process and fulfill the ambitious objectives that we have set for ourselves, we're already prepared for evaluating any possible partnerships with other firms for both technical aspects and commercial presence in the market. Opening towards joint-ventures with outsider realities means using a future-oriented perspective, looking towards new and potentially unexplored scenarios. It will be crucial to gather enough concrete evidence, through the metrics to be collected, to prove to be a strong and reliable player, capable of earning itself a piece of the market "pie" and moving on to the next step.

2REC may represent a significant turning point in the field of messaging apps and social networks right now, but we're pretty sure we're capable of so much more. Our services can be integrated with others, giving life to a product with an even more engaging user experience. Voice assistants can provide an excellent example in this sense, as we're discussing an industry that has literally exploded in recent months, and with which we have clear points of contact that only need to be explored.

This possibility is definitely a very concrete one. During the Silicon Valley experience, we had the opportunity to introduce ourselves to several possible partners, and some of them immediately expressed interest. Due to not yet receiving any feedback from the market at that time, we couldn't discuss the collaboration further, but we hope to once again "knock on their doors" with the strong results obtained.

* **Collaboration with other companies leads to an Open Innovation model.**

Indeed, openness to the outside is an approach on which we immediately founded the company. To develop a technically complex application like 2REC and be competitive in the smartphone apps market in general, specific knowledge in various industries is needed. For a small startup like ours, gathering such knowledge exclusively through our internal team is not actually possible. This is why we have based our corporate structure on the Open Innovation model. However, it was a natural choice for us since, thanks to my previous work experience as a Project Manager for large multinational enterprises, I acquired those methodologies that are needed for managing the processes and useful for implementing even the very complex projects, to which various professionals have contributed, many of which are scattered around the world.

* **Are you looking for new staff to integrate into the team?**

We are growing, and it is our ambition to continue to do so by collaborating with young talents who are enthusiastic about participating in an ambitious project like ours. Working with the right people is essential: the team must be made up of people who share our goals and embrace our project. This is why we're looking for proactive go-getters, guys, and ladies whom we will choose without focusing on their experiences but instead on their "spirit."

Furthermore, at this time, we are looking for collaborators to expand our structure. These should be external figures to work with remotely, but also new members of the internal team. We are looking for developers, graphic designers, illustrators, and marketers.

But in particular, we're referring to profiles capable of helping us expand our offer of content in our store, such as, therefore, sound designers, DJs, beatmakers, and anyone professionally producing music. We're offering them a double advantage for their collaboration: a percentage from sales collected by their artistic productions and the possibility of promoting themselves and increasing their visibility. Each of these contents will be available to users all over the world - an excellent opportunity for those who, besides earning directly with their work, would also like to get noticed and open up to new professional opportunities.

Anyone interested may apply through the appropriate section on our website www.2rec.app, or even faster by writing to us at hr@i-up.it.