

EDA University Center at the University of Puerto Rico helps promote resilient jobs in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria

September 20, 2017 is a day that forever changed the lives of people in Puerto Rico. As Hurricane Maria made landfall and wreaked havoc upon the Island, countless number of people lost their homes and jobs. Simple things became very hard to accomplish due to the lack of power, water, and communications. However, innovators were able to bounce back and help the Puerto Rican society recover through inclusive economic development and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) with assistance from the EDA funded Business Economic and Development Center at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez (UPRM).



Puerto Rico Industries for the Blind (PRIFB) is a 501 c 3 nonprofit corporation with a mission to offer employment and training opportunities for people with visual impairments. The EDA Center and its partner student organization Enactus helped PRIFB recover quickly to retain and create new jobs for people with visual disabilities and even expand their scope to serve persons with other types of disabilities. Efrain Feliciano, PRIFB executive director eagerly indicated *“With the help of the EDA University Center interns PRIFB returned to operations very quickly and was able to even expand its scope to provide training and job prospects for people with other types of impairments, given that 1 in every 5 people in the Island has some kind of disability.”*

Its resiliency has enabled the firm to capitalize on the increased manufacturing demands caused by Hurricane Maria to retain 45 jobs and create 47 new employment positions with an investment of \$450,000. They have also expanded job opportunities from mostly machine operators to including positions such as purchasing manager, purchasing specialists, sewing operations, sample makers, quality inspectors, sewing supervisors, packagers, and inventory employees.



The faculty collaborators of the EDA University Center also mentored UPRM alumni Emmanuel Oquendo and Israel Figueroa in the creation of the start-up, BrainHi. Through their automated receptionists, BrainHi provides automated appointment scheduling by managing missed calls, answering questions from followers on Facebook and chatting with potential patients on clients' websites.

BrainHi played a key role in maintaining people informed before, during, and after Hurricane Maria. Using “AdaBot,” BrainHi greatly aided celebrity meteorologist Ada Monzon in updating the Puerto Rican population on the expected impact of Hurricane Maria. “AdaBot” would respond to Facebook messages sent to the meteorologist in the same manner she would, using jokes and words such as “wepa” (Puerto Rican slang for “hey”). After Hurricane Maria cut off all communications within the island of Puerto Rico, Emmanuel would work wherever he could find wi-fi reception to continue to improve his product. Thanks to his resiliency, BrainHi now contains additional features and was accepted in 2018 into YCombinator, one of the most prestigious startup accelerator in the world, located in San Francisco, California.

BrainHi is the first Puerto Rican start-up to be accepted into YCombinator, where it is expected to continue developing and impacting Puerto Rico and the rest of the world for the better. At the moment, BrainHi has over 100 clients and continues growing. Founder, Emmanuel Oquendo, stated that *“the support of the EDA University Center and the mentors from the UPRM E-Ship Network were crucial in helping BrainHi excel in business competitions and evolve as a resilient enterprise that has created 15 new jobs and attract \$500,000 in venture capital investments during the past year in spite of the complex challenges we faced”*.

