

COVID-19: Interview with Jordan Appleson and Mike Jeffs at Hark

Founded in Leeds in 2016 by Jordan Appleson, Andrew Hathaway and Julian Kay, Hark provides energy and asset performance analytics to enterprise UK retailers. Its unique software makes monitoring large commercial estates much easier, from connectivity to visibility and intelligent control. Maddyness spoke with Jordan Appleson, co-founder and CEO and Mike Jeffs, CCO to understand how they are coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Maddyness] What is the biggest professional challenge for you today? (and what's the ray of sunshine?)

[Mike] I think the biggest professional challenge right now is gaining greater understanding. Understanding how current guidelines affect not only our

business but how they affect the business of our customers, future customers and, more importantly, members of the Hark team. The ray of sunshine is how positively people are/have been reacting, and in our own business, how people are able to come together and innovate around the challenge, be that a new product or a remote company social! People find a way, that's inspiring and drives me on.

What is the biggest personal challenge today? (and what is the silver lining?)

A personal challenge for me is productivity, not that I'm unproductive, but the separation I had before, between home and work, or screen time and no screen time. It's a challenge to give your mind a break, even for a short while as most of the things we're doing are via screens right now.

Is remote working a new thing for you?

Flexible working has been a part of Hark since it was founded. We've always been well setup to work remotely through Microsoft Teams and other digital tools, so it's been part of our culture to have people regularly work from home. That said, everyone is looking forward to being able to be in the same space again as a group.

What changes have you made to keep your business running?

The changes to Hark and how we operate have not been huge. One thing that sticks out is the increase in our internal written communication. We continue to have our usual weekly company meetings and we do our best to keep the wider company informed of how things are working. With the full team working remotely, we have increased the frequency of our written comms with staff which has been well received.

We've also re-prioritised our product roadmap, some deployments and installations have been delayed due to site closures however it's meant we've been able to build and deliver 2 new solutions: a new platform module and a series of online tools. So advertising is something we're looking at potentially increasing in the near term to promote those.

How is your relationship with your investors?

The relationship is fantastic. We're in a fortunate position to have known our investors for almost a decade and they offer a great deal of support. I'd say we've been in touch every single day and the conversations we have are always useful.

Have you had to end or delay your office rent contract?

We've been in touch with all of our suppliers as part of managing the business through COVID-19 including our landlords. We've aimed to manage cash flow to ensure we're not paying for things we're not using but we've also done our best to be respectful of other people's businesses and the fact that they are trying to manage this situation too.

What do you think of the support packages for startups offered by the government? What have you been able to use?

It's difficult to compare the packages to anything we've experienced or anything that was previously on offer. The fact that the packages exist is a good thing and we have friends at other startups who are relying on those support packages. The experience we've had with our local council (Leeds) has been more streamlined than other local governments.

There is a great deal of information available and what's helped us to understand what would be the most appropriate package to go for is the help of our partners, investors and advisors. They have been vital in helping to review and digest the information.

Do you feel confident in your business

post-COVID?

We feel as confident as anybody can, bearing in mind the situation. For us a number of projects were put on hold due to COVID-19, it's clear that those projects will restart and resume, but the key question is when and that's a challenge to plan for in the short term.

Our expectations of the market are that demand for remote monitoring and the solutions we offer will increase in the medium to long term, as businesses accelerate their technology and innovation budgets will increase.

Are there any changes in society/economy that you think will help you?

Absolutely. I think there will be more businesses who will offer permanent remote working options. We've been receiving positive feedback from holding new business meetings and software demos remotely, which is something that I think will become part and parcel of our sales cycle moving forward. This has been a bigger change to some industrial customers but one that they have embraced.

There may also be an impact on how construction companies and commercial building owners think about their assets and consumption – hopefully addressing some of those office lights left on overnight, for example. The challenge will then be seeing where the reduced commercial energy demand is replaced, for example, this could be in increased domestic consumption.

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