

COVID-19: Interview with Lee Vanessa Butz, CEO and founder of District Tech

Launched in 2017, District Technologies is a mobile-first workplace experience platform that digitises the user experience for commercial real estate by connecting people with what they love in and around them. Maddyness spoke to CEO and Founder Lee Vanessa Butz to share her journey, discover more about District Tech and what the future holds for office spaces.

[Maddyness] How did your career lead you to District Tech?

[Lee] Understanding the DNA of strong entrepreneurial hubs has been a silver thread throughout my career. Having written a master's thesis about it I have been lucky enough to take my theories into practice by initially launching big coworking campuses, first in Berlin then London, which consequently led to the creation of District. When creating these campuses, we realised that there was

a lack of technology available to support them, so I built an app from scratch twice as a client myself.

But building an app is expensive and doesn't really make sense to maintain yourself due to the expenses and time intensity involved. Therefore, a lot of large real estate players, and even large coworking campuses, have tried building their own office or community apps and have since discarded them to work with someone like us on a software as a service basis.

What does this software service provide?

District has built a proprietary mobile-first technology platform that it sells to clients who manage different types of buildings focused on community, wellbeing, shared spaces and services. Clients licence an app from us and it's all run on the same back end.

We can white-label, so it feels like the client's own app, allowing them to build their brand without the hassle of building their own tech in-house. The technology helps clients not only manage the people in their buildings but also operations: meeting room space, products to buy or sell, any amenities, concierge-style services or add-ons such as massages or dry-cleaning.

It can also function as a basic communication platform as it allows the landlord, property manager or company to communicate better in real-time with people in their buildings, which they've never been able to do before. In the past, the tenant-landlord relationship has been quite tarnished and we are helping our clients fix that. It used to be that office space was sold on 10+ year leases and landlords wouldn't speak to tenants unless something was broken or there was rent due. This has evolved significantly since.

We're fundamentally trying to evolve this dynamic from a negative landlord/tenant relationship into the opportunity for a more positive one by giving the clients the tools to build a much closer almost real-time connection.

It doesn't just have to be the owner. If the building is fully operated by a sole tenant or one company is managing it, they can also benefit from the same products that we have. Such as WPP for example, where we are rolling out to 170K employees globally for their campus experiences, and we also signed a large gaming company recently that will be using our tech to connect with their employees whether they are in the office or at home.

The added benefit of working with a SaaS company like ours is that the client benefits from any new core functionalities or features we roll out, and will never be left with an outdated platform due to it constantly being iterated and updated.

How does it work as an employee user?

Let's say for instance you're on the commute to work, you can open the app via face-id and the first thing you will see is what's happening today: any meetings, lunchtime networking activities, yoga classes – whatever is available in your office space. You could order products or services to your desk with the click of a button or scroll down to see what's happening tomorrow and the week ahead etc, so you don't miss any events or learning activities.

If you have integrated access control features you can use the same app to enter the main building, essentially replacing company cards or plastic lanyards. Once inside you can do whatever you like, perhaps book a meeting room, then put it away and focus on work. It's not like Instagram where you scroll all day; we've designed the platform to get what you need and then close it.

On the flip side, we also have community profiles where you can communicate with people in your company or building. You're a designer, for example, and you want to connect with other designers, maybe to go for a lunch, collaborate or make new friends, then you could use our community features to do so. Conversely, some clients who work in an office of 10,000 people might want to deactivate this or any others features – then the functionality can also be turned off.

The software is customisable to suit both client and user needs: clients can choose how much they want to show, and users can choose how and when they need it. The platform can also contain important structural information such as floor plans, car parking, wi-fi etc. Feeling appreciated, valued, and engaged in the workplace increases productivity and employee retention, so this app is a great way to support a company's employee engagement strategy as a digital platform at employees' fingertip.

Essentially, we're trying to bring the vision of coworking campuses to traditional office spaces and create a one-stop shop for your working environment. The benefit is increased loyalty and engagement from users, a more streamlined smart building that's a joy to be in and insights that can be tapped into for a deeper understanding of your community.

How has District Tech coped with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Well firstly it's about the team. My personal focus as founder and CEO has been the wellbeing of our team, checking-in on their mental health, allowing them a

day off or regularly running non-work related events through our District app, such as daily drop-in sessions, where any employee can join for a coffee and a chat.

I haven't had to furlough anybody, reduce hours, or make pay-cuts, which has been fantastic, and we are very privileged to have not been too affected by it. Because our products operate online, we can work remotely from home, so it hasn't been as disruptive as other businesses, and fortunately we haven't lost any clients. A lot of them are big companies in their own right, so have the means to continue with our service, and they think our product is very important to them, especially right now.

We've taken this time to really reflect on our product and identify how it can support our clients during this time and as we come into the "new normal". Off the back of it, we have developed brand new functionalities to help with re-entering the workplace safely. Due to the nature of our platform, it has almost become more valuable in these times, though it might sound bad to say because a lot of my start-up friends are struggling. I feel grateful because not only have we been able to survive this current climate but thrive and continue to grow our business. Looking at the positives, hopefully, the world post-corona will bring about new opportunities.

How have you personally been coping during the confinement?

Making sure I take lots of breaks because it's very easy for me to spend all day doing back-to-back Zoom meetings. I've been attempting to do sports alone at home for the first time, which is a skill that I haven't yet mastered, but I'll keep trying! As lockdown eases, I've been going for walks and socially distanced picnics with friends because I think it's important to start re-integrating with human beings as we prepare to return to work and hopefully an enhanced new normal life.

What does this return to work look like?

Within commercial real estate, the primary concern for companies and building owners is ensuring the welfare of employees and tenants. Currently, there's a real focus on reassuring returning personnel by taking physical measures to improve standards of health and safety in working environments, for instance, hand sanitisers and new floor plans. But the key here is communication.

There's no point going to these lengths if your tenants don't know about it, or are still uncomfortable returning to shared spaces, and that's where the District

Tech platform comes in. We've just launched some of our COVID-secure workplace functionalities to help get people back to the workplace safely through features such as health check-ins, booking contactless services and using heat mapping to indicate the least crowded areas. With the push notification functionality, you can send a short message that your community will receive immediately.

What I've found interesting is that we consider ourselves within Proptech, which before the outbreak was seen as a nice add-on for building communities. But it has now become an essential tool for landlords looking to rebuild confidence by informing tenants of safety measures taken and any upcoming important events. If you're a really forward-thinking owner, you could even take it a step further by implementing a hands-free environment; using an app to open doors, access control lifts or adjust the air quality in your smart building.

What about the future of office space?

Well apart from physical measures taken, I think we're going to see a substantial shift in the perceptions of what actually constitutes as an 'office', and therefore the way in which they're utilised. The rigid 9-5 schedule and everyday commute will be consigned to the past. Don't get me wrong – offices aren't going away – it's just how we use them that will change. Flexibility is key.

Companies will adopt a more fluid approach, mainly using offices like hubs as a point of contact for meetings, because face-to-face interaction is still crucial for generating productivity. With people now accustomed to working remotely, the 'office space' or working environment could be anywhere you choose: your home, a café (when they open), wherever employees feel most comfortable and productive.

Looking at the bigger picture, the most efficient change will be in optimising the functionality office space, which again is where District comes in. With an online platform, your staff don't have to necessarily be based on the premises in order to communicate efficiently. You can book space as and when you need, really streamlining the process with a nice user experience whilst optimising space, time, and money.

Moving forward, for us it's no longer just about coworking, which in the established sense is now pretty dead, but will re-emerge in some form and always be there – because working cooperatively has always been there. For us it's now more about managing a portfolio of assets. If you're a big landowner, like CEG or Merlin Properties or another of our clients, your focus is to optimise your asset value across your portfolio no matter how long the lease length may

be. Ultimately, as I mentioned earlier – communication is key. As flexibility increases and as we see a rise in distributed teams communication will be key to the future of work.

Lee is passionate about shaping the future of cities to improve everyone's work and life experience. Having studied Engineering, Economics and Management at Oxford University, she wrote her masters thesis on "Understanding the DNA of Strong Entrepreneurial Hubs" and took her theory into practice by building large technology and coworking campuses (Factory Berlin and Interchange Camden, Market-Tech). Working at the intersection of cities and technology, she has now founded District.

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