

COVID-19: Interview with Graham Mills, co-founder & MD of techspert.io

Founded in 2016 in Cambridge, techspert.io is a rapidly-growing tech startup that is revolutionising knowledge sourcing within the healthcare and life sciences sectors using machine learning. Maddyness spoke to co-founder and Managing Director Graham Mills to discover more about techspert.io and what the future holds.

Temps de lecture : minute

29 July 2020

[Maddyness] Tell us your journey up to COVID-19

[Graham] My career began in academia where I focused on exploration into pancreatic cancer chemoresistance. Life science is an area where primary research is crucial to progress and it became clear that academic knowledge was incredibly slow to transfer into the business world where it could be put to use. Here, I realised, was a business opportunity for a technology solution that enables organisations to gain the insight they need to reduce risk and, simply put, make better decisions.

In 2015, this led to the formation of Biotechspert in collaboration with co-founder Dave Holden-White. The company later became techspert.io.

techspert.io is the world's first AI (artificial intelligence) - powered solution to knowledge exchange. We have developed - and continue to invest in - deep search technology capable of trawling millions of global, real-time

online data points to locate world-leading experts on any topic, fast and accurately.

What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown?

The biggest professional challenge as a leader and entrepreneur lay in maintaining a focus on moving the business forward in times of uncertainty. Across the team, we have all committed to maintaining our exacting standards and motivation has stayed high. We have not compromised on any aspect of technology development, which protects our innovation leadership, and we have ploughed ahead on our 2020 strategy for growth.

Having said that, we are never so fixed on our vision that we lose the flexibility to embrace and adapt to changes around us. I believe that this ability to pivot is the key to our resilience and success during lockdown. Our purpose remains constant, but we are determined that our business will remain agile so that we stay relevant and effective in our space.

What have been the biggest personal challenges during lockdown?

I appreciate that there are a lot of people that will have faced much bigger challenges during the pandemic than myself.

Many will identify, however, with the struggle of social separation from loved ones. As I grow older, spending more time with my parents, in particular, has become more and more of a priority. As such, the real challenge of this pandemic for me, and families everywhere, is that seeing parents or elderly acquaintances in person is one of the riskiest activities we can do. Navigating a period of global chaos without being

able to surround yourself in person with those closest to you, weathering the storm together, can be incredibly difficult.

The silver lining, of course, is a fresh appreciation for those that we love and a reminder to let them know that we are thinking of them, even when we can't get together.

Will you be adapting your work to allow for more remote working?

The adaptation to working from home (WFH) has been one of the most significant work-related changes for us, as with many other businesses.

Luckily, technology businesses often are - or should be - ahead of the curve here. Our team is well-equipped to work from anywhere and we ran a trial team WFH day at the end of February in anticipation of lockdown to gather feedback and suggestions. We have been ordering for delivery any equipment that our people need to work better and more comfortably from home, whether that is a desk, a chair, a monitor, or a dongle.

Most of the team are eager to get back to the office but, now that we know everyone is equipped and capable of maintaining business as usual from home, we'll definitely continue to support flexible working.

How have you been keeping your employees happy?

Inclusion is an important ethos in our company, so our social team has - ironically - been busier than ever! We continue to welcome new starters with a techspert.io cake and work hard to keep our close-knit team together. We provide e-books, audiobooks, or post out copies for those joining our monthly book club and have regular coffee breaks and Friday

socials that people can jump in and out of for a catch-up. Our 'Friday Food Talks' are a regular lunchtime event where *techspertians* talk about something they are passionate about. This has moved easily and effectively onto Zoom, which we have also used to host quiz nights, games nights, and a hotly contested talent show!

As a leader, have you successfully managed your (and your teams) mental resilience through lockdown?

As a leader, my aim is always to retain the family feel of our growing team by staying as connected and energised as we would in the office.

There is so much technology at our fingertips to chat, meet and connect that maintaining regular contact across the team hasn't been a challenge. The important point is making those connections meaningful and ensuring people know they can speak up or reach out if they find themselves struggling.

For example, we recently hosted a lunchtime wellness discussion. There can be enormous value in sharing lockdown experiences with each other, so this was a chance for people to talk about their personal challenges and the strategies - however large or small - they have implemented to keep their mood, energy, and motivation up.

What changes have you made to keep your business running?

Changes outside of the physical location of our workspace have been minimal. We have obviously been more careful about how and where we spend money to match the current situation, but our plans generally remain on track - as does our forecast.

We secured investor funding earlier this year, led by pan-European VC firm [Nauta Capital](#) and including participation from existing investors, Cambridge Angels. This has helped us to continue investing in our technology advantage and keep building our business in core and new markets. Though, as the threat of a global pandemic emerged, we quickly pivoted our business back to its original focus on pharmaceuticals to ensure we were at maximum strength to deliver precise connections in this niche, fast.

Our team has grown this year, with recruitment and onboarding of several new staff continuing during lockdown. We have recruited VPs of Engineering and Sales - strategic hires in our 2020 business plan - and continue to make key additions to our team.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

Our mission is to disrupt and transform the primary research market, which has changed little since the invention of the database, so it is in our nature to be competitive!

We know that the world is much more dynamic, and knowledge evolves at a faster pace than any human-led solution can handle, so our focus is always on maintaining the competitive edge with our game-changing, AI-powered technology.

This year, we have developed and introduced new versions of our AI deep search and precision matching technology, adding tens of millions to our expert mapping capability. We enhanced the customer interface to better capture clients' primary research requirements and reinforced our AI programming against any kind of systematic bias in search and profiling of experts.

How is your relationship with your investors?

Our relationship with investors remains very positive. As I already mentioned, we closed a £3.76M Series A funding deal in February this year. As part of that deal, Carles Ferrer, Nauta Capital's General Partner, joined our team as a member of techspert.io's board and remains highly supportive of our mission to bring a powerful technology solution to the world's primary research industry.



Read also

[Finding and growing B2B dragons with Nauta Capital](#)

Do you feel confident in your business post-COVID?

I do feel very positive about business looking forward, but the scientist in me always seeks to understand before taking action!

Right now, we're busy analysing and quantifying the new dynamics of our market, our pipeline, our operations, and our team, then we will build on this foundation with confidence in our strategies for onward growth.

I think it's important not to try and return to the old state of 'normality', but instead retain an open mindset to embrace a 'new normal'. No one knows how our lives and workplaces will emerge from this upheaval, which can feel overwhelming... or it could be an exciting start to a new, flexible, entrepreneurial wave that will drive change and boost innovation. I believe that companies with this perspective will thrive as a result.

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

I believe that the pandemic has highlighted a gross underappreciation of the role that academia, research, and true expert insight plays in shaping business, politics, and society in general. As we begin to rebuild our economies, businesses need faster, more timely access to knowledge and expert insight as they make important decisions in the context of unprecedented economic and social conditions.

High-quality primary research can inform and de-risk these strategic moves that companies are having to make in an uncertain environment, but they need access to accurate specialist insight... fast. We are attracting clients away from traditional, database-led competitors as companies recognise the value to their business offered by the speed, precision and scale of our AI-powered platform.

Tell us about your future post-COVID?

techspert.io's post-COVID future is bright and it is exciting to be part of the journey. Bolstered by recently securing VC investment, we will continue the advancement of our core technology platform as a priority.

Plans for expansion into the U.S. market remain on track with the opening of a new office in New York later this year and we are gradually returning our focus towards growing our engagement with financial services and management consulting companies; sectors that are reliant on access to high-quality expertise to inform critical decision-making.



Read also

[COVID-19: Interview with Adam Popeck, VP Operations at Lifebit](#)

Article by Maddyne