

COVID-19: Interview with Jennifer Hore, co-founder & COO of Fluence

Using a cutting-edge natural language processing AI, Fluence facilitates transparent, repeatable decision-making in settings that require skilled interpretation of complex documents. Maddyness spoke with Jennifer Hore, co-founder and COO to get a better understanding of what they do, how they coped amid the pandemic and what the future holds for their company.

Temps de lecture : minute

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[Maddyness] What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown?

[Jennifer] Our company was badly affected by COVID. We were targeting regulators, who are known to be risk-averse at the best of times. When the crisis hit, our entire sector went into pure survival mode. In one morning in May, we lost over half a million pounds of projects from our pipeline.

On the plus side, the crisis forced us to take a step back from what we'd been doing to truly evaluate what options were available to us. It forced us to step away from what we were trying to sell and to think more about where we were needed most.

Because people were never more inclined to say no, we learned more about our business in three months than we did in the last two years.

During lockdown, we broke down our entire product offering into smaller, more manageable components, designed to help guide our clients through the AI-adoption journey so that no individual aspect of our offering is scary.

We also used the time to explore new markets and we've discovered a range of new opportunities which eclipse the ones we were pursuing prior to lockdown. So in many ways, COVID forced us to change and I am delighted with the company we've become as a result.

What have been the biggest personal challenges during lockdown?

For us, the exam scandal has been hard to watch. Our technology is designed and tested to automatically review student work in order to codify an approach to grading. Watching the crisis unfold, without being able to contribute, was a very difficult experience. My co-founder, David, wrote a couple of articles about it on [LinkedIn](#). We really believe we could have made a difference to thousands of people's lives.

On the plus side, the whole world now understands what our technology does and why it is important. Our AI can sometimes be difficult to explain. Now, all we need to say is "You know how difficult it was for the government to get hundreds of thousands of teachers to agree on the definition of an A or a B? We do that."

Was remote working a new thing for you and if so will you be adapting your work to allow more of it?

Yes, we really prided ourselves on having a lovely office in the heart of the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham.

We soon realised that we couldn't wait around for policy announcements. We decided to give up our office and implement a 12-month work-from-home policy. This meant that our team could settle properly into a new normal and transform their temporary solutions into a more permanent setup. So I've been focusing on how to make Fluence feel "Fluency" whilst not all being in the same office. I've really enjoyed the challenge and have some fun surprises ready for the team.

The team has responded really well and we haven't looked back.

It took me a while to get into the groove of lots more typing and Slack and more Zoom calls. I definitely went through a phase of Zoom fatigue, but I think there was initial overkill on how much I was using video conferencing both for Fluence and my personal life. After some tweaking, we've found a great balance.

How have you been keeping your teams happy?

We have a really great team and we all get on very well. We thought it was really important for everyone to have some normal non-work socialising, just to preserve the culture. We started off with a daily quick quiz or game at 3 pm to check-in. We still do a daily 3 pm checking, but now people join if they fancy it - most team members attend 3-4/week. We also completed a fun wellbeing challenge using [Kaido's platform](#) which provided a good source of conversation not about work and helped promote healthy conversation about our wellbeing.

We happened to hire someone the week that we were told to work from home, but thanks to our team catch-ups, they have also become a true Fluencer, even though some people on the team have never met her in person.

We're about to have our first virtual team day. The team doesn't know this yet, but they have a "box of yellow" arriving at their homes. Our office had lots of yellow walls to match our brand. The box contains a bunch of activities for the day and there are lots of yellow goodies, just in case, people missed the yellow. I'll be putting photos of the team day on our Instagram account @Fluence_Life.

The trick to a good virtual team day is not to spend too much time on Zoom. So I've planned plenty of offline challenges and we'll keep each other posted via Slack and WhatsApp - I can't wait to see how it works out!

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

I hope I have. There have definitely been times when I've found it difficult to get into the groove. I find it quite hard to think about 'what could have been' if COVID hadn't happened. We were on such a roll before the pandemic hit. Everything was going so well!

The thing I have tried to take away from this experience is that there are some things that are out of my control. I genuinely believe my co-founder and I have reacted in the best possible way to this crisis and that gives me peace.

I think the team has reacted positively to the fact that we haven't given up. We're driving forward. We have new, slightly different plans and we're carrying them forward as fast as we can. They have risen to the challenges in an incredible way. I really could not be prouder of them.

Have you made any changes to your business and business model?

Yes, big changes.

We realised that our product was actually quite a daunting one (AI that reads documents for you). We realised we could make the tech far more client-friendly.

We were selling AI that automatically reads documents and we learned that this is quite daunting. AI is quite a big transformational project at the best of times, we've worked hard at breaking our technology into three concise products so that we can support our customers throughout their AI journey, making it more manageable for them.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

We made the decision to find a new market. We figured that the public sector was in crisis and that they simply did not have the bandwidth to implement disruptive AI projects. The problem with AI is that it starts off stupid, so it takes a while for the client to see the value.

They have to train the AI before it is useful to them. We wanted to identify a market where the data already existed in the public domain so that we could train the software even before the client started to use it.

We set ourselves a goal of finding a market with very specific attributes:

- Market size of £1B+
- 100% private sector
- Experiencing growth
- Clear problems with managing documentation

- Evidence of accessible content where Fluence could add instant value

After researching Financial services and discounting it (so much red tape!) we landed on Intellectual Property. It turns out that there are billions of words of patents in the public domain. Companies face deep-rooted challenges in reading and interpreting patents. And with 1000 new patents coming out every week in the USA alone, a little automation could go a long way.

Global patents databases are tricky because every country categorises patents differently. That makes it really hard to do good research on them. Because our technology doesn't rely on these classifications to understand a patent, our product allows clients to do really interesting research on global patent portfolios as though it was one big map. The tech allows clients to research and visualise all their patent activities as a single product.

How is your relationship with your investors?

Our investors have been really supportive and complimentary during this time. They are aware that this is a risky time for any company, no matter how well it is run. We've had messages of encouragement from several people and genuine concern for our welfare.

We have not been made to feel bad or guilty for actions we've had to take. I think what investors really want to see right now is hustle and we couldn't be doing more of that. The biggest compliment we received from an investor is that this may have been the best thing to happen to us.

Do you feel confident in your business post-

COVID?

I genuinely believe that our post-COVID business is light-years ahead of our pre-COVID one. I think we will come out of this as a leaner and meaner operation.

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

I think the UK is craving some political stability. Brexit followed by COVID has been tough. And let's face it, we're probably not done with talking about either!

It is difficult to sell to a regulator when the regulator isn't really sure what laws they will be regulated in 6 months.

I know people say that crisis leads to innovation and I believe that is true. I think we saw that kind of cohesion in the health response to COVID. For other parts of the economy, the primary feeling is uncertainty. And during times of peak uncertainty, people tend to defer innovation spending.

I think there are so many innovative projects in the UK that are 'on hold' until the future is a little more certain.

Tell us about your future post-COVID?

We're pursuing some really exciting opportunities in Switzerland, selling into the pharmaceutical sector. Switzerland accounts for 11% of the world's pharmaceutical industry and we are setting up a branch there to explore this further.

One fantastic development about business etiquette since COVID is that video conferencing is now mainstream. That means that the cost of

maintaining commitments across multiple geographies has dropped dramatically, making it much easier to expand to new regions.



Read also

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