Be a secret agent for the day: Interview with Simeon Quarrie, founder of VIVIDA

VIVIDA brings the principles of storytelling to the world of tech – making learning engaging so that it actually sticks. Corporate training might soon involve donning a VR headset to get to the bottom of the dark web, or watching an honest documentary on mental health and suicide.

Maddyness spoke to VIVIDA's founder and CEO, Simeon Quarrie, about how he managed to 'hack' his way to better grades at school; why having his bank account emptied twice forced him to think seriously about cybersecurity; and his experience on the <u>NCSC Cyber Accelerator, powered by Wayra UK</u>.

[*Maddyness*] Could you tell me about your background leading up to VIVIDA, and what it aims to do?

[Simeon] Like many young children who don't particularly enjoy all things written and worksheet orientated, I struggled with learning. This was back in

the 1980s, when schools still implemented a very traditional type of learning. It just didn't work for me.

I was a little bit slower in class as a result, which worried a lot of the people around me. But ultimately I realised that, when learning was delivered in a creative or interactive way, I'd get things right. As a result, things that didn't matter to me before all of a sudden started to matter. Fast forward, and I ended up doing well in my education, because I managed to 'hack' myself.

I like to use creativity, interactivity and storytelling to make complex things more engaging, more exciting and more interesting. We take a subject that doesn't matter to people – and we make it matter. So, I formed VIVIDA, created an awesome team, and we've gone through various stages of storytelling.

For example, for Barclays Bank, we turned 'organisational resilience' into a subject employees genuinely understood and enjoyed learning about. We also got involved in making cybersecurity engaging – first with video animation, and then full-blown virtual reality (VR). For Barclays, we recreated the operation centre in VR.

You put the headset on and you're there. The telephone rings; you pick it up; you're told to turn the news on; and there's been an incident that you have to solve.

At Sky, we created a scenario where employees came face-to-face with a cybercriminal. This was so they would start to understand what the criminal was thinking, and his or her methods and approach. The cybercriminal changed from a man to a woman to a young boy, because that's what criminals do, right? They change the way they look. They appear the way they are in order to be able to catch people out.

Now however, VR has been temporarily relegated because of COVID-19. We can't have a queue of 100 people excitedly queuing up to take part in our virtual reality experience. We had to quickly think about how to repurpose our storytelling and intellectual property – to make it accessible.

We've started to create online, interactive, in some cases multi-language

experiences, where you get given a mission and you thereby increase your understanding of cybersecurity.

You might be an agent having to learn more about security so you can protect the business and your family; you might be told to investigate a past hack that's taken place through a technique called social engineering.

For too long, education related to cyber has either been very technical or very bland. We see a totally new way of educating people on the subject of cybersecurity.

Do you do other types of corporate training, or just cybersecurity? How come you wanted to educate people on cybersecurity especially?

As a team, we're very impact-driven. I wasn't interested in cyber – I didn't think it was that important – until my bank account was emptied.

Three days before payday, I went into the account and it was empty. When I rang up the bank, they put the money back in because it was related to fraud. Then I went to pay and, all of a sudden, my bank account was emptied again. They cleared out the overdraft.

Because it had happened twice in a week, the bank said they wouldn't give the money back until they did an investigation. How long is that going to take? At least a week or two weeks. So how can I pay anybody? I asked myself how it happened, and realised we had a lot to do.

That's one of the reasons VIVIDA started; I started to fall in love with the impact that we could have by helping businesses understand cybersecurity.

Cyber threats are becoming increasingly potent. Chief security officers get it, but to be able to tackle this problem, we need everyone within an organisation to understand digital safety.

There are other subjects that we're really passionate about. Diversity and inclusion is one of those subjects. As a Black founder and business owner, things haven't been easy – and I'm one of the fortunate ones.

We've created a film on mental health and suicide for <u>Helena Bourdillon</u>, the free diver, and we've made a short documentary on what it's like working in an organisation as a blind person. We helped one company's senior leaders understand what it was like to be a young Black man wanting to get a job in a big corporation, by using VR to literally place each member of the team into his body.

There are so many subjects we want to focus on but, yes, our key focus for the time being is cybersecurity.

VR is still pretty new. What do you foresee for its future?

I think VR could be a massive force for good – although it won't happen just yet.

But as more people work from home, VR will give them the ability to work in a different space – to teleport themselves into a different environment whilst inside the same four walls. There's an opportunity for escapism, and to learn by changing environments.

You inject tech with a bit of humanity.

Beyond what VIVIDA does, what role do you think telling stories, and learning from the arts and humanities, will play as the tech sector moves forward?

We've come to realise that we are very, very unique. While we really enjoy the fact that we are unique, my hope is that we end up not being so unique!

The problem of cybersecurity is so big that we really need diverse skill sets and approaches, in order to be able to solve this problem.

Sometimes, problems can feel insurmountable because you are focusing on tackling them from the same angle of attack.

I think that involving those who are from diverse backgrounds – that could be racially diverse, gender diverse, neurodiverse, or just those with diverse interests and skills – is really important. Cybersecurity is not a 'tech' issue; it's a human safety issue.

Could you tell me about your experience with Wayra and the NCSC Cyber Accelerator?

I was really fortunate with the Wayra/NCSC Cyber Accelerator and also with LORCA, which is the London Office of Rapid Cyber Advancement.

What really excited me at Wayra was that Oliver Dowden (Secretary of State for Media, Culture and Sport) came along on the day of our launch. This was really key because we're all about bringing media and culture together.

We found ourselves in a time period where we needed to pivot very quickly, just after lockdown kicked off. The timing of the Wayra programme meant that we were able to sort out our vision of how we were going to shift; the

programme helped us work out how we could change our business model, our strategy and our approach to market.

What my experience in 2020 showed me is that there is really good help and assistance out there for founders.

For me personally, from a political perspective or maybe more from a West Indian perspective, I've been brought up with this attitude of 'there's no one here to help you'. You've got to do things yourself; it's an immigrant mindset. The system will work against you just because it's not built for you.

The last year has seen that mindset totally shift because of the amount of mentoring, assistance, and access to people I've had.

What's your daily routine, and the rules you're living by to get you through lockdown?

I'm an action-orientated person, so when lockdown started, I moved immediately into action. My aim is to make sure that, personally and from the business side of things, I can look back and understand I'm better off at the end of it than I was at the beginning.

This could be a really negative time, but actually, if we can identify what we're in control of or what we have the power to change, we can reframe it.

We can turn a time period that would normally be negative into something positive.

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