Game-based learning with Dr Sarah Campbell, founder and CEO of Play Well for Life

Since 2015, the OVHcloud Startup Program has facilitated the growth of over 2,000 startups and scaleups. Maddyness is interviewing its participating founders, and today we speak to Dr Sarah Campbell, founder and CEO of Play Well for Life.

Temps de lecture : minute

23 June 2021

Dr Sarah Campbell has a deep belief that gamification can help learning, which can be <u>beneficial to users</u> of all ages and in different capacities.

Today, Sarah tells *Maddyness* about the power of game-based learning, the myths of the world of education, and making a comeback from a significant revenue loss.

Give us your elevator pitch (in 280 characters or less)?

<u>Play Well For Life</u> is an exciting profit-for-purpose company, providing innovative tools to equip young people with the skills needed to make informed choices and lead fulfilled lives, using game-based learning.

What is your favourite thing about being a founder?

My favourite thing about being a founder is the amount of variety every

day and the new skills and knowledge I continuously need to develop and then implement. I also love game design, and working with great people in my team!

You are currently on the OVHcloud Startup Program: can you tell us about your experience and the support you have received?

We have received great support for launching our first online product, and great technical guidance as well. OVHcloud have great customer service, are helpful, friendly and really understand what it's like running a startup.

How did your background in psychology lead you to where you are today?

I worked as a psychologist in wellbeing and education for 15 years, and I really saw how many of the traditional interventions we use didn't really engage young people in particular. I had always used immersive and game-based approaches in workshops and facilitation, and seen how effective these approaches are for people. I realised combining game-based learning – shown to be the best way to learn – and harnessing the potential tech offers to reach and engage a large number of people was the best way to engage young people to develop essential life skills.

My PhD research looked at how music could be used to help people better manage their emotions, and I developed a game-based intervention that was the basis for founding Play Well For Life. I had cofounded a wellbeing app previously and drawing on the lessons I learnt has been really beneficial.

How does gamification help learning?

Gamification is when particular behaviours are rewarded in some way. Gamification can help learning by initially increasing motivation, enhancing engagement and retention. However, over time, gamification can actually lead to a decrease in motivation, as rewards create extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, motivation. That is why at Play Well For Life we favour game-based learning, rather than gamification. Game-based learning means learning through playing games, using the structure, content and goals of the game to develop the desired skills and knowledge. In game-based learning, to do well in the game, you need to demonstrate the relevant knowledge and skills, rather than simply rewarding behaviour (as in gamification).

As humans, we evolved through exploring our environment, testing, problem-solving and through trial and error. Our brains are built to naturally learn and develop in this way, through engaging with our environment. Games require these types of processes, which is why they are great for learning! We also learn best when an experience is accompanied by emotions. Things we remember best are things that are accompanied by strong emotions.

Games and play create positive emotions and are highly rewarding, helping us to learn and then remember what we learn better, because the knowledge and understanding is accompanied by a positive emotional experience: meaning we are more likely to remember it.

> *People learn best by doing, by experiencing something, and using multiple senses, compared to reading or listening alone.*

This type of learning leads to information being processed at a deeper level, with more meaning, understanding and critical thinking, leading to a greater likelihood of remembering and being able to apply that knowledge in other areas.

Think about when you have taken your child somewhere, and through an activity they say something or do something that shows an understanding far beyond their age or what they demonstrate being capable of at school. This is the potential of game-based learning: to enable kids to far surpass their perceived capability in a shorter amount of time...all whilst having fun! And life is a lot easier as a parent when lived through fun and games, rather than battling with your kids to get them to learn!

What are the biggest myths about teaching and bringing up kids?

The biggest myths currently I think are:

- Traditional education is the best form of learning and education for children is one of the biggest myths still being perpetuated in society. The evidence does not support this, and this type of teaching, and the general structure of schools, only work for some children!
- There is still a myth used a lot in teaching about learning styles, and that different children learn through different modalities. The evidence does not support this, but it is still an approach seen throughout schools, higher education and also workplace training!
- Letting children dictate all choices in the household is NOT the best way to parent. Actually, all evidence shows that authoritative parenting leads to the best outcomes. This is still supportive parenting, but includes 'No' and boundaries, which create structure and safety for kids, letting them play and be kids!
- There is a myth we need to protect our children from the realities of life. Kids sense a lot, from a very young age. Children can understand

a lot, and it's particularly important to help them make sense of their feelings from a very young age to avoid confusion and internalising negative emotions resulting from what is going on around them. It is important to be age appropriate and use age appropriate language in these conversations, but children are never too young to talk about something that is happening, and this should be encouraged.Their behaviour often tells us if something is going on, so use this as a cue to have conversations. Remember, many Disney films begin with the death of a parent, so children are exposed to things like this through the programmes they watch, and it is important not to avoid topics they want to talk about or that may be affecting them.

Which founders or businesses do you see as being the most inspirational?

Stuart Malt, of Comnoco, is very inspirational to me. He demonstrates great business sense, calmness, excellent leadership and a real ability to understand what is important and what is smart in getting a product to market. I also think Anita Roddick will always be inspirational, creating a social and ethical business, and as a female founder, irrespective of what happened later with the BodyShop when it was sold to L'Oreal. As a surfer, I also think Patagonia is a really inspirational example of ethical business, and I encourage all founders to read Patagonia's story.

What has been your biggest business fail?

So far the biggest business fail happened quite recently, actually. We secured a contract with a large, global organisation to deliver our Escape Room, which develops and measures skills of teams, analysed against an organisation's particular culture. Due to internal politics at the contracting company, the project fell through, which lost us revenues covering 2.5 months of our costs. That is a big deal to a startup!

Another business lesson I have learnt is that things that look too good to be true, usually are! In the first year, I made several decisions to work with people at very low cost, which looked attractive to a newly-started startup. What I have learnt is this approach is usually a false economy. The input that is needed, the time taken to develop the project and the quality of the work produced means that in almost all situations where I have taken this approach, it would have been smarter to pay market rates and get good quality, experienced people to deliver the project instead.

What's in store for the future?

Growth! We are developing some new products at the moment, and are really excited about upcoming releases. We have just launched an immersive, music-based strategy game to help build teams and improve wellbeing, called Survive The Night, which is going down very well! We are releasing our Escape Room in July, and then our Augmented Reality board game to improve wellbeing in September… so exciting and busy times ahead!

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Develop a lot of resilience and don't take anything personally! Also, get some really good people you trust around you, who are happy to let you have a good moan and let off steam every now and then. It is really hard being a founder, and no-one sees what goes on behind the scenes and no-one experiences the highs and lows quite as you do. It is a rollercoaster journey, so make sure you know how to look after yourself, how to have down time and how to renew mentally and emotionally. Keep going, it is worth it!

And finally, a more personal question! We like to ask everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

My daily routine has changed completely! I used to be an evening type, but now I wake up naturally at about 4:30am every day, as the time before 8am is precious! I am energised, focused and have no distractions, whereas once 8am begins, and the Slack messages, emails and Zoom calls start, it is hard to find the time to focus on strategy and creative director work. Then by 6pm I am too tired!

I get up about 4:30am and have a coffee outside, listen to the birds and let the cat and tortoise out (!). I have a physical disability which requires quite a lot of management, so then I spend 30 minutes doing exercise to manage that condition and 20-30 minutes in meditation. I check my diary for what is happening that day, prioritise my workload and address any outstanding emails. I have breakfast, then settle to a few hours of really focussed work, either writing, product development related work or strategy.

8am arrives, and the calls start! My day is a mix of meetings with product dev teams for our various projects, calls with partners we work with, and calls/emails to develop new customer relationships. I also do some consultancy, so normally some of this is in there too! The afternoons tend to be answering questions/chats with individual team members about product development.

I try to catch up with emails from the day between 5-7pm, or any last minute calls/HR-related activities and so on. I then have dinner, go for a long walk, and chat on the phone to friends. I end the day reading a little,

or watching an episode from a series, before collapsing into bed!

Apply to the OVHcloud Startup Program

Article by Dr Sarah Campbell