

Meet Sona, the modern workforce management platform

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Oli Johnson, cofounder of Sona about building a mobile-first workforce management platform for the global 'deskless' workforce.

80% of the global workforce are 'deskless', but just 1% of VC funding goes to tech built for their needs. Sona is a modern workforce management platform that simplifies tasks like rostering, time tracking, and booking overtime for staff in frontline industries such as healthcare.

What was the catalyst for launching the product?

In a previous venture, Ben, Steffen and I were responsible for a team of 10,000+ deskless workers. Our operations were really complex, and we were swamped with admin. But we were unable to find software that could really help us manage our workforce in a smart way. So we built our own tech to manage everything from team availability to communication, upskilling, giving feedback, working with friends, and fintech features such as early payouts. We were able to achieve consistently high staff satisfaction and retention as a result.

Through our partnerships with hundreds of leading retail and hospitality

brands, we realised that few had similar tools in place for their own workforces. That experience, combined with our belief that mass smartphone adoption will see the technology gap between desk-based and deskless workers will close more rapidly over the next decade, was the inspiration behind Sona.

Our mission is to put modern technology in the hands of every frontline employee that combines the power of workforce software with a user experience that makes everyday tasks as quick and easy as ordering an Uber.

Tell me about the product – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers, USP and so on?

Frontline organisations can only operate effectively if they have the right number of qualified staff in the right places at any given time. They will only excel if their staff are well informed and highly motivated.

On the surface, that sounds like a relatively simple recipe for success, but at huge scale – we’re talking from hundreds to tens of thousands of people – that becomes incredibly complex.

The main pain points that our customers experience as a result of that complexity are higher operating costs, lower productivity, and too much staff turnover. Everything we build is dedicated to solving these problems, helping customers to reduce their staffing costs, automate more processes, cut out time spend on admin, and improve employee engagement.

We believe the key is empowering frontline staff by giving them the ability to ‘self-serve’ rather than rely on input from their manager or head office. And that’s what sets us apart. We have built Sona mobile-first, so every employee can have our employee app on their phone so they have direct access to important work tasks and information.

The app enables one of our standout features called ‘shift filler’ which automates the process of finding shift cover when someone drops out. This can take hours of manual work – individual emails, calls, texts to staff – but through our app staff can get instant alerts when overtime shifts are available and claim them instantly.

Our product offer also includes rostering, time and attendance tracking, holiday management, feedback and recognition tools, all of which are also accessible through the app. A lot of our initial traction has come in healthcare, social care

and the voluntary sector, all of which have faced significant staffing challenges all the way through the pandemic. We're proud to be working with leading service providers across the UK and Ireland.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We're well into our second year, and it's changed a lot!

From a business perspective, we've grown significantly since launching in 2021, tripling the size of the team (we'll be 25 or 26 by the time this is published) and adding thousands of new frontline users each month. And back in March we announced our *\$7M seed funding round*, led by Google's Gradient Ventures, which is an incredible validation of both the work we've done so far and the opportunity ahead of us.

From a product perspective, we were fortunate to find some brilliant early customers who have really bought into our vision and pushed us to be more ambitious with our roadmap than we had initially planned. This is taking us in exciting new directions, for example, we recently launched a unique set of features focused on helping frontline employers improve their staff retention.

What is your favourite thing about being a founder?

I love building products that address real needs for large groups of people. I especially like it when our insights about how to build these products are unique.

I love working with smart and highly motivated people.

I love that every day is different.

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

I'm inspired by founders that aim to have a net positive impact on the world and also play the game well, e.g. are hugely inspirational or operationally excellent. That said, coming from Iceland, a very small place where you regularly meet your heroes, you quickly develop this sense of nobody's perfect. And so, while I do take note and am inspired by founders, I tend to not dwell on these things.

Which other figures in your life inspire you?

The people I spend the most time with every day. My wife, my cofounders, my colleagues. I'm also hugely inspired by my parents.

What has been your biggest business fail?

Our previous business was a gig economy platform where people could work in retail and hospitality on a shift-by-shift basis. Our mission was to be the most awesome part-time job and to give people real control over when, where and how they worked.

I still believe that a significant proportion of the population prefers to work this way and in the future a sustainable platform to facilitate this way of working will emerge. Ultimately though, we were unsuccessful, with the pandemic playing a major role in that failure.

What are the things you're really good at as a leader?

I'm pretty enthusiastic, a trait that has served me well in inspiring people to join me on a variety of projects!

I'm empathetic, and I care deeply about the people I work with. These traits help me build and grow relationships.

Finally, while I have opinions on most things, I try to only focus on decisions that maximise outputs. That usually works out well, but has occasionally resulted in terrible restaurant orders.

Which areas do you need to improve on?

Communication. Delegation. Prioritisation. The list goes on...

What's in store for the future of the business?

Sona is still a young company but growing quickly. At present, we're heads-down building the best product we can and establishing ourselves in the market. Ultimately, I believe we have unique insights into how to manage and engage large deskless workforces and that those insights are applicable across different sectors. So in the future we intend to make inroads into other deskless sectors and expand to other geographies.

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

I often reflect on what it would have been like to go on the founder journey alone. I've been blessed with incredible cofounders that have made both the highs more epic and the lows more manageable, while also multiplying our odds for success. I would advise future founders to co-found businesses. And if you decide to go solo, make sure you have people outside of the business that you can lean on during the bumpy ride!

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?

Nothing crazy. I try to exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and eat well. But I also have a young son, Theo, and my main priority outside of Sona is to spend time with him.

Oli Johnson is cofounder of Sona.

Article by OLI JOHNSON