Meet Another Round, creating an accessible and personalised fitness community

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Jesse Shanahan, CTO at Another Round about making disease mitigation accessible for more people, avoiding the hype around AI and finding a healthy and sustainable work-life balance.

Temps de lecture : minute

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At <u>Another Round</u>, we're aiming to fundamentally change the way the world accesses personalised fitness. We know that nutrition and physical activity are key mitigators for the risks of preventable disease, and yet there are so many barriers between the everyday person and the fitness industry. Through the conscientious use of cutting-edge technology, we are targeting some of the biggest barriers - cost, accessibility, and education. Recent studies in exercise science indicate that one of the strongest contributing factors to people meeting their fitness goals is being able to have a personal trainer. Trainers bring knowledge, support, and experience, but most people aren't able to make use of personal training due to the costs, exclusivity, and inaccessibility. By using technology to scale quality personal training, we can lower those costs, break down barriers, and create a fitness community that can be accessed by everyone.

As CTO, can you explain how your company

uses artificial intelligence and how do you see AI impacting the future of the fitness industry?

While I do see technology advocacy as part of my role, too many years of being a machine learning engineer has made me extremely cautious about the proper utilisation of artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) models. There are a lot of products across numerous industries that are hopping on the AI/ML bandwagon, regardless of the feasibility or ethical impacts. In the fitness and health industries, this is even more concerning as the risk for harm is much higher.

At Another Round, we recognise that automation is going to be a key part of scaling affordable personal training. However, AI/ML is just one approach to achieving that, and we'll only make use of it as long as it is the best tool for the job - and as long as we can safely mitigate the risks. Our process takes in data that the user consents to share with us (like their fitness goals, injuries, types of exercise they enjoy, etc.) and combines trainer expertise with explainable automation. The output is a highly personalised exercise programme that is customised for the individual. As that person continues to complete workouts and provide feedback, their responses are combined with their trainer's feedback to further improve and tailor their programme. At no point is human expertise and oversight left out of the loop, and we've designed additional safeguards to ensure key decisions are always made by the trainer.

How does Another Round answer an unmet need?

Especially given the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increased focus on global disease prevention, and while the mitigation strategies are seemingly simple (good nutrition, increased physical activity), they

remain inaccessible for a significant percentage of the world's population. Whether due to the costs of training, gyms, equipment, etc., or the fact that the vast majority of fitness programmes can't meet diverse needs, there is a substantial population of people whose health needs aren't being met. Our goal is to fix that: first, by utilising online personal training to remove geographical barriers and then by leveraging automation to enable personal trainers to support more clients. In addition, we are improving the average quality of training and the knowledge base of the user by providing support and educational resources. Finally, we are working with subject matter experts and community members to ensure we are able to safely support every person in their health journey, regardless of fitness level, disability, age, body size, or goals.

What has been your biggest challenge so far? Are there any limitations to 'working with' AI and incorporating it into your software, and if so, how have you overcome this?

One of the biggest challenges so far has been avoiding AI hype. There is an enormous pressure, especially for a startup during a raise, to lean into the somewhat misleading marketing around AI technologies. For a while, we were attempting to integrate a more complex machine learning model into the product, and we realised that it wasn't called for. While it made for a flashier pitch deck, the sacrifices we were making in explainability, transparency, and accountability weren't worth it (and honestly, there wasn't much difference in performance, either). So, we rebuilt the entire system from the ground up with a much more cautious use of automation. As we move forward, we will continue to insist on human and value-centred development. This means only making use of technologies that we can provide accountability and transparency for. We firmly believe

that holding true to that development philosophy builds trust with our users, our investors, and leads to a better product in the end.

What one piece of advice would you give other CTOs or future founders?

Remember that the fanciest piece of technology has no value unless it is actually used. To encourage adoption, you have to build trust, and trust is built on transparency, accountability, and safety most of all. From the design of your product to the teams that build it, make people, not profit, your highest priority. Then, you'll have a business and a product that's truly sustainable.

Tell us about the working culture at Another Round?

I realise I might be biassed, but I absolutely love the culture we're building at Another Round. We work hard, but we've really prioritised ensuring everyone has a balance. I firmly believe that the traditional tech startup approach of "work hard, play hard" just leads to burnout and exhaustion. We want our team to stick around long term, so we'd rather have a healthy, sustainable approach to success. This means trusting that each person knows what they need in order to do their job well and giving them the flexibility/support to achieve it. Aside from that, there is a lot of silliness, laughter, and camaraderie. My philosophy is that people who enjoy their workplace, are supported, and have actual work-life balance are more creative and build better technology!

What's in store for the future?

We've got an amazing year coming up, so I'm incredibly excited. We're launching our B2B business and are really entering a growth phase. On

the tech side, I'm focused on expanding our tech team, by building a strong foundation of processes, policy, and people to drive us forward. Later in the year, we're going to be leaning harder into R&D, and I can't wait to dive in and start exploring what we've got planned.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

As someone with ADHD, I find routines both absurdly helpful and nearly impossible to form. That said, I've found that starting my morning with meditation, gentle physical activity, and time with my dogs sets me up for a good day. I live in Sweden and during the winter, it gets quite dark, so spending time in bright light, even if artificial, is also essential. I find the more time I spend in nature, the happier I am, though prioritising that during gloomy weather is always a struggle. One rule I try to live by is that I don't compromise on sleep anymore. The more research done into sleep, the more we learn just how absolutely critical getting sufficient quality and quantity is. I've made the mistake in previous jobs of putting the work first, thinking I had to prove myself (especially being the only woman on a lot of tech teams) or assuming that working more meant getting more done. Then, I experienced pretty severe burnout, and it has taken me several years (and moving to a new country) to recover. So, I've learned the hard way that good work happens when I am healthy, happy, rested, and supported. Any routines or rules I set for myself are ultimately about making sure I am bringing my best self to both life and work!

Jesse Shanahan is CTO at _Another Round_.