

How I overcame early career obstacles, and why you should have a focus outside of your focus

My journey to running a business and becoming a CEO was accidental. At 20, I was forced to stop chasing the rugby dream due to a few serious injuries - I had to quickly carve a new path where I could channel my ambition and work ethic. This took me first into recruitment, then to various businesses including eBay where I worked alongside pioneers in the rise of eCommerce. Not long after, I found myself in the high-octane throes of a VC-backed Silicon Valley startup and ultimately founded Detected in the middle of 2020.

Through navigating challenges at each stage, I was both inspired and learned fundamental lessons about effectively managing myself and a technology business from startup to scaleup. Here's what I've sussed out.

Driving innovation in big business will teach you creativity, resilience and people skills

When I arrived at eBay in my mid twenties, I hadn't worked in a business bigger than 100 people – at the time, eBay had 35,000 people. It quickly became clear to me that large companies value process more than individuality. Creating, innovating and challenging the status quo in a big business is literally an art that most never master. Motivated by driving results, I kept pushing because I just couldn't bear just watching the weeks roll by with nothing to show. One example is taking the concept of Click & Don't Collect to market with Shutl, a business eBay had previously acquired. Now, as the founder of a category-creating B2B technology, I know how to operate as a partner to big businesses – what makes the senior decision makers tick and how to get access to them.

Good mental and physical health makes you a better leader

One of the key mindset shifts I developed and often talk about is what I call New Year's Day Energy. This refers to waking up each day as excited about the possibilities and opportunities ahead as you do when you start the new year with big dreams about what's to come. Through experiencing some lows, I know in my bones that happiness is essential to success, so I prioritise my mental and physical health to maintain my happiness. Everything in my life is designed to make me happy because that is where we all do our best work – effort placed into my mental and physical health is key to this. Happy wins.

A focus outside of your focus helps you mentally take a break

When I was younger, my whole attention was focused on my work. Now, I'm committed to having a focus outside of my focus, and recommend it to anyone reading this. When starting a business everything can become intense very quickly, which can lead to over thinking and analysing things. Simply taking a break without something else to focus on, isn't enough for me to take my head out of work-mode. That's why I now make time to do the things I love. Ridiculous things, like setting myself the challenge of rollerblading 500 miles from Edinburgh to London in July (and setting the world record for the fastest

time). People have different types of downtime and you've got to find your best disconnect, whether it's a physical challenge, art, volunteering or simply doing nothing.

Really caring about people makes a difference

Early on in my career I learnt that building a strong network takes time and effort. I've found that being honest, sticking to my word and working hard are the best ways to be memorable to others. It is also crucial to stay in touch with people, not just when you need them. For other tech founders looking to build a strong network, I would advise focusing on building genuine connections rather than just collecting contacts. Bring your character and individuality to your day to day.

Don't take everyone on their word

If I could start this business again, I'd push for more specific examples of where the advice I was being offered by certain people had helped other businesses in the past. That way I could qualify their feedback and input, and choose whether or not to take it. Lots of people seem as though they want to help, but in a lot of scenarios that isn't actually the motivation – it's actually money or ego.

Tune into your gut instinct

I talk a lot about building a world class team and it's been crucial in allowing us at Detected to do what we do. The biggest lesson I have learned, the hard way, about leadership and building a successful team is that you have to trust your gut instinct. Additionally, the number one characteristic you need in anyone that joins your team is that they care. Ask yourself: would this person act in the best interests of the rest of the team if nobody was watching? If the answer is not 100% yes, it's a no.

Nothing beats hard work

If I had to share one piece of advice for anyone working in the startup world right now I'd tell them to work harder. I don't care what anyone says and this isn't glamourising 'the grind' it's just hard. The rewards are so great and so few people realise their ambitions because, in my opinion, they just don't work hard enough. Just make sure you look after yourself though because that balance is the real secret.

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