

Eargym, improving hearing and reducing dementia

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Amanda Philpott CEO and co-founder at eargym about building immersive games designed to train our brains to hear better and opening up the conversation about hearing.

I've always been passionate about working in healthcare and improving population health. I worked in the NHS for nearly 30 years across a number of different roles. Whilst I loved working in the health service, I wanted to branch out and learn more about population health from a different perspective. So I applied for the Zinc Accelerator, aimed at building businesses that can improve quality of later life for millions of people.

It was on the accelerator that I discovered I had hearing loss and met my co-founder, Andy. Initially, I hadn't realised the seriousness of hearing loss - I didn't know it's the biggest amenable factor in 8% of all dementias. After a talk from the RNID, I began to realise I was experiencing symptoms of hearing loss myself. I also soon realised how much stigma there is attached to hearing loss - people wouldn't bat an eyelid if you wore glasses, but wearing hearing aids always turns heads.

Andy and I decided to launch eargym together as we noticed how neglected hearing loss is, despite it affecting so many of us. We wanted to help tackle the

hearing loss epidemic and address the social and cognitive impacts of hearing loss by empowering people to proactively improve their hearing, and at the same time contribute data to this vital field of research. So we built eargym, a hearing tech platform that helps people check their hearing easily, and uses immersive games designed to train our brains to hear better.

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

eargym is a digital step by step hearing care platform. We provide a suite of hearing and impact checks for people to get a good understanding of their hearing health, and then recommend specific auditory training games, delivered via a smartphone app, which simulate realistic listening scenarios to improve auditory processing skills like speech comprehension and the ability to locate sounds. We also provide expert advice and guidance if our checks indicate you might benefit from face to face hearing specialist help. Our platform enables people to train their hearing regularly, and also take regular checks and monitor any changes. In a recent eargym study, 83% of our users reported an improvement in their hearing after using the platform for 7 weeks.

We have a D2C app, and we're also working with companies to help them nurture hearing health in their organisations.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We launched eargym in May 2020. At this point we didn't know where it would take us. At first it was all-hands-on-deck, with Andy and I handling everything. Over three years later, we've expanded to a talented team of 12 across marketing, games design, UX and research, and we have some incredible partnerships in place with big organisations like the Alzheimer's Society. It's been a brilliant journey so far, and every download we get or game played represents greater awareness for hearing health.

Tell us about the working culture at

eargym

Our culture is based on fairness and empathy. We work remotely, so everyone is given autonomy over how they'd like to structure their day. Our team is friendly and diverse, with lots of people at different stages of their eargym careers and based in different parts of the world. But we're all united and passionate about our joint mission to radically improve hearing health and address the correlation with dementia.

How are you funded?

We're a tech startup that's at the start of our revenue generation, so equity investment is very important to us. We bootstrapped, raised a SEIS (family and friends) round, raised a pre-seed round with a lead investor and some 400 individuals via Crowdcube, and we're now excited to be raising again.

Importantly, about a half of our funding comes from research grants, including the Alzheimer's Society, the UKRI Designed for Ageing awards, and the Longitude Prize on Dementia.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge of any startup is working out how to prove to investors that people will pay for your product or service, so identifying and building your best route(s) to market is critical. We've tested different routes and we're now confident that offering eargym B2B as a health and well-being benefit for employees is the best way forward, because hearing loss costs the UK economy £25BN a year in lost productivity and early retirement, so the cost-benefit equation for businesses is clear.

How does eargym answer an unmet need?

eargym is opening up the conversation about hearing like never before. We are the first company giving people practical tools to proactively improve their hearing without hearing aids. Hearing loss is the elephant in the room – around 12 million people in the UK are affected by it, whether or not they know it. It is associated with social isolation, dementia and poor mental health – and affects people of all ages. Yet, despite this, adults wait an average 8.9

years before seeking help, largely due to age-related stigma surrounding hearing loss. eargym is normalising caring for your hearing and creating accessible ways to engage with and improve your hearing through regular, daily practice.

What's in store for the future?

We're excited to be taking part in a number of research projects which are leading the way in how looking after our hearing can improve our quality of life. In particular, we're really excited to be working with the Alzheimer's Society to further investigate the link between hearing loss and dementia and how hearing training can help.

We're also really excited for more people to join eargym and start training their hearing, which we hope will help end the stigma surrounding hearing loss. We are hoping to partner with even more employers and businesses to provide their employees with access to hearing training as a work benefit. Ultimately, we want to make hearing care as accessible as eyecare and dental care at work and in society at large.

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

It's never too late to start something. When I applied for Zinc I didn't feel that I matched the typical "tech bro" persona, nor had the characteristics to be a startup CEO. Changing careers mid-life felt daunting and I was definitely nervous. But it was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

I'd tell those thinking about launching a startup to not let self-doubt or preconceived ideas about what a tech founder looks like hold you back. I've learnt so much since joining the tech world and it's been an incredibly stimulating new challenge. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to embark on this second career.

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

Great question - my daily routine has changed massively in the last few years and I don't know how much is down to eargym and how much to the Covid

lockdowns. In my previous career I didn't get the work-life balance right at all, and my sense of well-being and my relationships suffered. These days, I start the day by walking the dog, get to my desk around 9am and work about 8-9 hours any time up until 9pm at night. This flexibility allows me to take breaks when I need them and be as productive as possible when I'm working.

As for rules, Steve Peters' (The Chimp Paradox) mantra of 'Enjoy yourself and do your best' is my guiding light.

Amanda Philpott is the CEO and cofounder of [eargym](#).

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