

Ditto, the talent sharing marketplace

Creating a startup is always challenging. Founding one during a tech downturn, cost of living crisis and recession seems near impossible. However, with risk comes reward and many of the world's most successful companies were founded during times of economic uncertainty. As part of a series with Antler, Maddyness has interviewed founders hoping to become the entrepreneurial success stories to emerge from this time of crisis. This week, Maddyness spoke to Dave Owen, cofounder of ditto.

Temps de lecture : minute

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As Co-Founders, we each experienced different problems caused by the same problems in our pre-ditto careers. Primarily, the lack of skills and talent to go round. Secondly, the inability for companies to be agile with their workforce and to easily and affordably flex up or down as needed. This was extremely apparent during and after the pandemic. Despite our different experiences, we had the same desire to transform talent in a big way and a vision to normalise talent sharing and build a brand new type of career path in the process.

Can you share your elevator pitch?

We're *ditto*, the UK's first secondments marketplace. Our vision is to normalise talent sharing by making it simple & highly cost effective to loan or borrow employees.

We curate and set up personalised development opportunities that

employees will love, at external companies who cover the salary costs. Meaning companies can offset fixed costs whilst developing their people. This is a fundamental reinvention of Talent Development that simultaneously unlocks affordable and effective workforce agility for the very first time. All the benefits of internal talent mobility, increased via external talent mobility.

Not only that, all our members can access a brand new, short term talent pool of high quality, vouched-for secondees unavailable to them until now - 3.5x cheaper than traditional temporary staffing options today, such as contractors. A game changer for our public services who for the first time have a mechanism to close the skills gap with the private sector that is simple and affordable.

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Antler?

I was traveling the Americas after working with the BBC and like many people that join Antler, I had an 'idea'. That idea led me to research starting a company, discovering incubators and soon after, Antler. I really enjoyed Antler and importantly it's where I met my co-founders and discovered that my original idea might have been good, but it wasn't one enough people cared about!

Tell us about the working culture at ditto?

It's pretty simple. We value our personal lives and believe that mental & physical health come first. If they're out of shape we can't do our best work at ditto. We adopt an honest, open and authentic communication style and believe a problem shared is a problem halved. Finally, we know we'll have to scale ourselves up as we grow the business and we're determined to be the leaders we'd want to work for.

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

Building awareness of talent sharing and secondments as a new workforce planning lever and the benefits on offer. Customers have varied misconceptions and readiness to share their permanent talent with others and it sounds counterintuitive at first. When we explain our members can offer amazing development opportunities and are reimbursed 90+% of salary costs monthly. Plus they don't have to change employee contracts or salary payments, they LOVE it, but it might take an extra meeting to explain things first. We overcome it everyday and it's fun to have a growing variety of members from bleeding edge startups to large companies.

What's in store for the future?

We believe it will soon be as normal for companies to share talent externally as it is internally. We want to make it as easy to develop your existing employees skills as it is to hire new employees with the skills you now need. As the UKs first secondments marketplace, we're really excited by the fast emerging, mutually beneficial examples to cross-pollinate skills and talent. Whether that's making highly-skilled talent affordable to the Public and Third Sector. Or startups sharing each other's talent to reduce burn and extend their life. So to answer the question; growth.

How has the cost of living crisis and the tech downturn impacted your experience building ditto?

Interestingly it's helped in some ways. Companies and leadership teams are more cost conscious than ever and acutely aware of the need for

workforce agility. The idea of boosting the bottom line and reducing what has historically been a very fixed cost in salaries, has been what's caught the eye of many of our early members - as well as the fact their people are being developed and upskilled on personalised secondments they care about and love.

What barriers have you faced in realising your entrepreneurial ambitions? How can we make entrepreneurship more accessible in the UK?

I grew up on a council estate in rural North Wales. The concept of entrepreneurship didn't really reach my radar until university. Even then it was largely associated with people that had grown up with an example to follow or money to burn. I think this has largely been changed by the popularisation of podcasts giving founders a bigger platform and what looks like a growing number of 'day zero' style investors who recognise the opportunity to increase accessibility. It's hard to say I've had a specific barrier to entrepreneurship, but there's certainly an opportunity to formalise it's inclusion at university in some way I think.

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

Don't wait to "know" the idea of your startup. Embrace 'not knowing', as the whole point of becoming and being a founder. It's a Founders job to detach what they know from what customers know and want. It's a humbling and liberating realisation that instantly encourages you to focus energy on the right things. It's easier said than done, so create rules early on to check yourself and your co-founders when you hear yourselves saying things like "I think we should" too much. Follow the data!

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

Well sober October is well underway with the added challenge of no dairy. I ran the Manchester half marathon and think it's extremely important to always have something like that on the horizon and to do things that are uncomfortable as often as you can. In terms of work, I've tried to embrace working when I feel like it. That sometimes means getting into the office later but can mean sitting in the dark until the early hours. Giving myself permission to work when I want vs being structured has worked really well and thankfully as a team we're all onboard with that approach.

Dave Owen is the cofounder of *ditto*.

Antler is one of the world's most active early-stage investors. With 900 portfolio companies in 27 countries, they have a global community of early-stage founders addressing the world's biggest challenges.

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