

AWS Women's Demo Day in London: Empowering advice from empowered women entrepreneurs

AWS (Amazon Web Services) recently held the AWS Women's Demo Week, an event to provide women founders with access to funding, partners and potential customers, ultimately helping startups go to market faster. Paul Ferretti went to AWS Startups Women's Demo Day in London, to learn about the women founders and leaders of today and tomorrow.

"Take a no as a sign to improve yourself, or fight it. Keep pushing." – Alex Scott MBE

An inspirational day for female entrepreneurs, an inspirational day for us all.

Unique and prestigious speakers were assembled on AWS Women's Demo Day in London to provide the guests with advice, but also share their knowledge and experience.

Ina Yulo Stuve, Head of Startup Marketing, UK & Ireland at AWS, set the ball rolling. Beyond her regular role, she proved to be a skilled and captivating presenter, in charge of introducing the plan for the day to everyone in the room. She also listed a few important and surprising information, such as the fact that 67% of the questions posed to male entrepreneurs were promotion-oriented, while 66% of those posed to female entrepreneurs were prevention-oriented.

Tricia Troth, Head of Startups, UK & Ireland at Amazon Web Services, held the fireside chat at the event with the headline guest. She talked about the importance of such events, as well as their impact on the startup ecosystem.

“At AWS Women's Demo Day we leveraged our network to help connect women-led startups with our investor connections and resources to help these businesses to achieve the acceleration they deserve, and show they should be taken seriously by all funders, not only those focused on supporting underrepresented groups.”

A heroine for headline guest

Then came the headline guest: Alex Scott MBE, sports presenter, pundit, and former professional footballer for Arsenal and the English national team. Her experience and determination have been an example for all the people present at the AWS convention. Without any taboos, she talked about the discrimination she experienced both as a woman and a person of colour during her career.

As an athlete, she declared that, even though there is still so much progress left to do, things have changed a lot since when she began. For example, back

in her days, the women's team had to train at night, because they had to wait for all the men players to leave the premises first. She also said that as a sports broadcaster, she felt very alone at first, but that things are now changing as she is seeing more women and minorities around her.

Her secret to overcome these obstacles? Her 'Why not me' mentality.

And she couldn't be more right. When looking at these entrepreneurs, these successful CEOs and inventors, or even these 'stars' on the red carpet, what makes you think that you don't have what it takes to be like them?

Alex's speech reminded us that these limits are social constructs meant to keep those in power at the top of the food chain. Alex understood very early-on that stars, unlike what the word implies, are not unreachable suns, but normal people who dared going beyond the limits being imposed upon them by society.

But as she reminded the audience, having the courage of asking yourself this question does not equal being fearless. On the contrary, Alex has used her fear as a fuel. But what kind of fear? In her own words, the fear of losing it all, the fear that the day on which she was competing or presenting would be her last day. Thanks to this fear, Alex has fulfilled the human dream and reached the human truth. By giving herself 100% each day, surpassing herself each time, living every single day like it could be the last one, Alex has reached a potential so rare, so inspiring that everyone in the room was compelled by her narrative.

However, despite her efforts and unique mindset, Alex still suffered setbacks and discrimination throughout her career.

For example, during the 2018 World Cup, most of the headlines talking about her were discussing how well prepared she was. Even though these remarks can seem harmless at first, never would these comments ever be made about a male presenter, some media assuming that men would be naturally more predisposed to talk about football. In her career, especially at the beginning, she felt that people wanted her to be thankful for being here, as if her current role was the result of luck rather than hard work.

Panel and Q&A

Then came the Panel 7 Q&A with diverse investors:

Clare Zhang, Investor at Playfair

Meryem Arik, Founder and CEO of TitanML

Lina Zakarauskaitė, Partner at Stride.VC

Danielle Walsh, Co-founder and CEO of Clearly Earth

The investors discussed the opportunities in backing diverse founders, and provided advice to early stage founders.

Their impactful insights resonated with plethora of entrepreneurs present that day. They've learnt that it's fine to say no to an investment that comes in too early, or of the importance of storytelling. As a matter of fact, convincing VCs that the startup or product you made answers an unmet need is a big part of an entrepreneur's journey. Let's say that your startup is like your child, as a parent you'd naturally think that your child is amazing. And chances are that it is, but you need to consider others, who don't have any sentimental attach to it, that it is indeed better and different. Its story, its strengths and ambitions, are all important things to narrate.

Nevertheless, one must admit that this comparison to a child is a dangerous one. The investors present that day mentioned that your startup is not your newborn. No one will die if it fails, for at the end of the day it is not a sentient being. Taking risks with your company is nothing like exposing your infant to the wolves.

"It's okay if it doesn't necessarily work out." – Claire Zhang

Keeping that in mind, the different investors insisted on the idea that yes, the customer is always king (or queen), but that does not mean they are always right. It is important to keep listening, to keep building, to take advice, but also to be confident in your the product and to set boundaries regarding what clients can ask for.

The Good Den

Then followed six phenomenal pitching founders:

Abbie Morris, Co-founder and CEO of Compare Ethics

Amber Michelle H., Founder and CEO of Research Grid Ltd

Indiana Gregg, Founder & CEO of Wedo

Yana Barden, Co-founder and CEO of Watchers

Yasmin Topia, Co-founder and CEO of Sociate AI

Cristina Diez Santos, Co-founder and CEO of Open Hydro

They were questioned and reviewed by professional, tough but fair judges.

David Fogel, co-founder of Alma Angels

Jonathan Tudor, Investment Partner at Clean Growth Fund

Pedro Arst, Investor at Antler

Tania Hoeding, Investor at Prosus Venture

Millen Wolden-Selassie, Investor at Octopus Ventures

As all-knowing and caring mentors, they dissected the founders' speech, focusing on both the positive and the negative.

Exclusive Insights for Maddyness UK

Maddyness UK had the privilege to interview David Fogel, co-founder of Alma Angels, and Danielle Walsh, co-founder and CEO of Clearly.Earth, about their experience regarding today's event and their advice to new and future founders.

David Fogel

I came here today because we want to support and give feedback, network and connect with female founders.

It's very easy to be advocating for diversity versus actually meeting the individuals and seeing organisations that make a difference. AWS is one of the organisations that powers most of the startups in the world. They put time and effort into building this because it matters. We believe that, as we said, advice is nice, but resources deployment capital is what actually makes the difference, and we're very much aligned with that.

You need to understand what you want to build. You're not building your business for anyone other than yourself. You need to have the conviction that this is a problem you want to solve for the next decade, because having a business will sometimes be horrible. It's going to be horrendous.

It's going to be one of the most amazing and exhausting thing you'll ever do in your life. Unless you have that own personal conviction that that's what you want to solve and work towards that, it will be very difficult.

Danielle Walsh

"AWS is a big partner of ours. AWS is really about celebrating women rather than just complaining about the ongoing issues. When talking about the discrepancy between men and women, we usually hear the complaints, but here change is driven through positive messaging.

Also to hear from other investors, other founders, other advisers. I think it's very important to come together and lean on each other as a mini tribe to really inspire change.

It's a hard road and it's about perseverance, not about giving up. It's a daily grind.

There are two important things:

1. Pick something where you really see the value of doing and growing something.
2. Pick something that you're very fundamentally passionate about, because there are going to be many hard days, not some, many, many hard days. If you are really passionate about something, that passion itself gets you through.

Do not get knocked back by a no. When you get a no, always ask 'Well, why is it a no?' Really go to the why and get the feedback. This "no" could be what you need."