

Meet Harriet, the assistant saving HR teams from drowning

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Cecily Motley, co-founder and CEO of Harriet, about HR, human-centric work and courage.

What was the catalyst for launching Harriet?

While running my previous startup, Motley London, I got so frustrated at how much time I was spending on necessary but mind-numbing admin tasks. I couldn't devote as much time to the parts of the job I enjoyed the most – the higher-value tasks where I could be innovative, creative and collaborate with the rest of the team.

Unfortunately, the daily drudgery of admin is a necessary part of any role – to varying degrees. However, I realised that HR teams were drowning in admin far more than any other department. This was stopping them from being able to focus on people-centric work – which is a hugely valuable part of the job, and one of the things that People teams are known for doing best.

When generative AI exploded onto the scene, I realised I had the chance to make a difference. So, I built Harriet.

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

Harriet is an AI-powered HR tool, which acts as a personal HR assistant for every employee. Used by the likes of Making Moves and Apolitical, Harriet handles HR admin and microrequests like booking annual leave or answering employee queries like “What fertility benefits do we have?”. This means people teams are freed up to focus on higher value tasks, and improving productivity, performance and work-life balance in the process.

Harriet sits on top of your knowledge base and HR stack, bringing all this info to where your team already are – in Slack, GChat or Teams. Employees’ can ask Harriet questions as if they are chatting to a human, with no need for any prompt engineering. All conversations are confidential, but can be escalated directly to the people team if needed.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

When Harriet first launched in 2023, Slack was its home. Now, we’ve rolled out Harriet for GChat and Teams, so an even greater number of companies can seamlessly integrate Harriet into whatever platforms they usually work on.

Tell us about the working culture at Harriet

We’re a small team and AI is an ever-evolving sector, so it’s pretty fast-paced. So, to stay agile and maintain work-life balance, we work flexibly. This is something I’m a big advocate for. As a mother, I know how challenging it can be to balance work and home life. Having the freedom to work at home when needed, and fit running a company around the school pick-up is invaluable. I truly believe that when staff are empowered to work in a way that suits their needs, they and the business will thrive.

How are you funded?

We're VC-backed. We raised £1.2M in our latest funding round, led by Concept Ventures and backed by Frontline Ventures, Portfolio Ventures, and Notion Capital.

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

Keeping pace with rapid advancements is a challenge for any company in the sector. It's a challenge that won't ever disappear, but it's also part of what makes the work so exciting. We always want to be on the pulse and make the most of the latest advancements in technology. That's why we've prioritised agility within the business, to ensure we're able to get the most out of the AI's ever-expanding capabilities, and offer the greatest possible support for People teams.

How does Harriet answer an unmet need?

A couple of years ago, HR teams were reportedly spending 20% of their time on admin. The wave of redundancies in 2023 has since left remaining HR staff even more squeezed – and with tons of additional admin. We designed Harriet to solve this issue. By taking lower-value tasks (which can be automated) off HR team's plates, Harriet enables People teams to focus on the human-centric work that really matters – like developing employee engagement strategies and attracting, hiring and retaining top talent.

We also recognised that companies access HR information and services across a multitude of different systems. This is part of what makes it so time-consuming to carry out HR admin. So, we designed Harriet to make life easier for all employees and bring all this information together in one place. Harriet can talk to everything from Bamboo HR and Zapier to Notion and Google Drive simultaneously, so employees can access everything they need in one place, wherever the information is stored.

What's in store for the future?

We're currently developing Harriet to make the platform compatible with even more human resources information (HRIS) and payroll systems. We're also working with developers to introduce a Microsoft SharePoint integration. There are lots of exciting developments in store.

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

Don't be afraid to try something new. It will feel scary, but you need to feel fear and do it anyway. Stepping outside your comfort zone creates space for innovation.

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

I took up Thai chi almost a year ago. It's not for everyone but I find it a very calming influence on my hectic days. Oh, and breakfast. My big rule is always eat breakfast.

Cecily Motley, CEO and co-founder of Harriet.

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