

ITSU Jeff Williams

Matthew Todd

Hi. My name is Matthew Todd, and welcome to Inside the ScaleUp. This is the podcast for founders, executives in tech, looking to make an impact and learn from their peers within the tech business, we lift the lid on tech businesses, interviewing leaders and following their journey from startup to scale up and beyond covering everything from developing product market fit, funding and fundraising models to value proposition structure and growth marketing.

We learn from their journey so that you can understand how they really work, the failures, the successes, the lessons along the way, so that you can take their learnings and apply them within your own startup or scale up and join the ever growing list of high growth UK SaaS businesses. Hey, and welcome back to the podcast excited today to be joined by Jeff Williams, CEO, and co founder enroly. Great to have you here.

Jeff Williams

Thanks a lot for having me, Matt. I'm a longtime listener. So absolutely honored to be on the show today.

Matthew Todd

No worries, great to have you here. Looking forward to hearing more about your background and your journey as well. Do you want to kick things off by giving our audience a little bit of background about yourself and what it is that you do?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, sure. Starting with myself, I'm a lifelong entrepreneur. I was always obsessed with business to the point where I used to have a sign on my wall when I was about 14 saying what could I provide and or service the world with or something to that to that effect. So I was a bit of a weirdo when it came to entrepreneurship. So that's kind of been in my blood for a long time.

Fast forward to where I am now. I've had one previous company that had various successes and failures which was in the the television industry, funnily enough, at the sort of the the turn of online video and YouTube and things like that quite a while ago.

Then basically fell into the international student recruitment and admissions industry after that business and spent about 10 years in that sector. So traveling the world, recruiting students, leading admissions teams, and ultimately became a bit of a subject matter expert in that space, which then led me to found enroly in late 2017. Enroly is automation software to help universities recruit students from abroad. So it does things like sort of admissions, automation, compliance, automation and general onboarding.

Matthew Todd

Sounds interesting and look forward to getting into some of the detail around that. So for people who are not as invested as you in that field, and don't know what's involved, can you give us a bit of background about that whole kind of international admissions, attracting students how that whole kind of area works?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, it's an interesting industry, it's sort of off the radar, you wouldn't typically think about. If someone said, could you name the top five or top 10 exports, in most Western countries, it would very rarely make the list, but in many countries, in the West especially, it's in the top five, top 10 exports. So it's in the UK, it's a 32 billion pound industry, for example, that is sitting sort of under the radar and doesn't have a lot of attention from the tech world, apart from your old school players, I suppose that have been around for decades.

So what we effectively do or what the problem that we solve is bringing these students in from abroad, you know, hundreds of countries can be quite complicated. For a university, it's an incredibly seasonal business as well, you've only got one or two intakes per year.

Basically, where we come in is at the point where the student has an offer and that bottom of funnel phase through to the student arriving. So if you were to take a sales process, like buying a house, etc, you know, you go and view the property, speak to the agent, it's all fun and games, then when you make an offer, it suddenly becomes serious, and you've got agents involved. You've got solicitors involved, you've got various stakeholders. So that's really what universities are faced with.

The main issue or problem that they feel, is largely through attrition. So they'll get students very far in this process, the complexity of paperwork and compliance and things like that means that the students don't end up making it every time they lose a student that can be 10s of 1000s or even, 30, 40, 50,000 pounds of lost revenue per student. Not to mention, it's a it's a huge impact on that human being, being the student that's trying to study abroad and get on with their life.

Matthew Todd

I didn't realize that that was that profitable for university. So if someone does fall out at that point in the process is that genuinely lost revenue? That's not something that just automatically goes to the next person on the list that there's a space for?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, typically, it does. It will mean at that that point in time because the complexity of restarting the process it often means that there's not enough time for the student to say go and pick another university. So that doesn't mean they're lost completely, the student may be deferred. But that might mean they're deferred for an entire year to the next intake, for example.

Or what often happens is the student will obviously lose a bit of heart when it comes to that particular choice, and they will inevitably end up swapping to somebody else. So, yeah, it's not necessarily a

binary, they're lost, or they're not. But obviously, you want to convert those students, from a business sense. They want to convert those students into the semester they're intending to study, and otherwise you're duplicating your efforts.

Matthew Todd

Are universities themselves treating it like a business? Many years ago, I have worked in a few different university departments. I know, some are more businesslike, some are more academic than others, you know, quite a different environment to work in. So yeah, what is that environment inside of universities like?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, it's a good question. It's a hybrid, I would say, you know, they're not, they're not full blown, cutthroat, commercial enterprises. But at the end of the day, if you were to value them as companies, even the smallest University in the UK, is most likely a billion dollar corporation, many of our clients are doing half a billion pounds in revenue each year, which actually shows the the size and scale of these organizations.

Would I say they're commercial? there's an element of commercial commercial reality, some are more commercial than than others. But I'd say it's a, it's a bit of a hybrid. there's a recognition that, you know, international students, for example, are bringing in revenue that are contributing to domestic students, they're contributing to research, they're contributing to facilities. So there is an understanding the highest level in every university in the UK of the of the value and importance of this business.

Matthew Todd

It's not a perspective that I think many people are aware of exactly how valuable those organizations are.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, it's incredible, really, when you you think about it that way, especially in the startup world, right, where you're getting valued, and you're raising money, and you're seeing, you know, unicorns emerge and whatnot. To think that these universities are just plodding along, you know, doing the level of business and revenue, and not to mention research impact, you know, contribution to local communities and things like that. I mean, you get a lot of towns and cities around the UK, where the university is the number one employer by a factor of 5000. So they're incredibly important.

Matthew Todd

Fascinating. So when it came to that work that you're doing inside of universities and traveling the world, working on this admissions with them, what was the thing that the trigger that then led you to think, okay, well, actually, maybe there is a gap here for a product, something that needs to needs to exist?

Jeff Williams

I spent a lot of time in the sector. So you know, got a handle across all of the sort of those recruitment and admissions and compliance functions that were occurring. The part of the business I've most

enjoyed and was most sort of passionate about was the marketing and recruitment element. From an international standpoint, I found that incredibly challenging where you've got, ultimately you're selling a product into a market where maybe 001% of the population can actually purchase what it is that you're selling.

So, to put in perspective, about 600,000 International or higher education, international students will come to the UK each year, but you've got a billion people, you know, plus in some of these countries alone, so you know, aggregate that around the world, you're finding needles in haystacks, and that's where enroly was born initially. I saw this problem that we were spending millions of pounds in marketing and recruitment activities. For the most part, you're attracting students that are not not fit to study abroad. That can be for various reasons from, they don't have the financial capability, they don't have the academic background, they don't have the English, it's quite brutal in that sense. I wish that everyone could get access to come to the UK to study or America or Australia or whatnot. But you know, that is the reality of the of the business that at the end of the day, you have to you have to be have the resources, be at your own finances, scholarships, etc.

Where enroly was really founded was through this concept of solving that problem of how do we find the right type of student and the initial concept was, well, a lot of these students must know each other, they must go to similar schools, mixing similar friendship groups, etc. So I sort of came up with this idea was, well, if we could connect with a current student, they could recommend a friend or family member that's planning to study abroad, and we could connect them with approved assistants in their home country for the university they want to study at.

So to provide some context. Internationally, a lot of universities will have representatives so private sector representatives, sort of like travel agents in the old, old world or like travel agents, they're based 1000s of these guys 5000 plus active agents recruiting to the UK around the globe. What we did is we basically signed partnership to the university said, Hey, you, you know, onboard your current students, they can refer a friend will make sure they get introduced to someone who is approved to help the students through your process. There's a lot of people out there helping students as well that don't have the correct agreements. It's not an official representation of that of that university. So that's sort of the initial plan was, let's do that. That was the phase one of enrollee, but not what we do today, funnily enough.

Matthew Todd

So that phase one, then is that something you're doing alongside the day job? Is that something you left the day job for? What was that like?

Jeff Williams

Interesting story, I think many founders have their interesting story, I was working in a venture arm of a private education company. So they were looking at potential investments in the sector. I put my hand up, because I was very interested in this space, obviously, with my sort of keen entrepreneurship interest, that I'd love to get amongst startups and tech companies that my company that I was working for at the time would like to invest in.

I subsequently attended a conference, I meet an investor at a bar, I started telling him about this idea that I have. So had done nothing at this point, not even, tested it. He's like, well, why don't you quit your job and do it? I'm sort of like, well, I've got a mortgage. I've just got married, I'm back to the real world. He opened my eyes to this, well, why don't you come down to my office on Monday. So this is a Friday, by the way, come down to my office on Monday, we're running actually, just by coincidence, we're having some startups coming into pitch, I'll add you to the list, put a deck together. Let's see what happens.

That weekend, went home frantically contacted my co founder from my previous company said, I think we're starting another business, let's build a deck around this concept. Went in on the Monday, pitched, I then went straight to the airport flew to Hong Kong for work. So went to the pitch straight to the airport, got a call the next day saying hey, we'd like to make a seed investment. It's conditional on you quitting your job, though.

Just all of a sudden, in a space of few days sort of just plodding along with my, you know, well paid corporate job that I was really enjoying, thinking, you know, this will be, you know, the next 10,20 years of my life. Maybe I won't do this business thing again. All of a sudden, this being laid in my lap. I remember, I flew back from Hong Kong, gripping the armrests the whole way thinking, I want to do this, but how am I going to explain this to my wife?

Matthew Todd

I can imagine and I think many founders listening to this will be quite jealous about the prospect of being able to meet someone at a bar on a Friday and then beginning of the following week, have some investment. I have to ask what was in that pitch deck?

Jeff Williams

To be honest, I Googled pitch decks and I think we'd being subject matter experts able to convert that idea into a pretty sound format. I think it's, it's something as a founder, the advantage of being a subject matter expert with an industry network and understanding the inner workings is 80% of the challenge, I think. To be honest founders that go into an industry they don't know, inside out, I don't know how they do it. I mean, credit credit to them. It's must be such an incredible challenge.

Also another thing, I guess I was very used to presenting as well, that was something I wasn't fazed by that. I think a lot of founders go into those meetings, you get super stressed, you forget your facts, your figures, your edge in the market, etc. So I think I went in with a bit of a nothing to lose attitude as well. To give these guys a nod it's Emerge Education, they're one of the leading venture funds for Ed Tech, in Europe and across the globe.

When they invested in me, they were running an accelerator, which they no longer do. They're purely a fund now. So that was sort of a deal they put in that seed investment. I went on to their 12 week accelerator, which was incredibly valuable, because, it's been a while since I started a business and especially I'd never started a tech startup either before.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, absolutely. I think that's fascinating how you're able to turn that around so quickly, but I guess take quite an unexpected direction in your career so rapidly. It really does give meaning to the word accelerates with that context.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, absolutely. Those guys you know, they know what they're doing. It's incredible the value you can get when you're connected with people that have been there and done that. Much like your podcast, I love the nitty gritty elements of it, because it isn't, it isn't glamour, and actually, you need someone who can sort of walk you through what's about to happen.

To an extent you do need to experience those, you know, the different mistakes and identify opportunities and whether you pivot or whether you persevere. But just having someone say to you, you can pivot, you can persevere, and that is going to happen. It completely changes your approach to business as well. So yeah, so very, very thankful to that that accelerator experience.

I highly recommend them if you are given the chance, as long as their terms are fair, and equitable, as well. So just be careful of that.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, absolutely, I think definitely do look at how good a deal it really is and what they can add to it as well. But for the ones that are good, they are very, very good at genuinely helping you accelerate that journey. So on that accelerated and what was the outcome of that 12 week process? You know, how much of a product did you or didn't you have? How much in terms of you know, potential interest in at least the concept did you have at that stage?

Jeff Williams

It was a purely paper based idea at that point. One of the things with the accelerator was, yeah, it's a good concept, just, let's pound the pavement and see if you can get some traction, basically. Again, for any founders listening or prospective founders, it's, you know, don't waste time building a website, buying stationery, you know, getting business cards, etc. Just put your idea on a bit of paper, and just go and speak to someone who might buy it or might be interested in and you'll be, it's incredible the amount of feedback you will get, and the launching opportunity, you'll you'll get as a result of that.

What I did was I left my job, obviously, as did my co founder, as well. So I'm very much to the business and subject matter expertise. My co founder is a product guy. So he's sort of a UX, UI designer, some background in automation, as well, which is what we do. So we start off together, and we build a basically a hack together piece of tech, again, using a basic CRM as the underlying technology. So at this point, we're not even putting any code down at all, just trying to get a very basic working model to see if we can start to drive drive some traction.

At this point, I start courting another friend of mine, who's a super talented engineer, who was working for Tesco previously. Started to say, you know, are you interested because I'm by this point, I'm sort of aware that, you know, you need the three, the three key players, right in the startup, you need the hacker, the hustler and the hipster. I'm yeah, I'm the hustler. Of course, I had the hipster being my

product guy. I was conscious that if we were going to build a genuine tech company, we were going to need that hacker character. So I already have my high on, on our CTO, that has now been with us pretty much since day one when he finally quit his job and joined.

So back to your question, because I'm probably going off on a tangent here is we build this very basic minimum viable product or whatever you want to call it, something that works. I go and leverage my network in the industry saying, hey, would you mind if we run a little test? Can you put this out in front of your students, we start to get some engagement, we start to get some referrals, we start to evidence connecting those students, we've we've agents, and we actually start to generate some revenue in that 12 week period.

As a lot of investors will tell you, and founders, especially in this climate, if you can demonstrate revenue early in a business that is that gets a lot of people's attention very quickly, versus the companies that will monetize this later approach. So I was very old school in my approach. As a result, we built that that product, and then the culmination of that 12 week was a demo day for investors. So the the accelerator brought in about 50 investors, and I went to raise a target, I think of about 250,000. I think within a week of that we'd raised about 290,000 pounds, in addition to that initial seed, that was a really, really good launching off pad.

Matthew Todd

That's really, really a fantastic result from that kind of process. What you're saying about generating revenue early versus, oh, we can monetize at any point in the future when we choose to when we want to, we don't need to be profitable yet. I think it it speaks a lot as to whether you genuinely are delivering something of value, because there has been an exchange of value, right?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, absolutely. Unless you're, you know, building deep tech and there's some long term vision and that makes sense. But for most startups, you know, you're there to generate revenue at some point. And the sooner, the better, that's for sure.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, I guess pretty positive result then from that accelerated demo process. I'm kind of curious as to how the product developed and ultimately shifted from that initial concept that you managed to move pretty quickly to the version that you you now have in place.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, so we keep building that product out. Now, I've roped in my CTO, so he now convinced him to quit his job, we've now got some financial resources to pay to pay him. Because he was he was leaving a rather large salary, as you can imagine, as a senior senior engineer and give him some equity in the business as well. So our CTO is effectively a junior founder I would say. This is where we now start to build the underlying technology to do exactly what we want it to do. So products, and tech being the two other guys that are focusing on that, and I'm now purely focused on sort of sales and building the brand. So I'm working with universities, we sort of come up with this concept of white labeling the product and then actually putting it on the website of universities and kind of Co-promoting it with them.

We accelerate quite quickly with that. We get maybe 20,25 institutions that have white labeled this on their website. So very quick moving again, again, because of that industry expertise, which is, again, the value of being that sort of subject matter expert. We start to see the students flowing through. So we're now seeing 1000s of students engaging and referring, and the students getting to a point of accepting their offer paying their fees attempting to get visas and arrive in the UK.

This is where I start to see or be reminded of the high levels of attrition in the sector. So again, I was aware of this having been from the in the business, but now that it's vitally important to me because we were only getting paid if the students enrolled, right, because we were taking a commission on admission. So commission only so so there's no real risk to the universities, we weren't charging them even a license fee. So revenue share type model. Every time we lose one of these students through attrition, were losing potentially 1000s of pounds. So we start thinking, okay, what's going on here?

Then we realize, okay, well, these students, they often need sort of some more official help when it comes to that visa process. On the other side of the coin, the universities are not giving them the documentation that they need to go and apply for a visa until very late in the process. So the whole process seems to be sort of falling apart at various stages.

So from there, we thought, okay, well, what if we, on our platform, we then brought on visa solicitors, so that we could also connect students with sort of immigration advisors are regulated advisors, who could make sure the students move through the process. So we start to do that. So we start now we've got this kind of platform emerging where we're generating the leads, and we're also providing them help to ensure that we improve the conversion rate. So we did that for a little bit. That did move the needle, but it didn't move it enough, we were still seeing, 30, 40 50% of students leaking out of this out of this pipeline that we believe should have been converting.

When we started to reach out to these students saying, hey, like you paid your money, you were ready to go, why aren't you here? Well, I didn't get my documentation from the university till three weeks later than I thought it was going to come. Then my mom got sick and so I had to do that for a couple of days. Then I had to go and, you know, speak to the immigration advisor. And by the time we got ready, it was really busy. UKVI was swamped with Visa applications. It simply didn't come out in time. So we still weren't satisfied with that, that problem.

That's what leads us to our our third pivot, if you will, which is now oh, God, we've identified another another layer of problem and maybe there's a chance we can solve that too.

Matthew Todd

Interesting. I think that's really interesting that because you price your product in a particular way, in a way that reduced the risk, but aligned interests with your customer, you are almost able to do a deeper dive into the real customer problems and pain points rather than the surface level ones because you tried to solve those. Your interests were aligned, therefore, you immediately expose yourself to the deeper problem that was affecting your revenue because it affected their revenue. So I think that's a really, really, you know, fantastic example of the power of, you know, aligning those interests so well.

Jeff Williams

It's a really good point you raised that just my co founder and I were talking about the other day, which is we see there's two sort of startups that emerge, one where you're really aligned with your customer, and you have the same problem and you're solving it together. Then there's another type of startup which is just as valid by the way, but it just creates a different dynamic, as you've touched on, which is where you're delivering something for your customer. You end up solving being focused on solving your own problems in the delivery of that service, rather than the problem exactly.

I think that is, you know, one of those sort of hindsight 20/20 secret sauce moments that you've touched on where we were so aligned with the clients and solving this problem. It's what led to our, you know, the development of the software these universities are now purchasing from us today.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, and I think is interesting when it comes to pivoting, as well. I see a lot of founders that say, Oh, should we pivot? Shouldn't we pivot or we had to pivot. I see it too often, it's because they are more aligned to their product and solution than they are to the customer's problems.

So they can invest an incredible amount of time and money in building something that isn't really what anyone wants. And therefore, they're kind of forced to pivot because they, they kind of bang that drum for as long as they can get away with before they have to actually admit, oh, yeah, we're not really solving that problem.

Jeff Williams

It's all the classic cliches of kind of falling in love with the problem and your initial idea and your hypothesis and your assumptions. Startup survival is just based on constantly proving those things, you know, can you go out and get evidence that that hypothesis is correct, or that assumption is correct. And you know, as soon as you do that, you start to see this, you know, that build, measure learn feedback loop, I think they call it like, once you get that flywheel spinning, and you get that momentum, and you can keep that iteration going.

That's where you just keep, you know, those small touches of whether you pivot or whether you persevere those decisions you make, and that infinite loop that just keep spitting them out. I think, you know, we're now nearly five years in that loop. And that just keeps on going. You never stop.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, and I think the word pivot is obviously very overused. But I think it's the difference between a change in direction and an evolution of the way you want to solve the customer's same core problems. I think what you're describing is, is more of an evolution, I would say, based on a deeper understanding rather than a direction changing pivot. Oh, no, let's go over here instead.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, you're right. I think, the yeah, the pivot is, you go out to build a video game, and then you accidentally build Slack, as the as the story goes. That's a true pivot. Yeah, you're right, in the sense that I, yeah, it was a heavy evolution, I suppose.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, I think that's the right kind of one those values are, are aligned in the way that you described. So what did that evolution, then that kind of final evolution look like? How did you start to work out what you needed to do for that and build into that?

Jeff Williams

We had sort of the initial idea, I remember very vividly explaining the problem to my CTO. I was saying, like, you know, basically, they've got this hugely seasonal business with a lot of documentation and manual processes to move these, like, sometimes 5000 students through this process and a handful of staff and I was kind of describing how I believed it should work. I remember him saying, you're describing some pretty advanced automation software, we're gonna need to raise more money. If that's what you want to build, in the timeline, I suggested, which I think at the time was like six months.

So from there, we again, straight back to market, like straight back to the universities and said, hey, these are the problems we think you're having, do you agree? If we started to develop something that did this for you? Would that be of interest? That's where we sort of got the yes, absolutely. So we started with a couple of our sort of closer clients that we built a strong relationship with, and we're somewhat invested in this journey we were going on as well as, as a startup and managed to get The University of Greenwich.

Again, full credit to them and their incredible culture of innovation in that organization. They basically said, Yeah, look, if you're, if you're willing to build it, you know, we're willing to contribute to the development and be an informal sandbox. We'll happy for you to chat to some of our key staff, start to build out a prototype and if it does what it says on the tin, we might take it and that was basically it. We had nothing in writing, obviously huge amount of risk always with with startups, but we had enough buy in and enough cooperation and enough confidence really, that we'd identified a really a huge pain point that was not served by anybody. Again, it was a bit of a black hole in the process. You've got tech systems like CRMs, like Greenwich for example. They've got a CRM system. They've got a student management system, but it's very top of funnel focused. So is that very much that kind of lead admissions, early stages of conversion focus, but then when you move into that bottom of funnel, pretty much every university was ultimately run off spreadsheets and emails.

So one advantage - sometimes you get with enterprise software, that what we experienced was, you don't actually have a direct competitor other than maybe Microsoft spreadsheets or you know, maybe a retrofitted CRM or some other system that's been that's been built in house.

Matthew Todd

Yeah. But I guess you have existing things that are used as workarounds rather than something that is positioned specifically to solve those specific problems?

Jeff Williams

Well, I heard a good quote, recently, I don't know if it was on your podcast, maybe it was that any any piece of enterprise software can be built in a spreadsheet at the end of the day. The beauty for us is

these uni's that we're working with have built had built the spreadsheet. So we literally were like, well, can you share with us what you've got, and you know, we suddenly got these crazy behemoth of spreadsheets that they talked us through. Which kind of gave us an initial blueprint of a much deeper knowledge and understanding of what actually needs to occur through this complex process.

Matthew Todd

What you were proposing at that stage in terms of your own business model, then was that still the same business model? Was that still commissioned based? We're you looking at other kind of pricing models for that?

Jeff Williams

No, this product was very much moving into a license product. So a fee for the software itself. Interestingly, we were able to keep the fee for that product relatively low, because we were able to then layer these services we'd already generated on top of the platform.

So in some markets, for example, where there's students from kind of particularly high risk regions or difficult regions, when it comes to visas, basically, we can still connect those those students to visa and immigration solicitors. Not only was that that pivot, or evolution, or whatever we want to call it, it sort of came full circle, where some of that initial concept was then placed back on top of the platform that we ended up building the referral concept is gone. Still a good idea, and maybe it will reemerge at some point. But it hasn't hasn't hit our priority list yet.

Matthew Todd

I see. So now, it's very focused on that one specific area of the process where that attrition was taking place where it was hard to manage, hard to track, and as you say, there was no automation at place before your your product.

Jeff Williams

Correct, correct. The key thing to that process automation, as well is that the processes differ quite greatly, depending on the countries where the students are coming from. That's what can cause such complexity, because it's not just a one size fits all, you know, supply chain. It's actually can be very different whether you're a student from China, from India or from Nigeria, and many different things need to occur in that in that process.

So we were, again, able to use that industry knowledge to build a system that catered to those underlying problems that maybe a lot of the existing tech players hadn't really focused on, because they were providing, you know, services across the whole university without sort of a laser focus that we have.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, I can see that. I can imagine that as well, because you are solving the same problems dealing with students from all over the world. When you work with different universities, you bring that knowledge and that expertise to them as well. So you know exactly how they should be dealing with students from different areas.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, exactly. It's a best practice out of the box. That's sort of, you know, what we what we call it, ultimately, you can configure it to within an inch of its life, if you like, but ultimately, you know, we plug it in and turn it on. It's already pre configured to the requirements. That's quite interesting as a result of that standardization process, across workflows and sort of data points and naming conventions and things like that.

We've had a further evolution, which is the creation of data insights extension on the platform. So we saw this opportunity where again, another problem in the sector, industry data was taking one or two years to come out, because it was the government that ultimately had that aggregate data. Nobody else had it, right. So as we're finding out more and more universities, we started to get this feedback from institutions saying, do you know what's happening in this market? You know, you guys have got hundreds of 1000s of students flowing through? Can you give us some insight as to what's occurring?

That's where we came up with this idea of, well, what if we built a data insights platform that allowed an institution not only to look at their own data, but then layer industry trends on top of it. So we kind of, we call it Bloomberg for education, internally. Because the industry has never had it before. They've never had real time data. They've never been able to see what's going on until two years later. Two years later, is often too late to see that computer science was trending in Vietnam, for example, you need to know so you can go and capitalize on that opportunity.

So that's been flying off the shelves and it's one of those, you know, again, you go through that iterate startup process again, and it's one of the things I love about a tech being in a tech startup in a tech company is that you, just when you think the startup game is over, you come up with something like that. You get to go through that fun of, you know, building and delivering again.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it, I guess it's layering on those capabilities, you need the foundations there before you can build the next level. The next level on on top of that much like any area within tech, really. Whether it's Amazon Web Services that started off very basic, that layer on more platforms and services, so on and so forth. Things that people are able to build on top of platforms on top of platforms is just, you know, incredible these days.

Jeff Williams

It's a double edged sword, you need to be careful, obviously, that you don't just keep building everything that clients want. But at the same time, it's much easier to solve a problem and sell an existing client something. I think it's net revenue retention, if you can, you can grow a company quite significantly, once you get your user base big enough, if you're able to add value to those existing clients, you can actually generate 10-20% year on year growth, just out of your existing client base, excluding any new new clients who bring onto the onto a platform.

From a growth strategy perspective, for any founder out there, especially in sort of the enterprise software space. As soon as you get a large group of clients and you start speaking to them, and you

see any trends, it can be a huge opportunity to take advantage of that, and actually build and deliver something for them.

Matthew Todd

Would definitely recommend people look at that, especially in the enterprise space. But when it comes to serving that market, especially with something so disruptive, coming from spreadsheets to a new automation driven platform to then data insights on top, how do you deal with the challenges of adoption and change within organizations like this? As well as pricing it to give them some context to, to go forward with?

Jeff Williams

It's an invasive digital transformation that we represent at a university. It touches their people, their process, their system. So, you know, at the highest level, it's very scary for an institution, especially anyone in the tech team, they're like, oh, God, what, what are these maniacs planning to do? A couple of things we've done is one, we've made it very easy to integrate, we've done a lot of the heavy lifting on our side. So we know what systems they have. So that's sort of part one, part two, to your question around that that transformation for the people is I have to give credit to my co founder and his product team and the way that they design our software and the user interface. We apply something they call the Fisher Price rule. Basically, anything that we put in front of these users needs to be very, very simple to use. We try to maintain our system, from an onboarding perspective, should only take 45 minutes to an hour to train a user to about 95% competency.

So as soon as we feel something becoming sort of complicated or difficult or not intuitive, then it will get pulled back. We'll rethink how we're solving the problem. Because you're right, it's, you know, you ask people to use a very complex system, they'll bounce off the atmosphere. Back to your, for your first one, your first points about it being ultimately public sector, a government institution, people don't necessarily have the invested interest to spend their weekends learning how to use a new a new system.

So one of our real secret sauces has just been keep it really, really simple. When people find out that, you know, my co founder, who ultimately designed the product didn't really have any background in this sector, but just knows UI, and UX, it really blows their mind, which is, again, something that is such an incredible art form. We're lucky that we've got, you know, a great product team that have we've built out with our product manager, and principal designers as well, who are doing a fantastic job of maintaining that.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, so really making that experience as simple smooth as possible whilst demonstrating clear value, I guess, to those stakeholders.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, absolutely. It's got to be simple. I think that's, again, those the more legacy systems that have been around, and, you know, a hugely complex, I think it's only been sort of the last half decade, really, that companies have considered their, their user interface in that way, especially when it comes down to

price systems. I think a lot of companies now you know, it's really impacting their sales and their and their ability to impact and enter a market by just having a much much simpler system to use.

Matthew Todd

I think the way technology is now you know, everyone has an extremely capable high performing computer in their pocket right there. Used to using apps so I think gone are the days where these legacy systems could get away with poor UX, and you get people that just didn't care or didn't know that there was a better way of working.

Jeff Williams

Yeah, it is funny that when we go into universities, people request the user manual, and things like that. We've got some training, and we use a company called app cues, which can, you know, build in app training as well, which is a cool company, if you if you need something like that, for onboarding. It's sort of it's getting this awkward moment where you're sort of saying there isn't a user manual.

It's like Gmail. Gmail doesn't have a user manual, because it's just fairly obvious how to use 80% of Gmail without having to read a PDF. So it's, it is a bit of a gear shift for people when they're like, Well, you've got this complex software that's managing things like compliance and admissions and onboarding, but there's no instruction guide on how to use it. That again, once that penny drops, you go, oh, wow, okay, awesome.

Matthew Todd

Yeah. So definitely a strong education piece, but driven by, by that value and clear demonstration of value by the sounds of it, then. One thing I'm curious about as well, you kind of mentioned that much like public sector organizations that you're targeting as your customer base in a world where your customer base is very, very known to you can pinpoint the universities that you want to be customers that aren't customers, right? How do you approach kind of marketing and sales for your own business with that landscape of customers?

Jeff Williams

I consider it a privilege that I know exactly who my customers are. Again, a lot of startup founders, you're trying to figure out that product market fit. So for us, I'd say, you know, one of the bigger challenges is more around that innovation curve, that adoption curve. Obviously, you've got some universities, like Greenwich very early adopters, innovators, willing to take a bit more risk. Then you've got other universities that are a little late majority, if you've, if you don't know about the adoption curve, go and go and Google it, it's definitely good to understand software space.

The challenge we sort of have then is, is identifying the people in the organization, the culture of that of that organization, and then ensuring that we are basically selling the product to the right people at the right time. Because you also don't want to sell a product like this into an institution that isn't ready yet for that type of transformation.

But ultimately, our marketing is very low cost, we do a lot on LinkedIn, that's our sort of platform of choice, we do a lot of sort of content, blogs, cold outreach, conferences. So the marketing strategy in

itself is fairly simple. It's more about now, you know, making sure people are aware of the the sort of the value add, we have on the platform, the additional extensions and services and things like that.

Matthew Todd

I see it because I can imagine that, for many people, it might be quite a scary prospect to it's nice to know who exactly who your customers are, but I can imagine it can be a scary prospect, that can put them off going in with any kind of outbound approach. In case they get the timing of the approach wrong, they approach the wrong people, and they almost kind of closed on avenues that are previously perceived as, as open, if they go in there with the wrong approach, can imagine that can be quite daunting.

Jeff Williams

Knowing when to put the foot on the gas and the brake is really important, especially with enterprise software, where you've got, you know, the fewer clients but larger. But the other thing is, with those types of organizations, if you are selling a product like that into larger organizations, if you can pump the brake at the right time, because it's not quite the right person, they're not quite in the right mindset, there's quite often other people as well that have interest in that problem, or, have a stake in it and maybe more willing. That's where it's really key to find that that champion in an organization because you do need the help, you know, especially when what you represent is a digital transformation.

If you've not got someone on the other side of that fence, who's like, I want this, I'd like to do it. I'd like to see if we can make it happen. That's that's where the magic starts to happen. If you don't have that, and you're constantly pushing and selling versus kind of being pulled into the organization. Then again, another reason just to pump the brake. Let's maybe just put them in a, you know, a bit of a nurturing state and come back in three months and see where we land at that point.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, and I guess that's the difference between having an enterprise type of customer with the disruptive technology, innovative technology like yours, it's knowing that there will be people inside of those organizations that are also wanting to drive innovation. So it's looking out for the people that are already trying to do what you want them to do so that you can kind of connect with them and then go on that journey together, isn't it?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, and if I'm honest, Tech has a bad rep. In the enterprise space, it's always seen as very difficult, our integration is never going to happen, its implementation is going to take years, it's going to cost a million pounds more than you promised it would. That's typically the experience that most big organizations have had when it comes to new tech. It's why digital transformation is a whole industry itself and why people pay McKinsey and Deloitte and these companies 10s of millions of pounds to do it, because it's incredibly difficult. It's something that we've been really focused on, basically looking at every millimeter of that process and figuring out what can we do?

What of that burden, what can we do for the clients. So whether it's integration, solutions, implementation, training, onboarding, their stakeholders across the globe, we know what those

challenges are going to be. We just try to take as much of that pain away. So the institution can focus on, you know, just a fraction of those problems that are most impertinent and important to them.

Matthew Todd

But I guess then the reward for that, as well as that you then get those big deals and loyal clients that are going to stick with you and give you those growth opportunities as well, as you mentioned with the kind of NRR and other products that you can service them with?

Jeff Williams

Yeah, absolutely. It's incredible, once you form those relationships, when a lot of the the sort of development we've done on the platform and value add and things like that is driven by our our clients, and we're now in this great position where we can look at something like whether it's our data insights. We've also six months ago, launched a video interview platform, so automated interviews for students. We're able to kind of design the basic user interface, you know, in figma, or something like that, build a kind of a demo of or prototype and say, hey, we're thinking of building this, it's gonna be quite expensive and timely for us, it's gonna take three to six months at best. If we build it, will you buy it?

The amount of value you can get from a client when you've got a good relationship aswell they're like, yeah, you know, what we're spending 1000s of hours interviewing students, we have all this expertise, that could be focusing on critical problem solving, or high quality engagement. Rather than sitting there in front of a screen doing two students an hour manually, which is not a great experience for anyone.

Matthew Todd

When when you see opportunities like that, do you position that as an add on to what they're currently buying, versus just oh, maybe this would be a nice feature to add?

Jeff Williams

In the early days, I think when you're sort of getting to that first phase of feature completeness, you're adding features for free, basically. Because the product isn't isn't finished. It's a difficult stage for any startup. I'm sure every second person you speak to Matt mentioned this, the danger of just saying yes to everything from from clients. Because there is a line in the sand where pre that line being drawn, where they're adding pretty much constant value, because you start to see trends of requests, and you actually build a great product.

Then when you overstep the line, you start getting people that become experts in your product and start having these amazing, incredible ideas. It's gets to a point where you simply can't do it. Because the cost of iterating on a complex piece of software, it might seem easy to add a line here and another button, but it might end up costing you four grand in engineering and product time to do that.

Also you have to be considerate of the new users who are going to start using this product. Are we reducing the simplicity and starting to bring in an unnecessary level of complexity? So we're always all ears and what people want, but largely now, we will take requests, and if there have any sort of significance we'll typically add it as something that's an upsell or a value add to the product, because at the end of the day, it's you know, the development costs are significant. You then obviously need to go

out and market it and sell it and turn it on, etc. So you can find a nice, happy medium and I think once you build a cadence with your clients where they acknowledge that what you're doing is having a big impact and that it's not simple, even though you make it look simple, you know, they're quite willing to pay for it. Data insights is a great example where we put together, you know, rather expensive team with, you know, data engineer, data scientist developers to build this upgrade. But by doing it that way, were able to take that cost of a data team and then spread that cost out across a large number of clients.

Whereas if that client went and tried to hire those five guys, they're going to be running up a bill of many hundreds of 1000s of pounds when we can go and sell them a much better outcome and solution for an absolute fraction of what that price costs. So we're very connected to our clients to the industry. Try to be as transparent as well about what we can and can't do, and maybe why we're not able to do everything as well.

Matthew Todd

Yeah, I think that's a really, really good approach. It just shows that throughout the journey that you've described, that customer relationship, and connection with their problems, and the people trying to solve those problems, either has is really, really strong. I think there's so much to be sent for maintaining really good customer relationships.

It's not an email nurture sequence it's nothing like that. But it is a genuinely deep connection, rather than, you know, something that's more surface level, trying to give the impression that you care about your customers is genuinely going the extra mile and working out exactly what their challenges are and how they evolve.

Jeff Williams

Obviously, being more of an enterprise product, that's very different to someone who's got a B2C product. You can't necessarily have that closer relationship, it's more of a scale relationship, but you can get that feedback.

But I think what it reminds me of is something that, again, I learned back in the accelerator, and stuck with me, which is that concept of product-market channel and model. If you Google that there's some really cool blogs and videos on the constant process of the relationship of your product and your market, that channel and then your model.

If you think about almost all the questions you're asking me in a way, they're all sort of coming from one of those boxes. What's the impact of your product on your channel, or what's the impact of the channel on the model or, you know, etc. It just goes on and on and on. That's the job that never ends for a startup or even for a mature company. As soon as you start dropping the ball on the relationship between those things. That's where you can start to stagnate and start to lose that that sort of innovative edge.

Matthew Todd

Jeff, thank you so much for sharing that journey. Really, really interesting to hear the evolution. That enroly has been through the pivots, the evolutions and the lessons learned. I think the audience will get a lot out of listening to this, especially if they are b2b, especially if they are looking at targeting enterprise customers as well.

Jeff Williams

Thanks for having me.

Matthew Todd

Thank you for joining me on this episode of Inside the ScaleUp. Remember for the show notes and in depth resources from today's guest, you can find these on the website insidethescaleup.com. You can also leave feedback on today's episode, as well as suggest guests and companies you'd like to hear from. Thank you for listening.