

**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, welcome back to the podcast pleased today to be joined by Ed Plunkett from WithYouWithMe. Great to have you here this morning.

**Ed Plunkett**

It's good to be with you. Thanks very much.

**Matthew Todd**

No worries. And to kick things off, then firstly, let's dive into WithYouWithMe. What is the one liner. What does it do as a company, as a platform?

**Ed Plunkett**

We are solving the underemployment of several demographics, particularly those that generally just feel underemployed in life with the help and the use of digital skills. So getting people who never thought they would end up with in the digital space to to make that happen. So it's all about rescaling and giving opportunities to people who otherwise would never have had them.

**Matthew Todd**

Yeah, fantastic. And we'll get into some detail about exactly what that looks like how you achieve that as well. But just to start things off to give people a better idea as to your background, exactly what you do WithYouWithMe as well. I do you want to tell people, just a brief summary of your background before WithYouWithMe and how you came to join the company.

**Ed Plunkett**

So my I came from the forces. I was in the reconnaissance world, I served in deployment in various places, including Iraq and Afghanistan, and left nearly 10 years ago now, which has flown by and went straight out to work between Oman and France. That was really supporting the late sultan of Oman and in support of his friendship with various different countries, including, especially the UK and France. And actually, we used funnily enough, we used horses for that. But that's pretty much lead on too much closer links with how countries can support soft diplomacy. And, and then from there, it's seven years doing that role, came back to the UK, did a bit of work in private office. And then as a private secretary, and then a chief staff.

And I came across WithYouWithMe, funnily enough I was I was in Sydney very briefly for about 48 hours. And being jet lagged. I was in a bar, having a quiet beer by myself. And this gentleman next to me, was doing the same thing. So we had a chat, it became clear that he was also ex forces, Aussie, pretty rough around the edges. Great lad. And we carried on and carried on chatting till about seven in the morning. At which point we didn't see each other for another two years. And he contacted me out of the blue, and said, Ed, do you want to open the shop for this organization that he founded, called WithYouWithMe? So that gentleman is Tom Moore, an extraordinary man, and has been through some very tough times himself as well.

The reason why with you with me started was really because he was incredibly disappointed with the perception of veterans. And instead of convincing people to hire veterans, he thought, well hang on. We're not a charity case. Let's convince people, or let's convince veterans to train up and upskill into being software developers. And then we'll have an easy sell. So effectively, we've gone from a space of supporting the veteran community to absolutely look into all underrepresented demographics, including the neurodiverse, spouses returning to work, and refugees, to help them get a free ticket to digital skills, and that is what we do.

So we provide free, digital upskilling. People can jump on our platform, take our courses, walk away with our certifications. And an example of that is our cyber work. Our cyber training is certified by GCHQ. We never see them again, they walk away great, everyone's happy, we've fulfilled our mission statement. So, that's really where we came in. My job here is mainly the defense and security verticals. But we work very much in the private sector, in the finance world. Very much in all spaces of the commercial world. But it's only been two years. So we're still still early days. And we grew to about 60, last year, within 18 months, and growing very quickly. So obviously, that comes with all the pains. Particularly with someone like me that has no experience of the commercial private sector.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, imagine that's a bit of a learning curve, but a lot of transferable skills, I'm sure.

### **Ed Plunkett**

Yeah, I mean, I think the transferable skills, particularly from the forces is really not being a specialist in anything. And being a bit of a generalist. I've never been excellent at anything. And I've never been particularly good at anything either. But I think it's just a case of having the courage to put your hand up and give it a go, has always been one of my strengths. And, and it's daunting. I find quite often it people deselect themselves from tough challenges. And they're not the ones actually getting kicked off courses or kicked off processes or out of jobs. They're the ones who actually lose confidence in themselves and deselect themselves.

So perhaps I've got a bit of a sort of cavalry mentality of just blind confidence into just going in and trying something else. What's the worst that can happen? So yeah, it's been a it's been a fascinating learning curve for me in this space. I was by myself is pretty lonely for the first three or four months. Thankfully, I had great support from our headquarters in Sydney. But obviously the time zones, I was doing pretty long nights back then. And then eventually, we just grew very, very quickly. So it's been it's

been a fascinating journey. And I would encourage anybody that that is in a job that they think isn't really for them to consider the digital world? Because it is the gateway to the middle class.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, absolutely. There's definitely a skill shortage in the sector. And, you know, it's an ever evolving sector as well. And for that reason, it can be hard to find talent. So certainly there is the need to upskill people. One thing that you said a minute ago regarding confidence, regarding self selection, as well, do you think when it comes to veterans and the other communities that you mentioned, getting into tech and upskilling? Is that a problem that you see, attracting the right people and enabling them to stay the course as it is?

### **Ed Plunkett**

It's a very big challenge. There's a dark art myth to being a software developer, to coding to being a data analyst to being a cyber pen tester. All of that puts a fear of God into anybody that isn't, as it were a geek, that isn't a gamer. That is the image that it's got. It's just people in their pants and socks sitting at their computer, with neon lights all over and a really fancy computer chair. And at the end of the day, that puts people off, and when we're trying to change that image and trying to convince women to get into tech, trying to even convince a refugee from Afghanistan or Syria to upskill in this space. It is difficult.

So we try and simplify it. We really try and simplify. We don't assume anybody's knowledge of tech. We produce net new talents. People who really have come from being a paramedic who came out of work and had three children that have been out of work for eight years. We don't assume anyone's background and actually, we drink our own kool-aid with that. We don't look at CVs, we are a CV-less organization. So anybody that actually ends up working with us, or our clients, will not be presenting a CV. That's a bit of a brain fart moment for some of the HR departments that we speak to, who clearly are a very process-driven organization and have to be process driven.

But when they're not ticking that box that there used to be ticking, with, you know, accreditations, and, and academic background and what A-levels or GCSEs and degrees you got. We're not interested in that. What we do is we do aptitude and psychometric testing, we are interested in people's cognitive ability through data, which is totally agnostic to their background. So we can train the rest, we look for potential not experience.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, that's really refreshing to hear, I think, you know, many people will acknowledge a lot of the problems with CVs in, you know, no matter what side of that equation, you're on, whether you're hiring or whether you're the one applying for a position, the CV is never a really enjoyable process. But I think it surely must introduce a lot of biases, just by the mechanism of how it works. Now, what people think they have to look for if the CV is the filtering mechanism that they've they've got to work with.

### **Ed Plunkett**

It's fundamentally flawed. It encourages the stretching of truth, it ostracizes extraordinary talents. It has no bearing on someone's personal situation or life. And it doesn't tell me how somebody performed

when they may have known somebody in the right place and got that job. And then somehow managed to get, you know, a good reference. It's not realistic. So effectively, we would far rather just go in and ask people to do the assessments, which is both aptitude and psychometrics and the psychometrics is as important, if not more important, than the aptitude.

It actually reminds me of something that a sergeant major told me when I first got to Sandhurst on week one, which was, we are here to educate the motivated and not motivate the educated. We are happy to find people's potential, we're happy to train and, and really harness that potential. But you've got to be prepared to do the work. And, you know, yes, our courses are free. We will drive hard to get people jobs, and I spend much of my time with very large organizations, both private and government, explaining to them that we are going to introduce them to people from different backgrounds. Huge diversity applaud there, but also without CVs.

So if we're prepared to do that work, they need to be prepared to work really hard in education, to learn how to code to learn to be doing data, etc, and all our courses. And that's really important. And generally, the filter is a good one, which is the assessment itself, people who haven't got that commitment just simply won't do the hour to 90-minute assessment, they just won't do it.

#### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, interesting. And, you know, when working with those big organizations, you mentioned, the process that they must have in place, and quite often the CV is one of those kind of gatekeeper elements that you must, you know, tick all the right boxes to get through to the next stage where someone can again, review it in more detail. But you know, there can be many steps before someone actually attempts to talk to you as the candidate, as a person to understand a little bit more about them. So how have you found engaging with those organizations and re-educating them as to the process that you want them to take on board?

#### **Ed Plunkett**

Well, it's, it's been it comes in waves. I mean, I have some pretty bad days like it just like everybody and you know, you feel discouraged because you've just spoken to somebody who says that I want to see three years experience in a piece of software that's only been around for a year. Or they want to see a 2:1 degree for every digital skill. But ultimately, I would say that's 10% of the folks that I speak to.

Ultimately, these organizations are, I don't want to say desperate for digital talent, but they are now in a space where they have to think outside of the box. And if they do think outside of the box, they will reap the rewards. So they are now very open to having these companies, these conversations of looking at alternative means of bringing in talent. Talent is very expensive, particularly if you're looking for experience in several of the organizations I work with. They're looking for security clearances, as well, which really raises a barrier to entry. And, I think now organizations are take ESG seriously. And that diversity piece isn't paid lip service to, like it was 10 years ago. People really understand that diversity of gender, ethnicity, of mind. And quite often when we talk about diversity, we really are just focused on gender and ethnicity, I'm not really that focused by that I think actually, diversity of thought is really important. Supported by ethnicity, I think the diversity of ethnicity does bring with it and engender a diversity of thought, but, you know, I'm really interested by the neurodiverse world, I'm interested by

people with dyslexia, people with Asperger's and autism. I think their gifts, I've got dyslexia, it's been a huge gift for me to throw myself into all sorts of different pieces of work that I've been on. And, it allows me to think differently and look at life differently.

I think now we're in a very good environment to build on this talent model. And, and it's really encouraging to see these large organizations going for it and a testament to our clients who I can or can't mention on this podcast, who are particularly open-minded and serious about talent and diversity.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, well, it's very positive to hear and it sounds like it is a combination of factors, in terms of culture, skill shortages, and other areas that coming together that actually make this a very good time to try and influence that hiring process.

### **Ed Plunkett**

But then comes the challenge of actually, as I said, going back to convincing people that if they do reskill, as into the digital space, they will almost guarantee themselves a good salary, they will guarantee themselves jobs for the future. You could also argue that they will guarantee themselves better work-life balance with that digital skill. And I use the example of which probably won't really resonate with many of your listeners. But from the forces world, you know, if you're a lance corporal leaving the forces, which is a junior, noncommissioned rank, and you're going into the big bad civvy world, well, unless you're really guided and you're really supported, the general default setting is you go and work for a large telecommunications company, climbing up some tower somewhere spending a lot of time away from home, you're driving a lorry for the logistics world, or you're actually back on the security circuit, private security circuit, guarding a gate in some far-flung country, on an embassy. That's not going to support your family, it's not going to support your mental health.

I think that's where I'm a great believer that the digital space is going to do that. I'm not from the digital world. And just briefly, to go back to the interview that I had with Tom, to join WithYouWithMe. I had a bit of a reverse interview. And I said to him, look, I don't think I'm the right guy for this, to get this kicked off in the UK. I don't come from a digital background and I know nothing about tech. And I've never been in sales. Then he took a punt and actually told me that I was the right guy for it. So we're all credit to him. And the rest of the team who do support, you know, several others who are far less privileged than I am.

I'm also conscious that when I'm speaking to you right now I'm a middle-aged white guy, and I'm posh. So I'm not the greatest example of diversity. But I think for that reason, I'm keen to do something about it. Several of the team and the service personnel that I worked with, were far brighter than me, just didn't have the privileged background that I had, which is why I carried the rank that I had, and got to where I was. And I'd say now, I'd like to make amends on that.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah. And I think it's a great mission to have. I think, you say that you didn't have experience in tech, you didn't have experience in sales. But I can imagine, whilst that might initially appear to be a challenge, and imagine that also comes with a new perspective, and you talking earlier about different

mindsets and ways that people think about and perceive the world, I imagine there must be some benefit there to approaching it fresh as well.

### **Ed Plunkett**

Yeah. Coming into this with my preconceptions and biases of the digital tech world has been helpful. Because much of that has been dispelled. And, I made it very clear to the leadership that I wouldn't take on this role, which much of it is sales, and let's just break down the word sales. Sales is the idea of conveying an opinion, or at least a message to somebody else, it needs to be a product, it could be an image, it could be a lifestyle, it could be anything. I think we all do sales in our everyday life somehow, because we need to convince this leadership effectively, that's what it comes down to, it comes down to leadership.

So coming in here, wet behind the ears with my perspective on it, I think has been reasonably helpful to the organization. And I like the idea that having that diversity in my team here in the UK is really proving to be really strong. I've gotten the Katie who is phenomenal, she's one of our partners, she's done a phenomenal job and has grown from just being a business development role all the way up to now being a partner in the private sector. Before joining us, her prospects were definitely poor. And she was severely underutilized. Same way we've got Jack, who's our ops lead here. He is a former pilot from the Navy from the Fleet Air Arm. He got medically discharged, and is just the most phenomenal ops director. As I said, we drink our own Kool-Aid, and we are really enjoying the ride.

### **Matthew Todd**

I think for people that are listening to this, that are in tech, maybe they've got a startup or they're starting to scale, but they are starting to build their team and looking to hire new technical talent, new developers, what advice would you give them to source talent to look for people that are gonna be a really good fit based on everything that you've described, but they may not be people that they would normally know how to access?

### **Ed Plunkett**

I think that the first thing is, let's just look at the standard way that some of these organizations, and some of your listeners may be hiring people, let's talk about recruitment companies. And I'm by no means here to poopoo recruitment companies, they do a phenomenal job, but the model is slightly flawed. Everybody from the private sector and even the government sector are fishing from the same talent pools with recruitment companies.

If I was looking for a job, I wouldn't just go and see one recruitment company, I'd go and see several that were niche to my skills. And those organizations looking for somebody like me, would be going to those places and asking for that kind of talent and I'd be touted out to those different organizations.

But there just isn't the scalability to be able to answer the digital skills gap need in the UK? That model does not answer that skills gap. That model supports unicorns. It supports the highly educated and probably the very expensive as well, those salaries that those types will be commanding will be very high. I don't think it supports retention either. Because, you know, your average graduate with five years

experience in software development, owns the market, they're able to jump ship and jump to the next big paycheck. And, so retention is very poor in that space.

What I would suggest, and by no means am I the oracle on this, I would only really just suggest it, is let's have a chat with them or others who do similar things to us. And, let's see the kind of skills that they're looking for, let's really delve down into the detail of what could potentially be a really lazily written JD. There are so many job descriptions, which are lazily written. And are asking for things which are just not necessary to the specificity of what is going to be required of that person when they deploy when they when they are recruited, or go and work for or are subcontracted to another organization.

So, my view is they should be open minded, they should consider potential over experience. And again, I keep banging on about that, but that is our mantra potential over experience. They should not take a punt. But do it in a calculated manner. Using a testing process using an assessment process. By looking at the CV, automatically, you will be prejudiced, it's normal. That's just a human factor. There's nothing to feel guilty about there. Were human, we're tribal, you know, you went to a fancy university, you see someone else that went there on the CV, while you're gonna want to hire them, that's just the way it is.

Whereas you've got a single mum from Scunthorpe, who's actually got as high aptitude and has got the right match, but just didn't get those opportunities in life, she isn't far more likely to show your loyalty and stay with you for longer, if you just invest a little bit in her education, and invest in management time to get her up to speed. So I admit it's not for all levels of tech. But it's definitely from the entry-level to intermediate.

So in sort of zero to hero terms, hero looks like a SFIA level. We use the framework, the skills framework for an information age to benchmark the talent that we're creating. So we'll go up to a SFIA level four, which is effectively a senior consultant. Project management is included in there. So that will be slightly quicker, data is slightly quicker. Software Engineering, back end and front end is longer. And obviously full stack will take longer as well. But we're not a charity and talent that we work with on charity cases. And we want to make that very clear as well.

### **Matthew Todd**

Absolutely. It's just looking at that talent from a different perspective of that potential and aptitude through those assessments. When you were talking about the job description, so many companies and maybe they've got some new funding, and they're looking to grow whatever that means, but the people doing the hiring, whether it's new developers or other roles, quite often don't really understand what they're hiring for. They need more resources, more people, and they need them to do things, but they don't often don't have a deep understanding of the problems that those people are going to be solving for the business and therefore default to oh, what should I put in a job description? Let me Google what should I put in a front end developers job description? Oh, look, here's a template I can use. That sounds about right. Let me copy that in. It's got two years experience in React this, that and the other, add a few tweaks for this company. There we go. That's what we're looking for.

**Ed Plunkett**

Exactly. I think you're probably the best person to attest to this. With your background in the engineering space. You must have pulled your hair out at times when you are being presented with talent that just didn't align with what your team needed. How did you feel about that?

**Matthew Todd**

Absolutely. I've been involved in many hiring conversations and also advised people in that capacity as well. It was just disappointing to see them copy the same process that they'd been through, because it was the only point of reference. So they thought they had to look at the CV and look for certain things, years of experience, but it didn't really tell them anything about the ability of that candidate to make an impact in the business.

And they felt that they had to start an interview with a list of technical questions that no one in their right mind should really be able to remember off the top of their head. If they don't know what something is they'll open Google and within seconds, they'll have the answer anyway. So that whole interview process that starts with the CV but goes into the interview itself as well seems to be just mimicry of a process that they themselves had been through before and probably didn't enjoy either. So I think there's a lot of problems with that process, but a lot of reeducation needed to change it.

**Ed Plunkett**

There is. I do feel for those hiring managers, and those HR departments, they're under a huge amount of pressure they're thrown KPIs, which isn't that helpful, because then eventually they're put that pressure is on just to get people through the door, which is not helpful. It should be balanced with quality and, obviously not quantity. But that is a challenge that the sector faces and those people in those departments face education is a big part.

I think with your previous role with those a large consultancy company, in the engineering space, it would be very helpful for there to be more interaction between the users of the talents, and the people finding it. And don't assume that the people finding the talent, know what you know, and don't take that for granted. Because then we really can get into the granularity of what is actually needed. And what is a nice to have. And why isn't a level important? I think that there is that challenge.

Also there's there needs to be more emphasis, I would suggest in the civilian working environment, there needs to be more emphasis on leadership and management, which I would suggest what I've seen, since leaving the forces it's been pretty poor in the civilian world. I don't think it's anyone's fault, I think there's just a lot of pressure to increase the bottom line of companies. And so that translates into huge KPIs, and no one's got time for the human interaction side of it, which would improve retention.

If you invest in people's education, and you ask them how they are three times, then you'll get a real answer. And you can sit down, have a coffee and talk about it. But that takes time. And time is money and you know, that needs to be balanced carefully with a company's ability to achieve that. So, it's an interesting one,

**Matthew Todd**



Do you think that's because people aren't taught how to lead in most cases?

### **Ed Plunkett**

There is probably a lack of emphasis on soft skills. That's often talked about in DevOps and Milkin. And these large Economic Forums, there's a lack of emphasis on soft skills. And everyone's being driven to focus on the sciences and stem, which I absolutely agree with. And you know, we are talking about digital skills here. But you know, soft skills are so crucial to having a happy working environment. So I think the best organizations that I've seen have a real focus on that and don't pay lip service to it.

A large part of the other side of what we do is not just people, but we also support workforce planning and that in the future of what their workforce might be. So our platform is called Potential, which is the platform where people can go on and do their attitude, and psychometric testing and their training for free. That will also support the system that we've got on there will also support organizations to ascertain what roles within their organization will be redundant in the next five to 10 years, and that is a really good flag to go okay, well, which roles will be relevant and what do we need to drive towards?

So we support organizations with testing their current workforce, and you know, if they are going to make redundancies, and we've seen very large organizations these past three weeks, make very big redundancies. My message to them is, before you make those redundancies, get in touch, do the test, and get those people that you are looking to make redundant, to do our assessment, so that you can actually really understand what you're letting go of in the same way that when you use our service assessment to understand who you're hiring, really get a grip of who you're letting go of, because there's a high chance that you're letting go of people who have a high propensity for the roles that you're looking to hire.

So instead of letting go of people, reskill them and cross-check them into the roles that you're looking for. A) that works because those people understand your culture, B) they're far more likely to stay if they realize that you really care about their education and their development. And also C) you're not paying for redundancy fees, and you're not paying recruitment fees. So understanding your people is really key. Use us or don't use us for their continuation training, but invest in people's education, then they will stay there. Several people have claimed to have said this, but it's effective. It's something along the lines of, you know, why do we want to educate our workforce? Because then they'll leave? And I think the saying was, well, what happens if you don't educate your workforce, and they stay? And I think that resonates with particularly what we're doing in the civil service is, you know, educate as much as you can and people will repay that with loyalty and strong retention.

### **Matthew Todd**

Yeah, absolutely. I think I still see managers being fearful of over-educating people and them leaving, but I also see them not really understanding or having the tools to understand what their potential of their current workforce is, and also how to give them the tools and the space to improve their skills, as well.

And you see, on a Friday afternoon, you don't have to do your main duties, you have three hours to educate yourself, or whatever you feel is relevant, which, from what I've seen, tends to devolve into, oh,

this is just a personal interest to me, it may not even be relevant to the job that they're doing in any way, shape, or form, or people just feeling a bit lost, or what am I supposed to be doing with this time and not really knowing what to do and how to move forward?

### **Ed Plunkett**

Yeah, I mean, there is that. I think that again, comes back to management, making sure that your line manager or whatever they're called, are across what your objectives are in life and your personal life and your professional life. And if that includes fitness and staying fit, which I'm a great believer in, then get out and train for a triathlon or get out and get some fresh air.

I think there is absolutely a requirement to focus on management. And the digital skills piece within that is an opportunity to sort of explore if somebody does want to learn that skill, instead of just letting them go.

### **Matthew Todd**

No, absolutely. And for any tech founder listening to this, maybe they have got that initial funding, whether it's seed or series A funding, and they're looking to expand their team, what advice would you like to leave them with today,

### **Ed Plunkett**

I would absolutely ask them to consider the idea that they don't have to spend a fortune on salaries for huge amounts of experience. That if they spend time nurturing talent, it will pay back it will 100% pay back. It's not easy. You got to spend time nurturing it, you got to manage it. Sure, you can buy oven-ready, but oven-ready is just gonna be a problem that you're gonna kick down the road later because that oven-ready talent is going to stay with you for that long unless you are paying huge bucks.

So those who are starting out what to consider other sorts of sources of talent, look at other skills. I spoke to a guy last week who is being medically discharged from the RAF. He's been a fast jet pilot for seven years. And he came to me and said, I don't know how to do anything. And all he's done for seven years is assessments, if you fail as an assessment, twice in the RAF for for what he was doing, you're out. Sp for seven years, he's been succeeding on all the assessments, much of it is aptitude. And I said, I said to this chap, don't underestimate what you have to offer the outside world.

So what I would really like for the startup owners and entrepreneurs and those SME directors listening here is to consider taking on some of this potential talent. And yeah, sure blend it in with expertise and huge experience, blend it with that. But you'll find that you'll have far less friction in the workplace, because there's less ego, there's far less ego as well. That's a huge challenge in the workplace is managing people's expectations. And if you're able to do that by, you know, training in a type of academy model, in an apprenticeship model, then you'll be in a really good space to have that that balanced approach to talent.

### **Matthew Todd**

I completely agree. It certainly sounds like a healthier way to build a business. So for anyone listening, I'll make sure that we leave links in the show notes. I think people would be worth spending some time on reading. I'm sure that there are a lot more things we could go into. But for now, I think thank you so much for the pleasure of sharing those thoughts and sharing a bit about WithYouWithMe. It's been a really enjoyable and useful valuable conversation.

**Ed Plunkett**

Really appreciate the opportunity.