

COVID-19: Interview with Hayden Wood, Co-founder and CEO of Bulb

Starting with the simple mission to help people to lower their energy bills and their carbon emissions, Bulb is now the biggest green energy company in the UK. Maddyness spoke with Hayden Wood, Co-founder and CEO to understand how the business has coped, evolved and grown in troubled times.

Temps de lecture : minute

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We started Bulb because we saw a real opportunity to do things differently and make the energy industry better. We wanted to provide people with simpler, cheaper and greener energy. Our mission is simple: to help people to lower their energy bills and lower their carbon emissions.

We launched the business in 2015 and, five years later, now supply green energy to 1.7M households across the UK and our international markets including the U.S., Spain and France. We're now the biggest green energy company in the UK, providing 100% renewable electricity and 100% carbon neutral gas to around 6% of the domestic market.

We're also proud to be a Living Wage Employer and a certified B Corp. Bulb is the first and only major energy supplier in the UK to become an accredited B Corp, which means we meet the highest standards of social and environmental performance, whilst providing a great place to work.

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It's not easy to get accredited as a B Corp but it's something we'd love to see more businesses doing.

What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown?

As a business providing an essential service, Bulb acted quickly when the pandemic began to make sure we could continue to deliver the same high standards of customer service whilst shifting to a remote way of working and serving our members.

Our priority during the pandemic has been to continue delivering great service for our customers while looking after our team. The whole business moved to remote working in mid-March, ahead of the Government's official advice and ahead of the national lockdown. We began having meetings in January to prepare, which gave us a head start. Bulb already had an agile working culture which meant we were able to adapt quickly. Coronavirus hasn't stopped us from growing our team, and I'm proud that we've been able to hire and onboard 180 people remotely over the past few months.

What have been the biggest personal challenges during lockdown?

For me, the biggest personal challenge was being away from the office, not having the team around me, and not having that physical separation between work and home. I've really missed being around the team and going into the office! And I think a commute can provide valuable thinking time, although I've tried to replicate that during lockdown with walks

around my neighbourhood.

I'm proud of the way that Bulb's responded to the pandemic - and in some ways, I feel closer than ever to the team. We've worked hard to adapt how we communicate and interact as a business. We're driven by a common goal - supporting each other and our members as best we can - and we've kept our focus on that throughout this period.

Was remote working a new thing for you, and if so will you be adapting your work to allow more of it?

Bulb has always had an agile culture of changing teams and positions. We have a tradition of reshuffling our customer service teams so everyone gets to meet different people across the business, experience different management, and spread knowledge around the office. In January, we did a reshuffle which saw 600 people picking up new skills and experiences. Looking back, this was great preparation for what we did six weeks later when everyone moved from the office to home.

Over the past six months we've learnt a lot about our teams and the way we work best, and we'll be taking on board those learnings. We've used several different communication tools and platforms to help us stay connected - and most importantly, we still manage to come together as a company and connect each week virtually, something our team valued a lot in the office and is even more important while we work remotely.

How have you been keeping your teams happy?

We've been really busy throughout lockdown but also taken the time to come up with new and inventive ways to maintain communication with

our team members and ensure that everyone feels supported and connected to their teams and colleagues. Some of the ways in which we've done this include virtual training, regular check ins and the weekly team meeting where members of the Bulb team share updates, insights and company news.

One of the most important things that we've been doing is taking the time to say thank you to our teams. As a business, we don't always celebrate our successes enough. But we've been making sure we take more time to let people know how important and valued their work is.

As a company providing an essential service, I think we've been united by the opportunity to keep finding ways to do things better and help our members as much as we can. When we were first adapting to lockdown and thinking about what that meant for our members, having really clear direction and compelling reasons for why things needed to happen meant our team was able to keep working quickly and to a high standard. That sense of purpose and clarity is something we'll always want to maintain at Bulb.

As a leader, have you successfully managed your (and your teams) mental resilience through lockdown?

One of our company values is 'we take care'. This has been at the forefront of our minds during the pandemic. It's been really important for team members to look after one another, so we're making sure everyone speaks to at least one member of their team once a day, just so we know they're ok. We were also able to roll out additional mental health tools for our teams. This meant they had access to a much wider range of mental health support tools from early on.

While working from home, we've also amped up the social aspect of our company by hosting activities during and after office hours. I think it's really important that we maintain Bulb's culture, even during times when we can't be physically together. Over the last few months, we've organised team takeaway dinners and drinks, quizzes, karaoke, 10K runs and bake-offs. We also set up an internal podcast to share our 'Desert Isolation Discs' as well as work-free Slack channels.

Have you made any changes to your business and business model?

Our priority and focus throughout the crisis has been and will continue to be supporting the 1.7M households we serve. Coronavirus hasn't changed our priorities as a business, but it did change what's immediately doable. We quickly put in place measures to help our Member Experience team work effectively and help members remotely. We've provided extra support for our vulnerable customers and those that are self-isolating, for example, by sending out topped up prepay cards and creating a dedicated phone line for our members aged over 70.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

We moved fast at the beginning of March to immediately put in place measures to help our Member Experience team work effectively. Making sure our members have a great experience is very important to us. Unlike other businesses, we've been able to answer the phone to members' calls throughout the outbreak - human interaction was key.

We also set up a dedicated, free phone line for members aged over 70 to make sure people who are shielding or vulnerable always have a way to reach us and discuss their energy with someone directly. We've seen a

big change in the use of service channels, with many more people using our online chat function. We've also implemented a new chat platform in the Bulb account and our app which allows members to reach us in less than three minutes.

Our number one priority throughout the pandemic has continued to be our members. We've been doing everything we can to give our members the best possible support during the pandemic. We've been keeping them updated as our services progressed, and I think the crisis has proven how important customer communication is for businesses in any industry.

Do you feel confident in your business post-COVID?

This year, individuals, business and governments have been faced with waves of economic, social and health challenges that have never been experienced before on such a scale. At the same time, this global pandemic has highlighted the potential scale of the next crisis that we've seen coming for some time now: the climate crisis. There have been some positives for the environment over recent months, with a huge drop in carbon emissions and air pollution as travel stopped and entire industries shifted to lower energy consumption. But these were of course all short term effects which came at the cost of economic growth, and people's jobs and livelihoods. We can't afford to count on these trends continuing unless we work hard now to move to a more sustainable way of living and working. We have to emerge from this crisis with a plan to deal with the bigger, longer, more dangerous crisis of climate chaos and use COVID-19 as a chance to reset with a green economic recovery.

That's what drives us at Bulb every day: our mission is to provide people with cheaper, greener, simpler energy, which helps them reduce their energy bills and carbon emissions. The transition to renewable energy is happening, but it needs to be accelerated. We're driving that change to

take green energy mainstream. When Bulb started five years ago, 1% of the UK energy market was renewable and now that figure is 10%. We're taking our mission international to make sure we reach as many people as possible: Bulb currently operates in the UK, France, Spain and US, and we're aiming to reach 100 million people around the world by 2030.

Companies like Bulb will play an important role in the recovery from coronavirus by not only offering people simple ways to reduce their carbon emissions, but also by creating high-skilled, well-paid green jobs that support the country's economic recovery and help us build a greener planet. We've been the fastest growing company in the UK for two years running, doubling the number of members from early 2019 to early 2020. We know that people are voting with their feet and moving to green energy, and we look forward to taking our mission to more people at such a critical time for the environment and economies around the world.

Are there any changes in society/economy that you think will help you?

We know that businesses and households are looking to save money and move towards a more sustainable way of living. Switching energy suppliers is one of the quickest ways anyone can reduce their costs, and choosing 100% renewable electricity will also reduce your carbon footprint. In France, for example, as well as providing green energy, Bulb is €177 cheaper than the regulated tariff.

Around 30-50% of a person's carbon footprint comes from the energy they use at home. We think there's a significant opportunity to help people decrease their carbon impact by increasing access to affordable green energy. We're also supporting new technology that helps tackle climate change. For example, in the UK, a British driver can save around £1,000 per year by switching to an electric vehicle. We're committed to lowering people's carbon emissions and supporting new green

technologies.

The pandemic has shown the importance of resilience and preparation. We've joined calls for a green economic recovery post-Covid so we're prepared for the bigger crisis of climate change - and we support governments' ambitions for sustainability. In France this year, for example, the government has allocated €14,5B until 2024 towards renewable energy - with subsidies in solar, hydraulic and wind energy and more recently in green gas.

Tell us about your future post-COVID?

Coronavirus is not going to change Bulb's goals and ambitions. Since launching five years ago, our goal has been to offer people simpler, cheaper and greener energy. We're now the biggest green energy company in the UK, but we've got lots more people to reach, and we want to help green go mainstream.

People are voting with their feet for better service, greener energy and cheaper prices. 400,000 people in the UK switched from big energy suppliers to smaller, cheaper greener suppliers like Bulb in June and July - an increase of 25% from this time last year. The pandemic has reinforced how important a green transition at the heart of the recovery is, and every household can play their part by switching to green energy.

Article by Hayden Wood