

Adapt to survive: Interview with Ross Thornley, CEO AQai

Company lifespan used to be 67 years. Now it's just 14. What with COVID and the climate crisis, the times are a'changing fast - and businesses and employees will need to learn to unlearn quickly.

Temps de lecture : minute

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AQai has developed its own metric to assess adaptability quotient or AQ (a lesser-known cousin of IQ and EQ). We spoke to Ross about his definitions of adaptability and adaptability intelligence, how humans can embrace a burning desire to change and innovate - rather than waiting for a burning platform, and a daily routine that involves rescue chickens, sleep monitoring and a jigsaw puzzle.

[Maddyness] Could you tell me about your background, leading up to founding AQai?

[Ross] I started my first company in 2000; it was a branding and marketing agency, which I ran until December 2017. It was a 17-year rollercoaster ride; we employed about 100 people over the period, and when I sold it we had a full-time team of 25. Most of our clients were big corporates - Sony Professional, Thomson Reuters, that kind of thing.

I went from being somebody who - as my parents would describe it - 'coloured in with a mouse' as a graphic designer, through to somebody who just looked at spreadsheets and did emails. That reality of working on influencing people, innovations, product launches, mergers and acquisitions... all of that was great. It gifted me a network and an

education about business, society, people and the economy.

The significant shift came when we won a project to do the rebranding and repositioning for the UN volunteers globally. That was the first time we'd engaged with an NGO, and it was just prior to the SDGs. That gave me a real connection to helping people and the planet, rather than thinking about how many more commercial goods (that nobody really wants) I could sell.

This global goals to-do list led me to doing innovation for companies on how they move the needle. How can big corporations engage with exponential technologies? The main issue wasn't a technology one - it was a human one.

The immune system would come up and say 'that's not the way we do things' and I was recognising this big problem where so many organisations were either going bankrupt at the worst, or their propositions were no longer relevant and employees were losing their roles. Mainly because they weren't able to adapt to the world we're living in.



That led me to researching what makes people adapt. What makes them change; what ticks our behaviour through a work and career development lens? I'm a big fan of psychometrics and trying to understand people - having employed a variety of them, good and bad! - which led to AQ of our adaptability intelligence. We created an assessment with a vision of living no one behind.

What's the role of comms and brand strategy in the climate fight? Can good communication change behaviour?

Communications is still my first love - and my method of choice to inspire, educate and transform peoples' thoughts and hopefully behaviours and actions.

I don't think it's limited to climate - but any kind of shift or change. We see something we don't like the look of, and then we talk about it and communicate in order to shift thought. There's that George Bernard Shaw piece, 'all change comes from the unreasonable man'. Whether it's Black Lives Matter, or climate change, or how we treat animals, communication to me is the way in which we learn and change course.

For you personally, what's been the difference between starting your former company and AQai? How have you adapted over the course of those 20 years?

At the beginning, there was a bliss and naivety. You don't know what you don't know - so you just hit it with full energy. I had the advantage of that, and also the disadvantage. I was very young going into situations where you were expected to have age and experience behind you - if you're competing to win a contract with a big corporate like Sony, for example. It was all about the proposition of taking a risk into the unknown. And I grew that business organically; I took no investment and it was education by

doing.

Setting up now, I see the world quite differently – the size of ambition I have is much larger, and my approach is very different. I'm looking for collaborations around a movement, rather than a competitive advantage and protecting my little fiefdom of a company.

20 years ago the world was very different technologically and societally as well. Now there's the advantage of deeper collaborations on a global scale. AQai has team members all around the world. This is also the first time I've sought outside investment into a business; that's a whole new learning in my own entrepreneurial journey, to raise finance.

Can you explain what AQai does in your own words? What do you guys consider to be 'adaptability'?

There's a difference for us between what adaptability is and what we consider AQ - which is adaptability intelligence. You might have come across IQ and EQ.

Adaptability has two parts. The National Institute for Health issued a paper in 2015 describing it 'as a disposition and skill - adaptability is essential to an individual's psychological health, social success and academic or workplace achievement'. So in that context, our adaptability is super important.

Our model of AQ – THE ADAPTIOTIC TABLE

Transforming the way people and organisations adapt to change

AQ ABILITY

How and to what degree do I adapt?



1. Grit
2. Mental Flexibility
3. Mindset
4. Resilience
5. Unlearn

AQ CHARACTER

Who adapts and why?



6. Emotional Range
7. Extraversion
8. Hope
9. Motivation Style
10. Thinking Style

AQ ENVIRONMENT

When does someone adapt to what degree?



11. Company Support
12. Emotional Health
13. Team Support
14. Work Environment
15. Work Stress

AI Predictive Optimisation



16. Change Readiness index
17. Reskill Index

Scientifically valid measures of the 17 dimensions of adaptability



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A couple of years earlier, there was a quote saying ‘adaptability is the capacity to adjust one’s thoughts and behaviours in order to effectively respond to uncertainty, new information and changed circumstances.’

Now, that has become part of the lexicon because of the pandemic. Whilst it’s always been there and it’s part of our evolution, now it’s critical.

The other factor of what AQ is, and this is a term that in the last ten years has just started to become something, is the metric of adaptability. We then have invested over £500K in collaborating with the top professors, psychologists and other people from around the world to make a model of AQ that covers ability, character and environment. So our model is this ACE environment, which is about who adapts, why we adapt and when we adapt.

We measure it in a robust and user-friendly way - a conversational chatbot that gives you an instant dashboard report against 15 dimensions from resilience to unlearning. Then our marketplace helps you improve it.

Would you say humans are good or bad at adapting? Is there something about being in a company that inhibits adaptation that comes quite naturally to us normally?

Humans by nature are very adaptable - it's why we're still around. But often we're adaptable on the terms of comfort. For example, I might be adaptable at home or with health conditions; I can go from healthy to then having cancer - do I go into depression or do I thrive? I could go from married to being divorced. All those things in our lives, we adapt to.

The moment we stop adapting is death - other than that, we're always doing it.

The challenge is to do it in a way that isn't about coping, or surviving, but thriving and growing. Environment has a big factor. You've probably heard the term 'we're the sum of the five people we spend the most time with'; they affect our mindset, what we believe is possible and even true.

A company can absolutely help somebody who is struggling to adapt - they can accelerate and give people an environment where there is psychological safety and team support, where they can run experimentation without judgment.

Equally, we could have been super adaptable but suddenly find ourselves in an environment where the restrictions, governance and process inhibits us from truly adapting. I might be at the edge of technology and in healthcare, but it takes a factor of policy change to allow telemedicine to happen.

Our contexts or company affects adaptation both negatively and positively.

What impact has COVID had on your business and on the overall adaptability landscape?

Even without COVID, you had 375 million people needing to reskill in the next ten years. About 40% of the jobs that will ultimately be available don't currently exist. Imagine what we need to do!

COVID has given a global narrative for the importance of it; we're suddenly all in the same storm - although in our own boats. It's also accelerated the adoption of lots of technology by five-ten years; it's pushed forward remote working, where previously those who were motivated to change by burning ambition already did it - but others needed a burning platform.

Companies are going to go out of business if they can't figure out how to be valuable in this new environment. The average lifespan of a company on the S&P 500 used to be 67 years - now it's just 14. That goes to show the level of transformation and disruption that's happening for companies. COVID's bought that home in a visceral way for everybody.

The other huge challenge is mental health. Whilst we might be able to adapt to a new situation, whether that's sustainable is an important question. Productivity shot up; it's now down. Anxiety, stress and uncertainty is up. If we're entering a world where these challenges will become more frequent, our AQ is an important thing to focus on.

Do you notice that certain industries are better than others?

I think it's a human problem rather than an industry problem. Different industries are at different parts of their transformation cycle. Where we see fintech pushing the finance industry, there are other industries starting that same journey a little later down the line - edtech, healthtech is having an influx.

The human nature of individuals that may happen to be in certain industries or not - that will have a factor of influence, but it is trainable, learnable, irrelevant of where you currently operate and your current career path.

What's your daily routine, and the rules you're living by to get you through COVID?

I get up at about 6am during the winter - a little bit later than in the summer. I don't have my phone or technology in the bedroom; I charge it downstairs. I'll shower and make a green tea for me and a coffee for my wife, and then check my Oura Ring - which tracks my heart rate variability, which is an indication to your nervous system recovery, and deep sleep/REM sleep. It gives you a predictive readiness score for that day, which will influence to a certain extent what types of tasks I'll do - whether they're creative or cognitive.

We then go on an hour's dog walk in the forest, come back and have breakfast. We have rescue chickens; we grow most of our own veg; we're

vegans and have been for a long time. At the moment we seem to be eating a lot of porridge and caramelised apples from our garden.

I have a weekly planner by Strategic Coach. It starts with three positive focuses of the last week. I'm experimenting with a stand-up desk, take lots of breaks, only drink green tea (not coffee), been teetotal for most of my life. I'll generally have quite a full day at the moment - today for example my last appointment is at 9pm. We're trying not to binge Netflix in the evenings, so are doing more boardgames - and at the moment an impossible jigsaw puzzle!

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