A year of tech innovation in a crisis: how the education sector adapted

Everything – from work to how children are educated – changed one year ago. As a business providing education technology to workplaces and schools, we witnessed this transition internally and externally at Texthelp, but here's how tech companies can stay on track.

Temps de lecture : minute

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When the pandemic first crashed against UK like an unforgiving storm battering a ship at sea, it was a case for leaders to batten down the hatches and cry for all hands on deck across companies everywhere. The size, industry and location of businesses were irrelevant as there was no blueprint on how they should adapt.

The edtech sector specifically faced challenges around the sudden transition to remote education that schools and learners were met with and needed to react to the immediate crisis at speed.

The ubiquitous response was to provide support and access. This approach was twofold: doubling down on care of existing customers as a primary focus, with a secondary proposition to provide usage as far as possible to students and teachers in need.

Part of the issue in expanding was startups looking at the short-term gain, rather than long-term strategy. Some focused on giving free access away to get their name out there and beat the competition, which is completely

understandable from a marketing and client acquisition perspective. But what happens to the revenue model? Are there contingencies in place? How long can this free offer be sustained for?

It's a risky roll of the dice to rush in without taking a step back. I would advise any leader to triple-check the numbers when racing to win a first-mover advantage that may in fact leave them trailing behind. Wanting to support your ecosystem (and grow in the process) is admirable, but not at the risk of your company's sustainability.

Containing explosive usage

Edtech businesses by design are accustomed to having a formulaic service structure, whereby students are walked through programs by educators to support their understanding. Resources therefore needed to be enhanced and focused on pupils and parents, rather than solely

onboarding teachers first.

This demand meant education app downloads spiked by 90% in a peak week during March 2020 compared to the weekly average the previous quarter, according to App Annie. That upsurge was a lot for the sector to manage as nobody could have calculated such a drastic spike. Startups were familiar with their usage patterns, but this explosion was uncharted territory.

It wasn't uncommon to see services crash throughout the booming period, which proved to be overwhelming. This was disastrous because stability was a mission-critical requirement at what was a very uncertain and disruptive time as educators sought to deliver lessons as smoothly as possible.

In some cases, companies only had themselves to blame as the rapid push to bring in new users wasn't only risky from a monetary perspective, but from a usability stance too as they couldn't adequately accommodate newcomers.

This would have been a frustrating enough experience for existing users who should have been nurtured. But for those new customers operating on a free model, the sudden removal of access created a poor user experience.

We heard teachers claiming there were so many options on the market that they were dissuaded from using any at all. The risk of a patchy service here is deterring the target audience from the edtech space entirely, rather than convincing them that the tools at their disposal were something they needed long-term.

Operating in the cloud is a powerful way to provide businesses the reinforcement required to facilitate extra demand and reassurance that operations will be protected during unpredictable moments, whether

that's through Google Cloud, Amazon Web Services or otherwise.

Stress testing is an important exercise that tech startups should carry out to gauge how their services can be maintained under various conditions, providing confidence that scalability of architecture is in place.

Avoiding innovation for the sake of it

Product innovation is arguably the most compelling part of development but, like stress testing, preparation is paramount. So, who is the product being created for? It's an obvious question, but one that can be easy to lose sight of when a siloed coding frenzy occurs.

Helpfully, the clue is in the name edtech. We must be mindful that the education sector first and foremost is going to benefit from the underlying technology offered, and that's a solid start. This rule can be applied to

any sector, whether that's fintech, foodtech, adtech or otherwise.

As businesses, it's imperative to listen intently to the problems that those we serve face, rather than creating technology based on what we assume are issues – which in many cases don't meet the user requirements.

Gone are the days when educators might have been dazzled by a shiny new creation: many have become very 'no nonsense' during the pandemic and insist that tech must solve a problem for them. Companies that don't understand this will struggle but, in absorbing the problems of the user carefully, innovations can be solutions instead of vanity projects that can lead to a downward slope.

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