Meet SymTerra, allowing easy, instant, and intuitive communication between multiple contractors

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Sarah Crawley and John Ryan of SymTerra about co-operation, communication and helping construction to shake off its analogue methods.

Temps de lecture : minute

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SymTerra's cofounders are Sarah Crawley and John Ryan, a 'wife and husband' duo with 25 years of site management and engineering experience in construction, across both major infrastructure projects and high-spec medical projects. Sarah first developed the platform in 2019, having completed a series of intensive care ward refurbishments for Mace, and soon brought on John to help grow the business.

What was the catalyst for launching SymTerra?

In our previous lives, we both worked in construction. No matter how big or technical the construction project, we always found ourselves managing the projects with Microsoft Excel, email, WhatsApp and yes, even pen and paper.

The minimal construction tech we did have access to didn't benefit us, and was a hassle to use. We would regularly have to make decisions with

incorrect, out of date information or sometimes no information at all - and yet still needed to complete the work we were expected to deliver. Poor communication from site can have such a detrimental impact on a project, and yet we were unable to communicate with our subcontractors. We noticed a gap in the market and decided we wanted to create a tool that actually benefitted site teams.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Construction is an inherently co-operative activity: multiple different skilled trades come together to deliver a construction programme. However, the way teams currently communicate is structured for failure.

SymTerra's communication platform allows easy, instant, and intuitive communication across multiple contractors to the same project. Clients, contractors and subcontractors can now document works via images and video, cross reference assets and activities, and share information instantly with who they need to. It is the first Building Information Modelling (BIM) pipeline from site reflecting how works are delivered.

SymTerra is set to resolve a unified pain-point across all construction sites: poor communication. Unlike existing software where information is siloed, we allow site teams to communicate and share updates through flexible pricing and user permissions that reflect how work is delivered.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We launched SymTerra in March 2021. Starting off with just the two of us and a dog, working in a spare room. Fast forward twelve months, and we

have grown to a team of 15 people and have a whole floor in the creative Design District in North Greenwich. We originally started with one client on one project, and today we have a client portfolio that includes £5B worth of construction and infrastructure projects for industry-leading organisations Thames Water, MTR, Kier, Cambridge University, Balfour Beatty and Transport for London.

How are you funded?

We have just closed our first seed round at $1.7M, with investment from a global investor base, led by Samaipata with participation from Nemetschek, _Pi Labs_ and Accel.

Prior to this SymTerra was all self-funded and once we became revenue generating, we re-invested that to help us grow.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

For us, our greatest challenge so far has been the fundraising. When we started out, we didn't have an investor network, so we really did start from square one (albeit with the confidence of a proven business model and happy clients under our belt)! We initially struggled to learn the rules of the game and to know what was needed. After a lot of blood, sweat and tears, we started to find and speak to the right VCs with the industry background knowledge.

We overcame this challenge with resilience, determination and a lot of late night Deliveroos. We're not afraid to ask questions and acknowledge the limits of our expertise – so we sought out other founders who were in or had been in a similar situation, and spent time with VCs who were happy to give us guidance and direction.

How does SymTerra answer an unmet need?

Construction is one of the last industries to shake off analogue methods, and today, if you asked 100 random people on a site, they would all give you a different status report. This absent or incorrect information contributes to delays and cost impact aside, is a major cause of stress for those on site.

In every other walk of life there are excellent tools - some free or fairly cheap – that make things easier, quicker, more efficient; whether you're a hobbyist or a professional, you can probably find an appropriate tool to communicate with other groups in your network.

In construction, however, the range is non-existent, the quality is often poor and costs are high. The result? Low digital adoption.

Despite it being ~14% of global GDP, construction is seen as a niche industry to provide software to and therefore has a high bar for entry. Only the large companies with back-office teams have the time and resources to implement and utilise complex systems with high usage costs. This excludes the vast majority of construction related businesses who do not have the capability or finances to use these systems.

We allow site teams to communicate and share updates through flexible pricing and user permissions that reflect how work is delivered, with no siloed information.

What's in store for the future?

Currently, we are building our team – we're aiming to triple headcount by year-end, with a key focus on sales and marketing roles. This will help us expand and reach new customers across the UK and in new regions.

We want to make site communications accessible on a huge scale – we have a Freemium product launching at the end of this month, which will open the app to a large chunk of the construction market that is digitally unserved. Most construction tech is aimed at the Tier 1 contractors (size of construction firm with more than 1,200 employees) but this is only 0.02% of the UK market. With our tiered pricing, SymTerra is built for projects and contractors of any size – so that's the other 99.98% of the market to target!

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Our piece of advice would be to really have a think about how you want to communicate your product and startup to VCs - what is attractive about your product for the VC audience? When we first started on this journey, we spent too much time describing our proposition in terms of what we thought was attractive – turns out that wasn't always exactly what VCs were listening out for.

Sarah Crawley and John Ryan are the cofounders of _SymTerra_.

Article by Sarah Crawley & John Ryan