Cogs AI, the first holistic digital solution for the neurodivergent community

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Zareen Ali, CEO and cofounder of Cogs AI about supporting the neurodivergent community and the need for research, flexibility and sleep.

Temps de lecture : minute

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The neurodivergent community face some of the worst outcomes in health, education and employment. Autistic adults, for example, are nine times more likely to _die by suicide_ and _60% of ADHDers_ have lost or been forced to change jobs because of ADHD. So much of this is down to stigma and a lack of understanding about neurodiversity from the outside world. I saw this in action when I was working with neurodivergent teenagers in schools, and my co-founder Felix saw the way his sister, who has ADHD, was treated during her school years. Fighting this inequality is what motivated us to start _Cogs AI_. As an autistic person myself, it's a mission that's very personal to me.

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

Cogs AI is the digital companion for every neurodivergent person. Neurodivergence affects different people in different ways, so rather than focusing exclusively on one area of need, we create solutions that work

holistically to support users in multiple ways.

We launched our first product this summer, a mobile app that helps users manage stress and anxiety, become more productive and learn communication strategies. Our aim is to be the super-app for the neurodivergent community, providing highly personalised experiences across the different and varied needs of the community. Our initial focus is mental wellbeing and productivity, before moving towards physical health, daily living skills, relationships and community.

We're currently direct-to-consumer, reaching customers mainly through _Instagram_. We're having conversations with NHS trusts, local authorities and corporates to see if we can provide solutions to the neurodivergent community through partners. We also have a research partnership with the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge, where we work on blue-sky and R&D projects.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Cogs AI was founded in August 2021, so around two years ago. Our original idea was focused on education, due to my experience working in schools and my background in educational neuroscience. However, the more we spoke to people in the neurodivergent community the more we realised that just building an education product wasn't enough and that the issues the community were facing were so much broader. It shows how important doing user research is and not letting your past experiences (even if highly relevant) restrict the way you think about the problem.

Tell us about the working culture at Cogs AI

We're a team of four people and two of us, including myself, are autistic. The most important thing that _neurodivergent people need in the workplace_ is flexibility, so we work completely remotely with ad-hoc in-person days when we want to collaborate more closely. The only set meeting we have is morning standup and after that everyone is free to organise their day in the way that lets them work the best. That could be taking the afternoon off to go to the gym and working in the evening, or working compressed hours during the summer so they have more free time to spend with family. We have a high amount of trust in each other and each other's abilities which lets us be so flexible. If someone says they're going to deliver something we know it will get done.

How are you funded?

We've raised £500K to date, with our main funding coming from an Innovate UK Smart Grant, which is provided by the UK government's innovation department. We've also received grants from the London School of Economics, UnLtd and the University of Portsmouth, as well as investment from Bethnal Green Ventures and The Francis Crick Institute. We'll be raising an angel round later in the year so watch this space.

Also a big shout out to the friends and family who supported us at the beginning of our journey. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a network that can provide early financial support and we know the privilege that gives us.

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

Getting people who aren't neurodivergent, or have a close connection to

someone who is neurodivergent, to understand the problem space beyond stereotypes. This is an issue that's really rooted in the gaps in neurodiversity research and is why women and people of colour tend to be under-diagnosed or misdiagnosed, as they aren't represented in the datasets used by researchers to define diagnostic criteria.

When it comes to the general public, there is such a lack of knowledge about how neurodivergence works that it can take a lot of education before someone who's not familiar with the topic is on the same page. For example, a classic neuromyth is that autistic people don't feel empathy. I'm autistic and I'm highly empathetic, I just use different observations and social cues to understand someone and what they're experiencing. If anything, some autistic people may be paying more attention to you during a social interaction than if you were talking to a neurotypical person, as they're cognitively trying to decode the social dynamics of the situation rather than picking it up intuitively.

Overcoming this means being open to questions, curiosity and occasionally challenges from people about neurodiversity. If someone drops the "but you don't look autistic..." line, I try to use it as an opportunity to widen their understanding of what being neurodivergent means.

How does Cogs AI answer an unmet need?

The thing about neurodiversity that most people don't realise is that the neurodivergent brain is literally wired differently, meaning that a neurodivergent person's internal world can be very different from a neurotypical person's experience. The medical and scientific communities have only focused on what they can observe from the outside, which gives us diagnoses and treatments framed around how much a neurodivergent person deviates from acting "normal" and how to correct it.

Cogs AI provides the opposite of that. We work from the conviction that every neurodivergent person's experience is central to who they are, and rather than wanting to be "normal", they might choose to adapt to the outside world in certain ways whilst maintaining other parts of their neurodivergent identity in different contexts or spaces. Through our technology, we support each neurodivergent person to find the way of living in the world that works best for them.

What's in store for the future?

We're at a really exciting time of product development where we're pushing out new big pieces of functionality every month, experimenting with different ways of solving our users' problems and seeing what gives them the most value. Through this we're generating unique datasets and focusing on how to use this data to provide more personalised experiences for each user.

Our differentiator as a company is building out AI capabilities that combine our domain expertise around neurodiversity with neurodivergent-specific datasets. We have a data roadmap that goes hand-in-hand with our product roadmap, so we keep focused on how the data we collect translates into AI-enabled features that are creating user value. The bulk of these focus on personalisation. Even people who have the same form of neurodivergence can have vastly different needs, so personalisation is going to be the driving force as the product evolves.

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

Release early and often. You don't know what you don't know if you have no data. You can't keep laser-focused on providing user value until you have metrics that measure it. If you're not a software engineer this can

seem intimidating, but there are so many great no-code solutions that you should be able to build something that tests your value proposition. Adalo is great for mobile experiences. For web, there's Bubble, Webflow, Wix, Squarespace…even WordPress, depending on the level of complexity you need to test out those early assumptions.

Also think about the skills that you do have and if they can be hacked into something that works for now. I'm not a developer but I had to do a lot of data analysis for my masters using R. It's a programming language built for working with datasets not creating user-facing experiences, but I built our first prototypes using it and released them to the community, allowing us to get product feedback and engage with our first 400 users.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Something that neurodivergent people and founders have in common is trouble falling asleep. It can be hard to switch off at night, whether that's because you're thinking about your business or because your brain wiring isn't letting you.

To calm my brain down I need to distract myself with something low-key engaging so I'm processing it whilst I'm falling asleep. Reading poetry before bed works really well, the more abstract the better. T.S. Eliot, for example. -. I wouldn't say I do this consistently enough for it to be routine, especially as some of my best ideas have come from midnight racing thought sessions, so I wouldn't want to switch that off. It's about finding balance and making sure that over the course of the week I'm getting enough sleep to not burn out.

Zareen Ali is the CEO and cofounder of _Cogs AI_.

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