

# BoxHaul, the booking platform for container haulage in the UK

*Creating a startup is always challenging. Founding one during a tech downturn, cost of living crisis and recession seems near impossible. However, with risk comes reward and many of the world's most successful companies were founded during times of economic uncertainty. As part of a series with Antler, Maddyness has interviewed founders hoping to become the entrepreneurial success stories to emerge from this time of crisis. This week, Maddyness spoke to Saif Khalaf, cofounder of BoxHaul.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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After spending over 12 years in the container shipping industry, the last real innovation was the development of the container, all the way back in the 1980's. Since then, shipping lines have been competing on price in this homogenous industry, primarily by developing larger sized vessels to gain economies of scale. However, that approach is reaching its limits due to the lack of infrastructure to support vessel sizes larger than the 24,000 container vessels that we see today.

This past focus of strategy has meant that progress in terms of digitalisation has been extremely slow. The industry lags behind other similar transportation industries, such as airlines, where you can book capacity in a few clicks online across multiple different airlines. We wanted to bring this experience to container haulage, a low margin and unlooked at piece of the international trade process. But also go further in unlocking value to all the stakeholders with a marketplace backed by algorithms.

# Can you share your elevator pitch?

BoxHaul is the booking platform for container haulage in the UK. Think booking.com but replace the hotels with trucking companies.

On the demand side of the marketplace, we help shippers and freight forwarders get access to an instant carrier network to help grow their business and bring flexibility to the supply chain.

On the supply side, we help haulage companies get access to customers they might not have been able to access before. In addition, we help automate the identification of operational efficiencies by choosing the right customer and loads, which is currently done manually through whatsapp and facebook groups.

# Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Antler?

This is actually the second time I've been through the Antler programme. The first was four years ago in their Amsterdam residency. It's really hard to meet other people that would be interested in building a company, especially potential cofounders with complimentary skills. Antler helps to solve this problem with their model of curating and putting together each cohort with a blend of skills, all with the common goal of building a startup. That was the main reason for me joining the programme for a second time, this time in London. And it paid off! That's where I met Franco Basilico, BoxHaul's CTO and cofounder. He has literally single handedly coded our MVP up to this point.

Antler's support also goes further than just providing the initial pre-seed investment. You get access to a host of other skillsets across the Antler team for advice and introductions to other VC's when you fundraise. This

significantly increases your chances of success from day 1.



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## Tell us about the working culture at BoxHaul?

Every day, we have a call to start the day with the whole team. We always end the call with “let’s get shit done!”. Franco & I agreed on that aspect even before we created BoxHaul - it sums up the culture pretty nicely. We’re very goal oriented. That means every team member needs to bring something special to the table. In turn, that creates a lot of opportunities for everyone in the team to have a pivotal role in contributing to the success of the company. We’re currently in the valley of death, need to stay lean and mean, but also take the challenge as a marathon, not a sprint.

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

The cold start problem! All marketplaces face this issue at the beginning, where the marketplace concept works as long as you have both supply and demand on the platform. Without one or the other, there’s limited value you can offer either side to be interested in participating.

We did a lot of research on how to overcome this problem. A lot of the advice out there is very rhetorical, rather than practical. Build a SaaS. Fake it till you make it. Bring value to one side somehow. But what does this look like in reality? Especially for a legacy B2B industry like container haulage... We solved it by talking and listening to haulage companies. A

simple question - why did you sign up on our waiting list? The initial value that we had to offer became clear. Combined with some inspiration from other startup marketplaces and social media platforms, we didn't have to rebuild the wheel.

We gave haulage companies great looking profiles that they could update themselves, which were effectively free adverts to their customers. This solution actually solved two problems at once. We now had haulage companies signing up because they saw value in being part of our haulier directory list and we could also start reaching out to shippers showing off the supply that we onboarded to the platform.

## What's in store for the future?

We're now focusing on onboarding more shippers and freight forwarders to the platform to get marketplace liquidity. Once we figure out the playbook for doing this, we will look to cement our position in the UK.

Then we can start applying and adapting our playbook to other geographies. And of course, we're going to continue building new features that add value to both sides of the marketplace and get more sticky with customers.

## How has the cost of living crisis and the tech downturn impacted your experience building BoxHaul?

There have been opportunities and disadvantages. We're trying to focus on leveraging the advantages of a downturn in the economy. The UK is an import heavy country, so when consumers feel the pinch of a rise in costs, they start buying less. That means fewer import containers to the UK and limited demand. However, that also means the supply side of the

marketplace is looking for more business, and that makes it attractive to sign up to a new marketplace that you may not have heard of before.

On the other hand, it has been hard to attract the demand side, the shippers and freight forwarders, since they already have haulage companies they work with and not enough volume to warrant adding more haulage companies to their procurement strategy.

Here, we will benefit from the dynamics of the shipping industry which is reliant on the economy and is extremely cyclical. What goes down always comes back up. The market is already starting to see shipping lines push through higher prices, which puts pressure on shippers to find other cost reduction measures. What a great use case for a marketplace! So we're hoping to ride the next wave of this cycle.

## What barriers have you faced in realising your entrepreneurial ambitions? How can we make entrepreneurship more accessible in the UK?

To be honest, the process of setting up a company is quite easy in the UK. It's more about your personal circumstances. This has a major impact on your loved ones, in my case, my wife. I'm super lucky that we co-founded our first startup together and got investment from Antler in Amsterdam 4 years ago. She understands the pressures that I go through and I can talk to her about anything.

In terms of the UK, my main piece of advice would be to adjust the SEIS/EIS limitation on the time limit of 6 months for an ASA to convert to equity, to be in line with SAFE's in the US. This would make raising a seed round much easier in the UK.

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

Building a startup is a marathon, where you still need to be fast and push yourself to the limit, but not go off the edge. This means having a good understanding of yourself, your strengths and weaknesses (or at least learning about them quickly during the journey!).

There's no easy path or "get successful quick" hack. If you don't put in the time and effort, nobody else is there to do that. That can be quite a daunting thought at first, especially if you've only worked in a corporate environment before. If you can thrive on that challenge, day-in day-out, you'll go far.

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

In terms of routine, at the end of each day, I always set a plan for the following day to squeeze in any tasks and maximise productivity.

Since we work mostly remotely, communication is super important. It's better to over communicate so we have a "beginning of day" call at 8:30am and an "end of day" call at 5pm to align on what we're doing, what we've done and what we're going to do (planning & coordination!).

Saif Khalaf is the cofounder of [BoxHaul](#).

*[Antler](#) is one of the world's most active early-stage investors. With 900 portfolio companies in 27 countries, they have a global community of early-stage founders addressing the world's biggest challenges.*

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