Accessible mobile-first workplace learning, meet Blend

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 Jules Smith, the co-founder of Blend.

Temps de lecture : minute

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<u>Blend</u> was born from a perfect storm we witnessed in UK hospitality. Post-COVID and Brexit, the industry was drowning in a staffing crisis, and it became crystal clear that the old ways of training just weren't cutting it anymore. We saw a new generation of workers entering the field, and the one-size-fits-all approach to training this diverse generation of workers was not working.

As three co-founders with our careers starting in hospitality, we recognised this pivotal moment. Our complementary skills in video content, tech scalability, and strategic partnerships aligned perfectly to address this urgent need. We thought 'We can fix this'. That's how Blend came to life! It's personal, it's adaptive, and it's built for the way people work and learn today. We're not just filling a gap; we're reimagining training for a whole new era in hospitality.

Can you share your elevator pitch?

Did you know that 80% of the global working population are considered deskless? These frontline workers operate in key industries including hospitality, retail and construction and are essential to keeping our economy moving.

Take UK Hospitality which employs 3 million deskless workers in the UK alone. Since Brexit, a shortage of trained staff is costing the industry £25b/ yr in unmet customer demand. Hospitality onboarding is a repetitive process, costing our typical customer £25k every 90 days.

This is where Blend comes in - TikTok meets workplace training for deskless workers. Our microlearning platform allows operators to train and track their workforce much faster, saving our typical customer over £50k/yr.

Our B2B SaaS training platform enables time-stretched operators to build intuitive bite-size video banks, designed to make learning more effective for mobile first deskless learners. Blend leverages AI to enhance the accessibility and personalisation of learning material to allow any deskless worker (no matter their age, language or neurotypicality) to learn their own way.

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Antler?

Getting on the Antler program was the spark that ignited this whole journey, the place where my co-founders and I first crossed paths. It's such a unique experience - our cohort often joked it was like a mash-up of Dragon's Den, The Apprentice, and Love Island.

Imagine being thrown into a pressure cooker for three months, pushed to your limits, and surrounded by some of the sharpest minds you've ever met. That's Antler. It's this brilliant sandbox where you get to play with entrepreneurial ideas, test them rigorously, and if they don't stick, you just dust yourself off and try again. Maybe with a different idea, maybe with different people. The beauty is in that flexibility and support.

The Antler team? They're not just observers - they're in the trenches with you, guiding you every step of the way. They've crafted this program to help you find not just the right idea, but the right people to bring that idea to life. And they're relentless about it.

From day zero, they've had our backs. Winning their investment was a massive vote of confidence, but it didn't stop there. Even though we "graduated" 18 months ago, Antler is still our biggest cheerleader. They're constantly opening doors - introducing us to investors, getting us into key events, and always being just a call away when we need advice. It's not just a program; it's a launchpad and an ongoing support system all rolled into one.

Tell us about the working culture at Blend?

The working culture at Blend is something we're really proud of. We've intentionally fostered an environment that is collaborative, innovative, and supportive. We have tech developers distributed across the globe, and we make sure to prioritise daily check-ins and casual conversations to maintain that friendly, connected vibe.

We've built a culture of transparency and mutual support. Open communication keeps us nimble, but what really sets us apart is our commitment to wellbeing. We even included a 'founders' health clause' in our agreement, prioritizing physical and mental fitness. It's not just about productivity; it's about sustainability. We're united by a mission we

wholeheartedly believe in, and that shared purpose energizes us through every twist and turn of the startup journey. It's what brings our team together and keeps us focused, even when the going gets tough.

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

Building a startup is like flying a plane while still constructing it mid-air. Our biggest challenge? We quickly realised that waiting for perfection was a luxury we couldn't afford. Instead, we've embraced an iterative process that keeps us nimble and responsive. We're continuously refining our product based on real-world feedback, which means some days it feels like we're repainting the wings while cruising at 30,000 feet.

The game-changer has been our incredible relationship with our early customers. They've been more than just users; they've been co-pilots in this journey. Their feedback has been pivotal, helping us navigate the early-stage development and steering us towards features that truly matter. We've been extremely agile in building our MVP in the no-code platform - bubble, which has allowed us to build and iterate rapidly.

Overcoming perfectionism has been a constant battle. There's always that voice in your head saying, "It's not ready yet." But we've learned to quiet that voice and push forward. We've had to accept that our product will never be 'finished' in the traditional sense - it's a living, breathing thing that grows with our users' needs.

What's in store for the future?

We've only just scratched the surface, and yet we're already seeing incredible traction with paying customers. Our journey so far has been all about strategic, lean growth - we've scaled our capabilities with a nimble team of freelance developers and interns, keeping us adaptable and

fresh.

Market: Our customers include fast growing QSR and Casual Dining chains SushiDog, Brother Marcus, Jenki, Urban Greens and açai berry franchise Oakberry. Together they will help Blend penetrate the UK Hospitality market which employs 3.3 million deskless workers - 80% of whom are GenZ or Millennial and require a new way of learning on shift.

Traction: since launching Blend V1 (our first paid product) in April/ May, we have now secured £15k+ worth of recurring revenue through platform subscription fees alone. With account sizes growing, we project £50k ARR through new and existing customers by 2024 year end. Other milestones include 750+ employees onboarded, 500+ unique courses created, 25+ new products launched, 10+ new locations opened and 90% employee satisfaction score from our mobile learners!

We've validated our concept through rapid iteration, thanks to our smart use of no-code platforms. Now, with a proven product and growing demand, we're gearing up for the next big leap. We're talking in-house tech team, custom-coded solutions, and mind-blowing new features that will revolutionise deskless worker training.

Our sights are set on making waves in UK hospitality first, but that's just the beginning. We're eyeing the entire deskless workforce, with plans to go global. It's a massive opportunity, and we're positioned perfectly to seize it. We're not just building a product; we're crafting a movement that will transform how millions learn.

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

Blend?

As an early-stage startup, we've had to be scrappy and strategic with every penny. We've prioritised product development above all else. To stretch our resources, we've tapped into talent outside the UK, which has been a game-changer for our burn rate.

Living in London? Yes, it's tough! The city's expensive on a good day, let alone during an economic squeeze. But we're making it work because we're chasing something bigger than ourselves. It's forced us to get creative, to hustle harder, and to really focus on what matters. In a weird way, these challenges have sharpened our resolve and our vision. We're building something we truly believe in, and that makes the sacrifices worth it. This lean period has taught us invaluable lessons about resilience and resourcefulness that I think will serve us well as we grow

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

Raising early-stage money is not a walk in the park. We quickly learned that warm intros are gold - they get you through the door. Once you're "in the room," things start to flow a bit easier. But getting there? That's the real challenge.

Community and network are everything in this game. They're not just nice-to-haves; they're essential for survival and growth. The connections you make, the advice you get, the shoulders you lean on - they make all the difference. The female founder networks and startup communities have been absolute lifelines. They've provided support, advice, and a sense of "we're all in this together" that's been invaluable.

To make entrepreneurship more accessible in the UK, we need to start younger. Way younger. Imagine if we taught kids about entrepreneurship alongside Maths and English?

By nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age, we could create a whole generation of innovators and problem-solvers. It's not just about creating more businesses; it's about fostering a mindset of creativity, resilience, and initiative. That's how we'll build a more dynamic, innovative UK economy for the future.

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

My one piece of advice for founders or future founders: Make sure you're genuinely passionate about the problem you're solving. You'll need to live and breathe it.

Looking back, there are a million things I'd do differently. But here's the thing - there's no "perfect way" to do this. The key is to stay nimble, to reset and adapt constantly.

Every challenge, every setback, every small win - they're all part of the journey. Just dive in, keep moving forward, keep learning, and remember why you started. When things get tough, that initial spark - your purpose - will keep you going.

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

I'm on a mission to become a morning person as I have always been slightly nocturnal. These days, I savour my mornings to get ahead for the
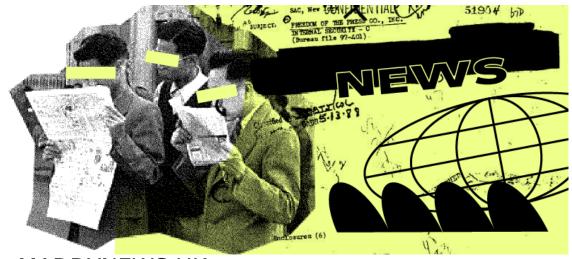
day. Training for a marathon has kicked started me to get up and get running (might be slightly harder in the winter!). I'm up early for a quick 10-minute meditation, followed by a coffee (because, priorities). Then I'm off for a run, using the longer ones to catch up on podcasts and mentally prep myself for the day.

After that, it's a mix of working from home or zipping around town for client meetings and events. It's hectic, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

My current mantra? "Everything will be okay in the end, and if it's not okay, it's not the end!" It keeps me going through the ups and downs of startup life. Plus, it's a great reminder that this journey we're on is just getting started.

Jules Smith is the cofounder of _Blend_.

Antler _is one of the world's most active early-stage investors. With1,000 portfolio companies in 27 countries, they have a global community of early-stage founders addressing the world's biggest challenges._

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