



GameChangers
Season 2: Episode 4
Adam Jahnke

Seth Robinson:

Welcome to GameChangers, the show that's about playing by your own rules when it comes to your career. Join us as we speak with people who've taken the road less traveled and found their niche. I'm your host, Seth Robinson. This season, we're taking some time out to reconnect, exploring the ways our game changes are forming connections in the world by creating new communities, spaces, and technologies.

Adam Jahnke:

It's about understanding what you bring that's unique and diverse to the team compared to everyone else, and then being able to really capitalize on that.

Seth Robinson:

Today, we're joined by a founder who has taken an invention he created for his family and used it to launch a truly unique startup. Now, his tech stands at the forefront of the aged care industry, one of Australia's fastest growing sectors.

Adam Jahnke:

Hi, my name's Adam Jahnke. I'm the co-founder and CEO of Umps Health. We support people to remain safe and independent at home as they age using our smart home technology. Our technology uses smart plugs to measure someone's interactions with everyday household appliances, like when they boil the kettle, open the fridge, cook using the microwave, turn a bedside lamp on or off, any appliance that plugs into the wall.

Adam Jahnke:

We have an analytics platform that then learns a person's usual daily habits and their unique routine and looks for subtle abnormalities in that routine that indicate a decline in health and well-being. For example, people's heads usually go toward the situation where someone might get up in the morning and boil the kettle to make a cup of tea. And then one morning nothing happens, and then an alert will certainly be raised because that may indicate that something's gone wrong overnight.

Adam Jahnke:

But our system also looks for more subtle changes in routines such as, for example, if someone normally opens the fridge 11 times on average a day, and that day they've only opened it three times, and the day before they've only opened it four times, that could indicate a decrease in appetite, or if someone's using appliances throughout the night, that could indicate a disruption to sleep. Our platform generates those insights, and then we provide that to family members and to formal carers to support them to deliver the best possible care for older Australians.

Seth Robinson:

It's a really incredible idea, and it's exceptionally nuanced. How is it that you came up with this idea? What inspired you?

Adam Jahnke:

Umps was never really intended to be a company that provides technology to the aged care sector. In fact, it was a system that we designed to support my family and my grandpa. It was 2016. He'd been living at home for more than four years on his own since my grandma passed away. And then in 2016, he had his first major fall. We were fortunate in the sense that it happened when he was putting the bins out and he lives on quite a major road. Someone saw him. Got him the support that he needed. He was taken to hospital.

Adam Jahnke:

And then we were doubly fortunate because when he got there, there were no major breaks and no major injuries. But despite that, he was still having some challenges with balance, and so he needed to go through a period of rehabilitation. But when he came out, he was adamant that he wanted to remain living in the home that he'd been in for more than 60 years, and we wanted to support that. But we were surprised at how much frailer he was coming out of hospital compared to when he'd gone in, despite doing that physical rehabilitation. We stepped up the level of care that we were giving to him.

Adam Jahnke:

We started calling him, visiting him in the morning before work, after work. But we found that because we couldn't be there all the time, we missed some key indicators that his health was declining and unfortunately fell again. And he went to hospital again, and he went to rehab again. When he came out, he was frailer still. My background's in public health and technology, and so I looked at what was available and saw that he already had the industry standard in incident detection, which is the pendant worn around your neck and pressed in case something goes wrong.

Adam Jahnke:

But the problem for our family was that that only told us about something after the fact. And the kicker was that on both occasions when my grandpa fell, he wasn't wearing his pendant anyway. We set out to build something that would work for him, something that was really non-intrusive, something that was very simple to install, no batteries, really easy to maintain, and something that he could understand and be really comfortable with. He was the first person to use it and we all call him Umps, and so that's where the name Umps Health comes from.

Seth Robinson:

It was an incredibly personal experience developing this idea. And it really shows that you have kind of a deep understanding of your clients or customers and who's going to be using this technology. Was that all based on this experience you had, or did there have to be a lot of research in terms of

developing that understanding and how you were going to kind of bring this product into the market?

Adam Jahnke:

No, it wasn't all from that experience. It was later that year that I just had requests to build the system that I'd built for my grandpa for other friends in similar situations with their parents and grandparents. And that gave us an indication that there was something more in this. We started a company and we started to really try and engage deeply with older people. And older people are a group of users that are often overlooked when technology is being designed.

Adam Jahnke:

We took what was designed for my grandpa and very early on worked with one of the largest aged care providers in Victoria to actually put that system in the homes of their users. We created a reference group of 10 older people, and we spent from the ground up more than 18 months designing the technology in their home to really suit their needs. There were a few really interesting insights that we had out of that very early on. My grandpa, for example, he had wifi in his home and I've come to understand that's not the typical experience for many people in their sort of mid to late nineties.

Adam Jahnke:

The first home that we deployed the system into, this woman didn't have any wifi, and so we had to get a cellular modem and run the system using a SIM card. And then about the third or fourth person that we put the system into, we noticed that a lot of the plugs were not functioning and they were going off very frequently. And so we went around and we were talking to this woman and we discovered that she actually turns off her appliances at the switch to save power. And similarly with our hub, it had flashing lights on it.

Adam Jahnke:

Within that reference group, a number of people were turning the hub off at the wall and the SIM card off, and so we were losing connection. When we went to redesign our hardware, we had to make sure that from the plug perspective, if the switches were turned off at the wall, it was completely uninterrupted and the system would just be back on. When the plugs were turned back on, there would be immediate power through to appliances.

Adam Jahnke:

And then from the hub perspective, we designed our all flashing lights, so that it's just super non-intrusive and people don't have that perception that it's wasting power. But there are all these little kind of insights that we got just in that group of 10 people that taught us how to manage infrastructure within someone's home, right through to the setup and maintenance of the system as well for a group that doesn't have the highest levels of technology literacy. We've carried that through those design principles right through to the product that we've got today. But it was a very extended process.

Seth Robinson:

We've talked about the process around the products there a little bit, Adam, but it makes me wonder, can you tell me a little bit about that journey from having an idea to building a business and now kind of being the CEO of an established company?

Adam Jahnke:

Umps has been around now for five years. And I would say that those five years have been the period in my life where I've absolutely learned the most and grown the most, both professionally and personally. I left Ericsson in 2017. For that first couple of months, I was largely just working out of cafes and working from home. And at that time, I hadn't yet met my co-founder Jeff. It became really apparent to me that for the first time in my life, I was working outside of the parameters of an institution.

Adam Jahnke:

My education through primary school, through high school and then into university, and then my first and second job at larger established companies and in a corporate environment, they all came with structures and support mechanisms around them that made it really easy for me to, I guess, define and identify the problems that I needed to solve and then go forth and do that. I actually found that first six to 12 months quite exposing really. For the first time, as I mentioned, operating without that support network, I found that I had to do a lot of searching internally.

Adam Jahnke:

It did actually cause a few issues when I found that when I wasn't feeling the greatest and when my mental health started to decline in that first 12 months, I could see the direct correlation with the progression of the business. There was really nowhere to hide. I actually did for the first time in my life actually see a psychologist during that period and start to work through some of the things personally that I feel I needed to do to grow as a person. That was really rewarding.

Adam Jahnke:

And then as I started to identify the supports that I needed around me and started to seek that out, that's where I came across the Melbourne Accelerator Program. That's a program that the University of Melbourne run, where they provide early to mid stage founders with access to capital, with workspace, with mentors, with support and guidance from people who've gone through that path, tried that path previously. Knowing that I did want some kind of support network around me, that really motivated me to apply for that program.

Adam Jahnke:

That was very competitive, but I feel very fortunate that we were one of the businesses that were selected to progress. It was the same week we were notified that we're accepted into MAP, that I officially formalized the relationship that I have with Jeff, my co-founder. And we're also awarded an aging innovation prize, which was a pretty significant philanthropic grant.

Adam Jahnke:

I feel like that was a real turning point for me in terms of going from a solo founder, learning to navigate my world without the structure and support that I previously had around me, to setting myself up with a co-founder, a team mate in an environment where I felt like could really succeed and thrive. And that point didn't come for 12 months after making the decision to leave Ericsson.

Seth Robinson:

The nature of entrepreneurship is something we talk about a lot, debating whether or not it's innate or can be taught, whether it's a talent or a skill. Whatever the answer, it seems the seed was planted in Adam's case long before he had the idea for Umps Health.

Adam Jahnke:

It's interesting because one of my friends who had initially approached me to try and set the system up in his grandma's home during that very, very early stage, I went to high school with him and he said to me, "Oh, I can't believe it. You've actually done what you said you were going to do." I said, "What do you mean?" And he said in year seven, on the first day of school, we had a session with the principal and we had to all write down what we perceived our profession might be moving out of high school and through university. And I actually said entrepreneur.

Adam Jahnke:

And maybe at the time I was trying to be a little bit smart because maybe I didn't think other people would even know what an entrepreneur was. It might've been a word that I'd only just sort of recently learned myself, but I think there was always that notion of trying to do things a little bit better in me. I don't know if I necessarily needed the vehicle of a startup to do that. I think at my previous roles, I had been fortunate enough to work in small teams that were pursuing new businesses and new opportunities and really working on green-field projects.

Adam Jahnke:

But I think that disposition to try and really engage deeply with a problem and think creatively about different ways to solve it probably has been in me for some time.

Seth Robinson:

You've mentioned your previous experience there, which I find really interesting. You said you were an Ericsson. I think previously you did some work at Cochlear in China as well. Is that right?

Adam Jahnke:

Yeah, that's correct.

Seth Robinson:

You feel like having had that experience in industry previously set you up with a lot of learning and skill set that you were able to bring to that.

Adam Jahnke:

Yeah, 100%. Those kind of positions and those kinds of companies are really set up to try and provide employees with as much experience and training as possible to make them productive employees. It's amazing the learning opportunities that you get on another company's dime and being able to do that without having to fund that sort of experience yourself through a startup. At Ericsson, for example, I had the opportunity to participate in formal training sessions. I did short courses and courses that ran over weeks to teach sales skills and negotiation skills.

Adam Jahnke:

I was involved in government tenders and 18 month, two year long engagements with large companies. And prior to leaving, I had the opportunity to lead a submission for a government tender for a piece of critical infrastructure. Those skills, the ability to coordinate responses, the ability to engage with large organizations really served me well when moving into a startup within the sector that we operate within, because aged care is a very risk-averse environment. The organizations are highly operational. There are multiple layers of bureaucracy and you do need to navigate procurement processes.

Adam Jahnke:

I had that ability and that experience from Ericsson. And there were other businesses that were trying to engage with the same aged care providers that we were. But I think because we understood the inner workings of larger businesses, we were able to really progress our relationships further than we would have otherwise been able to do.

Seth Robinson:

It's interesting. You've touched on something there, which I find fascinating when talking to entrepreneurs, which is kind of the business technological or industry nexus point. For example, we on one of the previous episodes interviewed Cameron Knox, who's the CEO at Allume Energy. He studied engineering and then came to this project as an engineer and was talking about how he had to learn the business elements on the fly a little bit, but you kind of did the inverse to that. You started with those business foundations.

Seth Robinson:

Did you feel like you were going on to learn more about the industry through that post-grad study and through those jobs? What was that kind of process like for you?

Adam Jahnke:

Both Cochlear and Ericsson technology led companies. And at Cochlear, I was one of very few people with a commercial background in the Chinese office. And then at Ericsson as well, the overwhelming majority of Ericsson workforce in Australia are engineers and field services offices, and so as well in the minority from sort of a commercial expertise perspective. I did spend a lot of time understanding our technology at both of those companies. A lot of time in the weeds, understanding the different architectures of networks, understanding how networks operate, and I tried to go as deep as possible initially.

Adam Jahnke:

And then probably three or four years in, I was really starting to think about, well, what's my place as a non-engineer in these very engineering led companies? I did seek out the advice of a much more senior salesperson who didn't have a technical background. And what she told me was that it's about understanding what you bring that's unique and diverse to the team compared to everyone else, and then being able to really capitalize on that.

Adam Jahnke:

She spoke about understanding the capabilities of the technology and then being able to translate that capability into real world solutions and being able to engage with businesses deeply about their problems and how our technology suite could solve them. That is at Ericsson where I started to carve out a nation. That's certainly how we operate at Umps as well. Because I've tried to go as deep as possible on the tech side, I feel like I have an understanding of our capabilities to a sufficient degree to have those discussions.

Adam Jahnke:

My co-founder, Jeff, he's very technical by background, but also has a high degree of commercial acumen. So we kind of have a Venn diagram where we overlap at that sort of intersection between the commercial and the business side, and that allows us to operate as a team really effectively. But I do know Cam Knox from Allume really well, and what I would say about him and really about myself as well is that we are not afraid to roll up our sleeves and to learn new things. If we have to learn new things to get a job done, we will. And we have not stopped learning upon the conclusion of our degree.

Adam Jahnke:

We treat learning as something we do on a day-to-day basis. And I think that's important not just to the start up, but to be successful in any sort of field really.

Speaker 1:

Australia is at a demographic tipping point. The baby boomers have turned 65, and they're retiring.

Seth Robinson:

With this change in demographics in our aging population, it means the demands for services such as Umps Health are only going to increase in the coming years. They're changes that will bring a range of challenges and opportunities with them.

Adam Jahnke:

I didn't make the decision to leave my job and start Umps just because of a couple of inquiries from friends. During that six months at Ericsson, I was not only refining my understanding of the problem, but also looking at the aged care landscape in Australia. The federal government had embarked on a transformation of the system that was due to come into effect in early 2017, which would make the aged care system far more competitive. Now, since then, I'd say we haven't witnessed the large scale adoption of technology in aged care that shift to consumer directed care it promised.

Adam Jahnke:

I think there's a lot of momentum wrapped up in the way aged care services have been delivered and a lot of structural problems with the system that have prevented that transformation from occurring. But we did see the power of technology within the sector throughout 2020 to support continuity of care. The Aged Care Royal Commission findings were released just in recent days, and there are a large number of recommendations within that report around changing the broader structure of the system, but also embedding the delivery of technology into aged care.

Adam Jahnke:

I think anyone can look at the numbers and tell you that we have an aging population. The needs for these sorts of technology are growing and have been growing for some time. And actually, it's very plain to see that the way we deliver aged care right now will not scale to meet the demand for aged care into the future. The questions that we face are more around getting to market and funding mechanisms and making those work for a technology company like ours. I think the Royal Commission will challenge us to think about the way we think about older people.

Adam Jahnke:

And a lot of the neglect that we see in aged care, I believe, is a product of ages and within our society. Hopefully this huge report and inquiry has provided us with the mechanism to have that conversation about how we want to support an older population moving forward across the whole spectrum of aged care services and informal care services.

Seth Robinson:

2020 and the onset of COVID-19 have also had a major impact on the way we think about aged care.

Adam Jahnke:

It has fundamentally changed the way aged care was delivered for about six months. We saw as early as March 2020 countries overseas, the UK, were talking about 16 week lockdowns for people

over the age of 70. The government here started encouraging residential aged care providers to restrict visitors to only those deemed necessary, and we saw widespread home care cancellations as well. Up to 30% of home care services were canceled. Group activities and group respite centers were shut down, leaving people who really required the services not getting them.

Adam Jahnke:

I think that there is an argument to say that because our aged care system was already structurally lacking, so there were already cracks within the system, it was not set up to weather the disruption that COVID-19 brought. Even the way that the workforce was managed in residential care, and there were large numbers of people within secure work, working across multiple different companies, meaning that it was very hard to contain the spread once a worker got infected with COVID-19. But then we did see in response to that...

Adam Jahnke:

And I was really surprised and really heartened by the fact at how quickly the aged care sector can move when we're relentlessly focused around one single goal, to preserve the continuity of care and support older people and preserve their health and well-being throughout COVID. We saw large swathes of technology adopted in response to that. Our technology was used to deliver remote respite, so people that would normally be visiting a day center during the day would not be able to do that. Our technology was put in place in their home, so those staff members could monitor them remotely.

Adam Jahnke:

But the federal government also funded internet subscriptions and tablets to be able to support people to remain connected with their family through video conferencing. In residential care, there was a lot more therapy and diversion therapy rolled out using really innovative technologies. It was interesting to see how quickly we could put these technologies in place and the fact that all of these technologies have utility in a post-COVID world as well.

Adam Jahnke:

Now that there are providers out there where every single resident or every single care recipient has a tablet in their home and can connect with family members, they're going to continue using that after COVID-19.

Seth Robinson:

A lot of what you do is about allowing people their kind of freedom and their independence to live at home. But I wonder what you think when it comes to staying in the community and counteracting that sense of loneliness that comes from isolation. Do you think there's a relationship between that and being able to maintain independence in that role of tech?

Adam Jahnke:

Definitely. I think our users, it's quite a complicated process that they're going through navigating physical declines, navigating cognitive declines. We often just think about the impairment and how that disrupts their day-to-day function essentially. But it's important to reflect on the emotional experience that those people are having as well. I contrast the users that we have, the younger users that we have, with a disability versus the users that we have who are older and are experiencing functional decline that's progressing.

Adam Jahnke:

And if you're someone who's younger living with a disability, then you are very eager to grasp at anything that can support your independence and support you to function and really access the rest of the world. But what we find with our users who are older is that they're not just navigating a functional or cognitive impairment, they're also navigating the emotional implications that come with that.

Adam Jahnke:

And being able to provide someone with the mechanism to continue living independently in their own home, to continue to operate without a carer living in or without a carer visiting them seven days a week, that supports them from a physical and a cognitive perspective, our technology, but it also supports them from an emotional perspective because it means that they have that sense of empowerment. They have that sense of independent. I think that's sometimes the more important thing that we're doing.

Seth Robinson:

I'm curious, what's one thing that's gotten you to where you are today that you wouldn't put on your CV?

Adam Jahnke:

Yeah, it's interesting because CVs and resumes, they're quite one dimensional really. There's a lot of things actually that have gotten me to where I am today that aren't on that piece of paper. But I probably want to talk about the privilege that I've actually had that's allowed me to get here. And ironically, some of this does show up on my CV. But over the past five years as I've grown to understand more about myself and my circumstances, I've been able to better observe and articulate a lot of those social privileges that have allowed me to start a business.

Adam Jahnke:

Those things are the certain advantages that I get by belonging to a particular group. I'm a straight white man, and so people can look at me and say, "Yep, he's privileged." And that's probably the perspective that I started from, but my privilege is far more nuanced than that. For example, when I left Ericsson to start Umps, I made the decision not to renew my lease and to move back in with my dad. My thoughts were that that would allow me to save rent and extend my personal runway.

Adam Jahnke:

I sometimes he found us talking about moving back in with their parents like a bit of a badge of honor, like they're willing to sacrifice everything and live with their parents so they can get their business off the ground. But it's not lost on me that there are lots of people living in Australia that don't have parents that can financially support them while they start a business, let alone in other countries. If you have parents, you have a safety net, you have a springboard that other people don't. And that's one of the biggest forms of privilege I see within the startup ecosystem in Melbourne.

Adam Jahnke:

I think privilege is a bit of a loaded term and it shouldn't be. It just comes from the circumstances you find yourself in. And that's certainly not the only form of privilege that I've had. But yeah, you definitely can't succeed on privilege alone as well. I've worked 70, 80 hour weeks. I've held a second and a third job at times, and I pitched Umps to hundreds of investors and customers. But yeah, it's something that doesn't show up on resumes all the time, and I think it's such a big factor in whether you cannot or cannot choose to start a business.

Seth Robinson:

I'm really glad you said that, because I feel like it's about acknowledging those realities of circumstance and the challenges that come with that and the privileges that sit on the other side of that coin. I think often those are discussions we shy away from, so thank you for your candor there.

Adam Jahnke:

No problem. And it is just about that, acknowledging the cards you're dealt, everyone's got a right to play them to the best of their ability, and acknowledging it creates discussion around the privileges that others don't have. And from there, we can identify problems that we can potentially solve.

Seth Robinson:

Adam Jahnke, CEO and co-founder of Umps Health, thank you so much for joining us on GameChangers.

Adam Jahnke:

No problem. Thanks for having me, Seth.

Seth Robinson:

There's a lot to be learned from understanding the system we live and operate in, acknowledging its flaws and seeing the ways we can create change. As we all grow older and the system adapts, it's having these discussions and acknowledging these problems that will allow us to keep moving forward. Subscribe to GameChangers for new episodes or catch up at fbe.unimelb.edu.au/gamechangers.

Seth Robinson:

If you're interested in finding out more about life-changing technologies, check out season one of GameChangers and our interview with Navi Technologies founders Shing Sheung and Wei Sue. GameChangers is recorded on Wurundjeri land. The podcast is produced by me, Seth Robinson, and edited by Michelle Macklem, with support from the University of Melbourne.