

# Conversation #4

## Finding the Right Problem to Solve

Timbo Drayson of OkHi



***Timbo Drayson** is co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of OkHi, a start-up based in Nairobi whose mission is to enable the four billion people in the world without a physical address to “Be included.” Born in the UK, he studied engineering at the University of Oxford before starting at Google, where he spent more than six years working in marketing and product management in London and San Francisco. He built the YouTube apps on your mobile phone, marketed the first Android phone, and has seven US patents to his name. Outside of work, Timbo wastes his time fixing up his VW camper van or doing some form of exercise to keep his mind sane.*

**What is the story behind OkHi?**

Well, I was supposed to be moving to San Francisco for a dream job at YouTube but decided to take a three-month sabbatical before I sold my soul to Silicon Valley. I did a tech tour of Sub-Saharan Africa and was inspired by all the start-ups I met that were impacting the world through their profitable businesses. Realizing it was now or never, I left Google in mid-2013 to move to Kenya to have a better chance at solving a bigger problem.

I chose Kenya because it just felt right. I loved my time in Nairobi because of the amazing people I met, the lack of language barrier, the exciting tech community, and ultimately because I felt I could live a happy and integrated life as an expatriate.

As for how OkHi started, an important learning from my previous start-up was that it is not the idea that counts, it is the underlying problem that you need to focus on. I therefore purposely arrived in Kenya with no business ideas but spent three months trying to find the right problem to solve. I settled on the lack of physical address system in Kenya and beyond.

**Did you explore the problem all on your own or did you look for co-founders?**

During my three months of research, I spent all day meeting new people and was always looking for co-founders who could complement my skill set and provide local Kenyan insights into the business. It was at an event called Startup Weekend that I met Wes Chege and Evans Mutai, and soon after I was introduced to Navraj Ghataura by a common friend in the tech community (thanks, Adam!). We were all interested in the problem of physical addressing, and so, we started working together in early 2014 to validate how big the problem was and whether businesses would pay for a solution.

Since then we have had Henry Ingham, Punit Shah, Dennis Mutugi, and Mugethi Gitau join the team, all from very different backgrounds and experience, but all passionate about our mission to make the four billion people in the world without an address “Be included.”

**You mentioned that you are all passionate about OkHi’s mission. What do you have in mind when you refer to a mission?**

I am sure there are many definitions out there, but for me, a mission-driven business is one that focuses on solving a big problem. My previous start-up is a good example of what happens when you focus too much on a solution, and not the problem or mission. We had this idea for a service that could pool money from a group of friends to enable them to buy a better gift for a mutual friend. We were really obsessed with the idea and spent every hour outside of our day jobs working on it. After 18 months of tireless work we launched, but no one came. We tried to make it work, but we were so demotivated that we had to shut down the business.

My main learning was that our business was far too focused on the idea. This meant that when the idea didn’t work, we had no reason to continue running the business. If, however, we focused on the underlying problem, even if the initial idea didn’t work, the problem would still be there and so too would the reason to continue running the business.

That is the point of being a mission-driven company: The underlying problem remains unchanged and constantly keeps the team challenged and motivated to find the *right* solution.

**How did you find out just how big the problem is that OkHi seeks to solve? And how did you turn that into a mission statement?**

So there are two parts to this. One is, how did I settle on the right problem? And two is, how did we come up with our mission statement to “Be included”?

During my research phase, I chose the logistics and supply chain space as my broad problem area because I saw that its inefficiencies were having such a detrimental impact on the economy and anyone living in Kenya. I spent three months interviewing 120 people and observed a number of businesses in order to find the right problem to solve. I observed van drivers taking crazy routes and motorbike riders having to follow crazy directions like “Turn left where the goats used to graze.” It was after all these insights that I realized that the lack of a physical address system was

one of the most fundamental reasons for the inefficient logistics and supply chain industry.

There were two further insights that told me this was the right problem to solve. First, during an interview with a Red Cross ambulance driver, she told me that she was so lost trying to find someone's house that when she arrived it was too late, and the person was already dead. This made me realize that the problem of physical addressing was so much bigger than just the logistics and supply chain industry. The second insight was from a United Nation (UN) spokesman, who said there were four billion people in the world without a physical address today and that this number would double to eight billion by 2050. That was when I realized quite how big this problem is for the world and that finding the right solution for it would be a mission that I wanted to dedicate the next decade or more of my life to.

The last step was to turn the problem into a single mission statement that inspired not only the team but also anyone who touched OkHi, from friends to journalists, family members to prospective employees. It actually took us 18 months to come up with our current statement. At our first off-site retreat, we spent time trying to answer why OkHi needs to exist and why it is so important to solve the physical addressing problem. We settled on an initial statement that was to "physically connect the world with a global address system." Over time, though, it became clear that the statement was not inspiring enough, or emotional enough, so recently, we worked hard to revise it to something more human and aspirational. And that is what our mission statement is today, to "Be included." What do we mean by that? Well when someone gains a physical address, their life changes; they can now get access to emergency and finance services that they could not otherwise get access to. They are now part of society. They are now included.

As a side note, it often feels like certain elements of a company need to be 100 % right from day zero, such as the mission statement and values. A big learning from building OkHi is that it is much better to make a quick decision that is 80 % right than to worry about the last 20 % and potentially never make the decision at all.

**If the mission is the kernel of your venture, how do you select new team members? Let us imagine you selected me: What do you think I would find surprising in my first week on the job?**

It is funny—I do not think our hiring process is all that conventional. But judging by the caliber of the team, it seems to be working. As an example, I have not seen the CV for a single one of the seven OkHi team members. I do not even know how old everyone is!

Our hiring process is based on three principles. First, we hire for aptitude, not experience. Someone’s aptitude is their natural ability to do something—it is in their DNA. This is much more important in a fast-changing start-up where responsibilities often change than someone who can only do one thing very well because that is all they have known for five years.

However, aptitude is very hard to test in an interview. So we test it through our second principle, which is to trial the candidate before making an offer. This is designed to be a two-way benefit—as much for the candidate to work out if OkHi is right for them as it is for us to test their aptitude and ability to exceed the expectations of their role.

The last principle is that we hire for cultural fit, meaning that we test a candidate on how well they align with our company values. This is often a deal breaker for me. For example, if a candidate does not align with our company value to “Grow together”—which means they need to be motivated to give and take feedback—then it does not matter how high their aptitude is, working at OkHi is not going to work out for us and, more importantly, for them.

To answer your other questions: In your first week, you would not find anything surprising, because you would have already spent enough time working at OkHi during your trial! And what makes OkHi special is definitely the team. They are the foundation of the company. It is incredible the power that comes from bringing a group of people together who are all aligned on the same company mission and values.

**You and your team are strong advocates for the lean start-up mentality. Why is that?**

“Find a problem, not a solution”—which I have already mentioned—is actually part of the lean start-up mentality. I think it really resonated with all of the co-founding team because we had all run companies before and had all made similar mistakes. These mistakes could be attributed to the fact that we made wrong assumptions. We assumed that our thoughts or ideas were right—until we were proven wrong. This is really the fundamental principle of the lean start-up: You are wrong until proven right.

When you are starting a business, you are trying to get to a point of success with the minimal cost possible, whether that cost is financial, your time, or otherwise. The Lean Start-up’s mantra is that you do this through an iterative loop of Build, Measure, and Learn. You build something quickly that can test your assumptions, which is called the minimum viable product, or MVP. You then measure the success of this MVP in a qualitative or quantitative way, learning from what worked and what did not. And then you restart the loop again.

I wish I had known about the Lean Start-up during my previous start-up, because it was only after 12 months of engineering that we learned our users did not understand our homepage. If we had put paper screenshots (“Build”) in front of our target users (“Measure”), then we would have realized that no one understood our homepage in 2 weeks rather than 12 months (“Learn”). Though to be honest, the theory is the easy part. The hard part is putting the theory into practice, because there are so many open questions you need to answer. For example: Do we build one product or three different ones? What design fidelity should we build the product to? And, How many users do we need for the results to be statistically significant?

These questions highlight the many potential pitfalls of implementing a Lean Start-up, and the frustrating thing is that there is no right answer. Each company is so unique that you need to work out the right recipe yourself. Ironically, my best advice is to use the Build, Measure,

Learn principles of the Lean Start-up to implement it successfully. In every work sprint, we define the process of how we are going to work (“Build”). Then after the sprint, the whole team reviews how it went (“Measure”). And then, we discuss why some things worked and some did not (“Learn”). If you do this enough times, you will generate a process for running the Lean Start-up principles that is optimized to your business, team, and culture.

**An entrepreneur is often seen as the individual hero that develops innovative solutions for long-lasting problems. How much is the entrepreneur really that lonesome fighter as opposed to a function of a wider community effort?**

From both working at Google and running OkHi, I have come to realize that every successful business is like an iceberg. I think everyone is guilty of seeing a company that has been successful with just a simple idea and thinks, “Why didn’t I think of that?” or even worse “Wait, I had that idea — they stole my idea.” But as someone who knows nothing about that business, all you can see is the tip of the iceberg above the water, the working solution. As soon as you start understanding more about the business, you realize there is so much more to it than you originally thought. Whether it is that they made a big pivot one year into the business (Twitter), had to fire one of the early co-founders (Facebook), or ran out of money and had to sell cereal boxes to make ends meet (Airbnb), every business has so much more to it below the surface.

So what I am saying is that it is never just the CEO or co-founders that make the business, it is the whole ecosystem around the business, from the employees to the partners, from the investors to the customers. Especially in the technology sector, the wider community is a hugely important factor to the success of the business, and it is often overlooked because it is one of the parts of the iceberg that remains under the water.

While I was at Google, I spent two years leading Google’s developer outreach efforts across Europe, Middle East, and Africa and gained a unique perspective on seeing what was a small technology community in London in 2008 turn, in just five years, into one of the largest tech

ecosystems in the world. There is no way the successful companies coming out of London today could have done so back in 2008, because there was not the capital, the mentors, or employees to make it happen. There just was not the ecosystem, or community.

For me, the biggest thing I see missing in Kenya is the lack of this kind of community. There is an amazing buzz here, but as entrepreneurs (and I include myself here), we do not do a good enough job of sharing, learning, and generally making the most of each other. We also lack the experience in Kenya of tech entrepreneurs who have built successful businesses multiple times. It is these people who are the ideal mentors, with vital advice for those of us who are inexperienced founders.

So it is up to us founders to actively make this change, to run and host local events ourselves, and forge relationships with more advanced ecosystems like Silicon Valley. It is happening—and will happen. It is just up to us as entrepreneurs how much fuel we want to put into the local tech ecosystem fire. I think we need a lot more!

**Let us imagine you could start OkHi all over again. What would you change?**

This is a tough one. There are so many things! I suppose thinking through the timeline of OkHi, I would say the following:

First, I would find a co-founder who could run the operations of the business. There is a lot of company infrastructure to build as a start-up, especially in Kenya, where you cannot yet buy solutions off the shelf to set up your payroll, benefits package, or stock option plan. It takes time to get it right, especially because I was doing this in a new country. Operations is also not a strength of mine, so I spent a lot of time doing it when it would have been better for me to focus on other areas of the business.

Second, I would solidify the values of the company early on. As a team we have spent time talking about our values, doing exercises to understand what our personal values and therefore our company values



should be. But it took me almost two years to clearly define a set of values, because I put so much onus on them that I was scared of not getting them 100 % right. This was actually where I learned the importance of making a decision, even if it is only 80 % right. Now we have a set of five company values that the whole team is proud of (you can find them on our website), and they have really helped me, and the team test culture alignment in interviews, make decisions internally, and know how to act when talking to potential customers. They have become our internal compass.

The third would be to complement raising smart money with just money. Smart money is investment in your business that adds value beyond the money itself—things like mentorship, for example. Our first round of financing took over five months to close because I would not accept money from an investor unless it was smart money. In hindsight though, there should have been a balance.

The last thing I would have done differently would be to leverage mentors and investors more. It is very hard when you are in the weeds of running a business and trying to plow through the next wall ahead to take a step back and gain the perspective you need to steer the ship in the right direction. This is the support that great mentors and investors can provide—support that I need more of and support that I need to do a better job of getting.

**Thanks, Timbo!**



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