

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/blog/videos/the-future-is-accessible-entire-talk>

While earning his MBA at the University of Oxford's Said Business School and teaching himself to code, Srin Madipalli found himself compelled by the power of technology to transform the lives of people with disabilities. He soon co-founded Accomable, a web app that grew to list accessible accommodations in 60 countries around the world. In November of 2017, Accomable was acquired by Airbnb, and Madipalli joined Airbnb as its accessibility product and program manager. There, he has overseen the addition of new consumer-facing accessibility filters and features, while also exploring how Airbnb can make its hiring and management practices more inclusive for job candidates and employees living with disabilities. He describes how Accomable grew from a side-project into a fast-growing company that landed at Airbnb, and points out how focusing on accessibility can provide companies with a massive opportunity to engage with the disability community.



Transcript

- [Host] Who you are defines how you build.. (audience applauding) - Well, hi, everyone.. Thank you so, so much for having me over today and giving me the chance to share my story and background and the work that I've done to date in order to help people with disabilities using tech.. So, today, I just wanna give a bit of a whistle-stop tour of the story behind Accomable and how we ended up at Airbnb, but also hopefully leave you with some take-home messages about how investing in accessibility can be really valuable from both just in terms of inclusion, but also as a business opportunity, and give you all something to think about, as hopefully one day you'll end up building products yourself.. So, as mentioned, my name is Srin.. I share this photo for two reasons.. One, to prove that I once had hair and good looks.. (audience laughing) The second reason is this photo was taken about a week before I was diagnosed with a condition called spinal muscular atrophy, so it's a neuromuscular condition.. That means I don't really have much movement in my arms and legs, and since I can remember, I have used a wheelchair for mobility.. I have a team of carers and nurses that support me around the clock, and I've sort of used assistive technology since day one..

You know, I think I learnt to type on a computer or use voice activation before I even knew how to hold a pen.. So for me, technology, not just on the business side, it's had sort of a transformational impact to allow me to live my life since day one, and as you can see today, you know, I'm sitting in a pretty high-tech powered wheelchair that allows me to get around and do whatever I want to do.. As was said in the introduction, and as you can tell from my accent, I am not from here.. I am from London, and this is the cheesiest photo of London that I could find on the internet.. (laughs) And so, yes, I was born and brought up in London and moved to San Francisco a couple of years ago.. So, as mentioned, I'm from London.. I originally trained to be an attorney, and I practiced law for nearly five years, so I was an MNA guy and had the most amazing time, learnt a ton, but it was just not really something that I felt resonated with me in the long term.. I've always enjoyed building things and just making things and trying stuff out, and just the life inside a law firm at that time was just not for me.. And so, up until about 2011, I'd never really traveled.. I'd only ever gone on those vacations that parents force you to go on to meet relatives that you don't really want to visit, and, like, I'd always wanted to go on more exciting adventures..

All of my friends have gone traveling and sort of seen so many cool places, and so many times they would share those experiences, and I'd be, like, "Oh, you know, wish I could do that," and because I had never really done anything.. And so, I took those six months off to see whether it was possible.. So, with one of my, well, sorry, two of my care assistants, booked a bunch of trips, not really knowing what to expect.. I had the most amazing time.. It was an experience where I went all around Europe, went to many parts of the US, went on a camping safari in South Africa, and learned to scuba dive in Bali, as you can see from the photo.. And, you know, this was from an adapted diving center in Bali, where I turned up to a big flight of steps, and I, and I asked, "Well, how is this adapted?" And there was six guys saying that, "We will help you." And not exactly quite adapted, but, you know, it was, it was an amazing experience.. However, things didn't always go to plan.. So, lots of times, I would use well-known travel websites and things that were supposedly accessible clearly weren't.. So, this is actually not a photo from that trip but just goes to show you what people with disabilities often have to face when traveling.. So, this is actually in a registered, listed ADA-accessible room at a major hotel chain..

Clearly, as you can see, it is not possible to use this hotel room.. The bed is too, the width between the bed and the furniture is far too narrow.. I simply couldn't, I couldn't use it.. And this actually was about 11:30 at night when I arrived, and then I had to find other accommodation in the middle of the night just after coming off 11-hour flight from London to the Bay Area.. And actually on that trip, I remember another experience, a place that I had booked.. The property owner claimed to not have steps at the home.. Turned up to see three steps, and I asked the property owner, "Why did you say it had three steps?" The property owner said, "Well, it does have, well, "it's step-free, but you have to get past "the first three steps." And so, you know, these are the kinds of challenges and barriers that people faced when traveling with a disability.. And so, fast forward about three years, so I went back to school again.. As mentioned, I did an MBA at Oxford, and on the program, I was very fortunate enough to get to know some engineers, and I always feel oh, you know, I'm too old to learn to code, and this is it.. Very gratefully, some of these people said, "That's absolutely nonsense," and started to help me learn to code, so by the time, you know, fast-forward two years later, I'd learnt quite a lot of sort of Ruby on Rails programming, had done a load of sort of online courses, and a lot of times just taught myself, where by the time I'd graduated, I was starting off as a, as basically working as a freelance web developer, making basic web apps for whoever needed anything..

And I'd just rolled off a really big project, and also on the side, with my friend Martin here.. This is from our trip in 2011, 2000, yeah, around then, in California.. We thought to ourselves, you know, could we build something interesting in code that could help people with disabilities travel? So, you know, Martin and I went back a long way, childhood friends who both loved to travel.. We'd had a bunch of side projects where we were running a lifestyle magazine just to share information and advice on accessible travel.. And so, in the summer of 2015, I effectively just locked myself in my bedroom for about 20 days and hacked together a very basic prototype of what became Accomable.. Now, I don't know whether it shows very well on the projector screen, but there are two unique things about what we built.. So, the first was that we had lots of different filters.. So, normally a website may have just had a box called Wheelchair Accessible.. We took that box out and actually had lots of different things.. It could be grab rails, roll-in showers, medical equipment, loads of different things that people could search for and that we'd verified was accurate..

The second thing is that we also used to joke about was we had more toilets on the website than any other website out there, and sort of joking aside, like, it's something really important to see really good bathroom pictures when you are traveling with accessibility needs.. The bathroom is so important, and it's so vital for your own dignity to be able to use it, and so we were meticulous in collecting photography and making sure that if somebody said they had those things, you could see on the photo whether it was there or not.. So, as you can see from that photo, it's one of our first listings in Barcelona.. The shower is perfectly roll-in, the grab rails are solid, and there is space under the sink.. And so, I shared this product just on social media just to see what people would think, and I think just wanted to reiterate, this actually wasn't a business at the time.. It was just a fun project with a couple of friends just to see whether we could help friends, our community, our family find somewhere good to stay when going on vacation.. And I've always been sort of inspired by sort of the approach of like when you're building something to be as hands-on as possible and to do everything as manually as possible at the beginning to kind of learn from your users.. So, after building the prototype and seeing that we're getting some initial traction, I effectively sort of went on the road, so I had an absolute superhero of a support worker care assistant.. Me and him basically did about three and a half, 4,000 miles around Europe for three months.. We would source recommendations on social media, and I would just contact that person and say, "Hey, look, you know, would it be possible "to stay with you?" I would go there and sort of build the product around your user, and effectively, you know, every time I would stay there, I would ask for feedback, iterate the product again, and I come very much from sort of like a rapid prototyping background, where you're constantly looking to improve the product, push code out again, and actually this is a photo of me staying at one of the listings we had in sort of the Catalan region of Spain that they, the website broke down, so I literally had to push a fix on the edge of a mountain..

And so, we pushed this site out, and lo and behold, we actually had some, we had some people using it, which was, like, the most incredible experience ever, and our first customer was Suzanne from Belfast in Northern Ireland, which is a part of the UK, and she'd gone on her first ever trip to Barcelona and sent us this note afterwards, saying that "Accomable allowed me to experience "my first girls holiday with my best friends," and then she sort of added a note onto that, was saying that this was, like, the first steps to independence.. I was just really grateful for, like, we had enabled her to travel for the first time.. And so, we were like, "Okay, awesome, what do we do now?" "We've got a business on our hands." So what started then was probably, like, two of the craziest roller coaster years ever, when we realized that there was a nucleus of an idea here and that this could grow, we raised, we raised a load of money from venture capital investors in London and grew to a eight-person team.. And over the course of that two years, we got over 2,000 listings with properties in just over 60 countries, and things were growing really fast and really well, but the problem we had was that we had way too much demand and not enough supply.. So, just to sort of provide some context, for every 10 booking requests that we were getting, we could only satisfy one of them at a time, and some of our property owners were taking bookings two years in advance.. That was the level of, like, demand and the need that this community had and what a shortage of supply there was, and also at the time, you know, there's many engineers in the room, and I'm sure that you've come across this when trying to build things, just as products start to grow, they start to break.. And so, we were getting, you know, a lot of users on the site, and trying to build infrastructure to support that growth was beginning to be a really big challenge for us, and we were needing a lot more resource in order to scale much further.. So, early on in 2017, we'd started a series, a funding round.. So, this is a funding round just after seed stage where, you know, you usually look to raise sort of between two and three million in order to take sort of initial kind of products that has early product market fit to scale it to a much larger area.. And for us as well, we are

very driven and passionate about taking this solution that we had sort of prototyped and being able to take it to a much global audience..

And I think, you know, from the get go, we started this because we wanted to help people and wanted to solve this problem for people with disabilities so they could travel everywhere.. So, we would ask this question to ourselves: how do we take this to a much more global level? So, we started this funding round, and very early on, some of my advisors and investors said, "Hey, why don't you talk to the big travel platforms "and see whether, you know, there could be some tie-up "or whether the infrastructure you need "could be sourced from a big player "like (laughing) Airbnb, for instance." And so, one of my investors made an introduction to somebody at senior at Airbnb.. I came out here in the summer of 2017 and started a whole series of conversations with a completely open mind.. We had no, you know, we didn't really have a, a goal as to what, any kind of partnership or collaboration could be, but very quickly the conversation moved towards on the Airbnb side actually if we wanna take this solution and be able to scale it to a global audience, the best thing would be to acquire Accomable and my team to work at Airbnb.. And so, in November 2017, we closed the acquisition, so Accomable was acquired by Airbnb with very much the mindset that we would infuse accessibility within Airbnb on a much global level, and I would move from London to San Francisco to build out this new team and group, so I was the only one from my team that moved to San Francisco.. The rest are still in London, working on other parts of accessibility at Airbnb.. So, I just wanna take a step back, so we'd moved over, so I moved over from London to San Francisco, but also just here now wanted to take the time to think about why this area is actually really important and why I think many sort of future entrepreneurs in this room today, it's something really valuable to think about.. So, firstly, it's about a report, a statistic from the World Health Organization that a billion people in the world have a disability of some kind.. Now, there's many different types of disabilities across a broad spectrum, but I think if we just sort of hold on there and think about that statistic, that is a huge number of people, and often in a massively untapped audience that many companies, organizations don't often think about.. Now, for those of you who have worked in accessibility before on sort of the tech side, I'd ask sort of what comes to mind when you think about tech and accessibility, and I imagine a lot of it is things like, you know, digital accessibility compliance, and does it, you know, comply with sort of W3C standards, and is it double A, or lots of kind of, you know, but well-established and very vital compliance and accessibility measures to make sure that a website is digitally accessible..

However, as the online/offline worlds are converging, we need to think about how accessibility can be baked when technology is facilitating the use of a real-world product.. And so, I have some examples here, whether it be a self-driving car or an Alexa Echo device or home automation or even on-demand transport like Uber.. How are all these products and services gonna be usable for people with disabilities when maybe even the foundational, fundamental product itself may not have been built for accessibility in mind? But when those products and services are becoming so vital and important, how do we make sure people can actually use them? And for me, sort of the anecdote I share, even though things are much better now, when I first moved from London to San Francisco, one of my biggest struggles was the fact there was no transportation.. So, at the time, Uber and Lyft did not provide any accessible vehicles as part of their service, and so it was literally impossible to get a taxi of any kind around San Francisco.. Luckily now, fortunately things have changed, and there is a lot more service.. But when I first got to San Francisco, I was completely, I felt completely stranded because I couldn't use the same transport services that everybody else could use.. And so that poses the question when offline and online converge, how do we ensure accessibility? And I think it's a really important but also very complex question that sits at the intersection of technology, policy, product development, design, and has a lot of really complex societal questions that we collectively need to think about.. And so, coming back to kind of what we were doing at Accomable and now Airbnb, so when I started in November 2017, we often say it started sort of a new beginning sort of in the world of accessibility, where we launched something called the In-Home Accessibility Team.. Now, from the outset, I need to add one sort of caveat where, you know, the work that my team does is focused very much on how do we facilitate the real-world product to be usable on Airbnb, and the second caveat is, like, we had to start and focus on something, so for the first 18 months, our focus has been very much on physical mobility, and how do we ensure that travel is accessible from that perspective but with a view to one day making sure that actually other people with other types of disabilities can use the product just like anybody else? So, firstly, new team, and this is just a photo of the team.. We are, you know, a team full of engineers, designers, data scientists, operations people, the entire spectrum of just over 20 people..

And for those of you who don't know, so Airbnb has a big vision statement with a mission to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere, and, you know, our sort of sub-mission within that team is that we need to make sure that that ability to belong anywhere includes people with disabilities.. And so, our team's vision is to create the most trusted travel platform for guests with accessibility needs.. So, how do we reach this mission? So, firstly, we don't just think about accommodation, even though our focus is just on accommodation now.. We often chart out the entire process of travel, whether it be, like, what to look for, how to plan for it, where to find accommodation, things to do, what services, and see, is a very holistic thing.. We also see it very much as a big multi-year project where we have to work with lots of stakeholders in lots of parts of the world in order to make this better.. And so, when I started, I posed three complex questions, and even to this day, we're still working on answering them.. So, number one, how do you accurately collect accessibility information across millions of listings across the world? Now, there's no one definition for accessibility.. Many counties, many cities, many countries all have their own definition of what is accessibility, and actually, again, we joke in our team sometimes.. Some of our biggest philosophical questions are trying to define what is a step or what should we define a step to be? Is it a quarter inch? Is it a half inch? What if it's half inch with a slightly rounded edge? And so, we go round in circles, trying to define these standards because no one's ever done it before.. And again, in various countries of the world, where accessibility has not been

considered, how do we think about educating and how communicating our information to hosts around the world in order to add that information? Question two..

As you know, sort of Airbnb, the bulk of Airbnb is people sharing private homes that can be booked, and the question then comes at how do you find listings that have high levels of accessibility information when many homes around the world are not built with those sorts of standards in mind? And finally, when you have a large platform of hosts around the world, how do you make them more aware of accessibility in the first place? So, I'm gonna give you a quick sort of whistle-stop tour of some of the products and services that we're trying to build in our team.. So, first we've even started that, and I, and one of my big take-home messages today is whatever you are building, whether it be accessibility related or any kind of problem for people, you start with empathy and trying to understand people.. So, we regularly run focus groups and research with the local disability community.. Whenever we are testing products, we make sure that those products are tested and we're getting feedback.. We're making sure that many people in our team and across the research function are having that exposure and, like, learning firsthand from people the experience of traveling.. And actually, that firsthand experience is really vital when you are building product.. Secondly, I spend a lot of my time engaging disability communities around the world, so this is a photo of an open house that we did in Los Angeles, where effectively, you know, we had decent amounts of food and drink and had an open invite to the local disability community, just to come hear about our work and where I could be really transparent about A, the challenges that we face, and B, what our bigger picture and roadmap is, just to get the community really excited about what we're trying to do and feel like they're part of the journey as well.. And so, a lot of that research and that empathy and that direct contact of people allowed us to build a roadmap of what we can actually build.. And so, again, first thing we did when we got there, there was this one wheelchair-accessible tick box that, you know, is very difficult to understand, so we took that out and replaced it with all the different filters that we once had at, many of which which we had at Accomable but were adapted for Airbnb, so again, things like roll-in showers, grab rails, all the different features that were once on Accomable, these were sort of adapted to be within Airbnb.. Now, with Airbnb hosts create listings, and they can add photos in order to prove things..

So, one of the things that we did when we first started was in order for people to, in order for hosts to be able to understand what they could select, we made it mandatory to add a photo, so if you say that you have a grab rail or a roll-in shower, you can only tick the box by adding a photo.. And so, this is just some screenshots of how it looks now for hosts, where they get some in-product education.. They have to add photos, and we provide some training about what exactly they need to do.. And again, this was a really good example of it's a complex engineering challenge to rebuild a lot of photography uploading systems but also making sure that we can do this with our users in mind, that they can do this also with an ability to understand what accessibility is if you're a host.. Again, as a legacy system, Airbnb had a lot of accessibility information where there was not photography, so we ran a retro, or we are running a retrospective exercise where we are asking hosts to add photos or have accessibility information de-selected from their listing.. And while that might sound pretty kind of acute and harsh, sort of our belief is we wanna have a really good service where, even if there are less listings, we'd rather have them really accurate with really good photography.. So again, this is just a little, a few screenshots of what hosts see now when they are asked to add photos or face information being de-select, accessibility information being de-selected from the listing, and again, that's been a great prompt to make sure those, that photography is there.. Before, a lot of accessibility information on the listing was pretty hidden and not very easily discoverable.. We've bumped that to the top, where it's now much easier to find.. And also, we did a whole load of engineering work where if somebody does stay at a listing, and we know that they've searched using the accessibility filters, they will get a follow-up review questionnaire afterwards asking about their stay and whether all the accessibility features that they thought were in the listing, whether they were actually there or not, and again, it's just been really popular with guests to be able to have that review flow tailored to them..

And then finally, as mentioned, we're asking hosts to add photographs to their listing, and we're still thinking a lot about how do we make sure even those photographs are as good as possible, so one of my most, like, favorite projects this year is where we've actually partnered with disability community groups in the Bay Area, and we've been working with their membership in a pilot program where we've been paying them to review photos on listings for us in order to give feedback to the hosts, so this was a short, you know, two-month pilot that we ran earlier in the year, but it was really popular, and again, we got great feedback from people with the lived experience because yeah, they know what they need as somebody with accessibility needs and were able to provide really good feedback on photography.. And so again, this is just a screenshot of it.. It's a very basic tool where an evaluator would be shown a photo that hosts would've said, you know, we think this is step-free.. Does it have these, we think it has these things.. And then the evaluator would just go through a checklist to see whether the photo had all of these different items in that photo, and if not, to be able to provide feedback.. And then, the other big track of work again, is not just about technology, even though I'm guessing everybody in the room today cares about engineering and product.. We look a bit as just the start, like, no matter how good a product you engineer, there has to be that educational layer on top in order to empower the people that you're building products for.. So, we have a network of photographers around the world, and so, we've been training those photographers on how to take better pictures of listings should they have accessibility, and I think the best, it's showcased, I think really evidently in the next slide where again, it's a before and after.. So, the photo on the left, you could not tell much about that shower.. After some training and some education, that photo is so much easier to tell that, it's so much easier to tell on that photo that that shower has a shower chair..

There's a solid grab rail there, and it's step-free to enter.. And again, simple educational interventions that have provided a

transformational experience on that listing, that somebody can now see it and book it just like anybody else.. Again, another simple example.. The photo on the left doesn't tell you much, but after some training, the photo on the right is so much more evident to see that this listing is so much more usable.. And then finally, like, if you're interested, we've been housing a lot of the work that we've been doing on a simple website, airbnb.com/accessibility as part of our program just to be really transparent about where we're at and what we would like to do.. And then, on the subject of sort of education, so this year, I feel like I've spent most of the time sort of on a plane.. We have run over 20 workshops with hosts, real-life workshops around the world, where again, we bring in local folks with disabilities to share their travel experiences.. We ask our top performing hosts in the area to listen to a short talk about accessibility, why it's important, and how they can create a great experience for guests and the importance of making sure that whatever they have in their listing is communicated really clearly.. And so, again, just a chart of where we've had some workshops this year.. I've, yeah, went to a lot of different places, and I've got to run, I've been able to run workshops in Europe, America, and in Asia, and it's just been a really exciting experience just to be able to evangelize the work that we're doing to a global audience..

And again, like, coming back to sort of the real-world aspect, no matter sort of how important the tech is, it is about real people and being able to improve people's lives.. And this was a quote that a host sent to us after coming to one of our training sessions.. They updated their listing with accessibility information.. A guest tried to book that listing, albeit was not able to make the booking because calendars didn't align but found the information on that listing really helpful and sent the host a note just thanking them profusely about how having this information made their life and product experience so much better, and this actually wasn't a technological thing.. This was simply being mindful about how we communicate, how we educate people in order to create a better experience alongside having that technological product there as well.. And so, you know, as much as sort of we're doing this at Airbnb and making a really concerted and intentional investment to improve things, I really do think there are some other core things that other companies are doing as well.. And again, it revolves around sort of trying to bridge sort of the offline and online experience.. So, I don't know how this is actually performed in the big picture, but Tommy Hilfiger now have an adaptive line of clothing where, you know, that they have clothing ranges that are more easier to use if you are a wheelchair user or if you've had a prosthetic limb, and they've just really thought about how they can modify clothing to make it easier if you have an accessibility need.. About 18 months ago, I think, Google launched a new service on Google Maps, where they were adding accessible navigation routes on Google Maps.. This was a really great example of an intervention where it had nothing to do with the accessibility of Google Maps itself, but they were using their technology to find real-world information so you could discover it on Google Maps..

And here is the Xbox Adaptive Controller that Microsoft created, again, a couple of years ago.. This was a controller made to make the Xbox easier to use for folks who have accessibility needs.. I thought this was a really cool example of a company making an investment to make their product or service easier to use and an adaptive controller it was that actually, it wasn't just for one type of disability.. I think there's lots of different kinds of disabilities that this controller considers when it's being used in real life.. So again, it's an example of where it's even the Microsoft game or whatever the product was may have hit compliance on an accessibility standard, here Microsoft have made the investment to make sure that the controller allows somebody with a disability to use it, and just a great example of converging technology with the real life experience.. Here are just some sort of some take-home messages that I'd love to leave with you all today, that was hopefully covered in some of these slides.. Firstly, as mentioned, start with empathy and speak to users with disabilities.. Make sure you test what you build.. Iterate and make sure you're testing with that audience to get that feedback.. One thing that a lot of companies and organizations struggle with is that they often think about accessibility many years down the line, that the earlier that it is done, the easier it is to fix problems..

The more scale you have, the harder it gets to retrofit solutions, and then it's not just accessibility.. I think it goes to so many other problems that society is facing.. The longer that they are dealt with, the bigger they get, so the earlier you can address some of these things, in my view, the better.. Something that I'm really passionate about is actually doing what we can to hire people with disabilities.. It's a massively underserved and under-tapped in community of talent and resource, and where possible, there's so many amazing and talented people looking for roles, and I think not just on the accessibility front, it also then gives you fantastic insights and lived experience on developing products.. And finally, as much as investing in this area is the right thing as like an amazing opportunity from a business perspective as well, that this is an underserved need, and the best entrepreneurial opportunities often come from needs that are underserved, and so, if you are thinking for entrepreneurial ideas, to think of this community as something where you could build solutions for, and on that note, thank you from sort of me and my team.. That's my email address and Twitter handle.. I welcome any questions, whether it be today or any time ever.. Love being able to help people build things whenever I can, so feel free to reach out to me.. And thank you..

(audience applauding) I think we have some, some time for questions if anyone, if anyone has any.. - [Attendee] I'll start us off.. You, you skipped over the acquisition of your company.. Can you talk about the experience with going from a founder to being an employee? - Sure, it is, it's an interesting experience.. It's something again, like, there are, there are some benefits and some drawbacks.. You know, when you are a smaller company, there is a very different process to building things, but when you are in a larger company, yeah, you have to collaborate across many different teams, and things have a lot more process for good reason, so that was very much, you know, a massive learning curve for me to get used to, but like with anything, it's a different stage of the life cycle of a product, and there's been a great learning experience for me to be able to work on product where you do have sort of Airbnb-size scale.. I think there's also just on a very human level, you go from working with a team where we can all fit around the same table, and now you're in a big building with thousands and

thousands of people, yeah, it's a very awe-inspiring experience where you feel part of something much bigger, and that was, you know, as mentioned a bit earlier in the talk was what drove us to do this was that, you know, we could get that excitement, and that we can actually be part of something bigger and take what we were doing to a much more global audience.. - [Audience Member] Well, thank you for the talk.. I was wondering about sort of, like, any really, like, human challenges that tested your vision and sort of your road, and sort of your path because you spoke to a lot of, like, sort of awesome steps, but just curious more about some, like, really big, sort of personally testing, vision-testing challenges that you came on early stage.. - [Attendee] Repeat the question..

- So, thank you for the question.. So, the question here was whether there were any sort of challenges to our bigger vision.. Did I understand the question correctly? There were a couple of things, so, on one level, at the very beginning.. I did think a lot about, you know, when you create a website like this for people with disabilities, is it the right thing, that this is, like, a separate website, so, you know, I've always been a great believer in sort of integration and mainstreaming things, and I did in the early days think a lot about whether, you know, are we doing the right thing building a stand-alone platform in itself? I think in hindsight, it was a great way to prove the concept and to prove some fundamental hypotheses, but that yes, it is better to do this as part of a wider organization.. In terms of other challenges to the vision, I'd say they were more just on, like, the operational level.. Again, often, things just didn't work to plan, whether it be, like, bits on the website breaking down, or whether, you know, you're dealing with challenges of, like, of onboarding new hosts and getting information, the right information from them, so I think it's less about the vision.. The main stumbling blocks actually become more in execution and just trying to sort of overcome all of these daily challenges of building a product where you, you know, you don't really have much funding.. Everyone is stretched.. Yeah, you feel like you're never more than a day from, you know, running out of money or some big disaster on the horizon, but at the same time trying to sort of grow and scale something that is, you know, effectively still very fragile, so I'd say in the, the challenges and obstacles are more on that front rather than on sort of challenges to the bigger vision.. There's a question at the front..

- [Participant] So, you talk a lot about the difference between compliance and actually making things usable.. Do you think that sort of the rules that you're complying to need to be changed, or does it more need to come from other people, like, taking things further? - So, the question is, so, I mentioned earlier a lot about going beyond compliance and making products usable, and the question is about, sort of is it how we can best do that, and sort of how we can take that further.. Did I understand the question correctly? So, I definitely think that's been a major challenge, and I do think, like, rules, and a lot of the basic kind of guidance in place does need to be developed.. I think a lot of rules were, and a lot of guidance notes were created in an era sort of before the internet, and I do think when you are having things like the sharing economy or like sort of the tech and real world sort of merging together, I do think at a societal level, yes, we do need to have a rethink about what new standards could be.. Also, many rules and guidance sort of notes are sort of done very much thinking about the world divided up by sort of national borders, and in a sort of a tech world that, you know, it is where you can, I don't know, communicate with somebody in another country or use a product to travel to a different place at the click of a button, I think again we do need to think about how do we build standards at a more global level that I think'll actually make it easier for a lot more organizations and companies to do this.. - [Listener] What advice do you have for budding, you know, product managers, especially, you know, there's this huge debate between whether product managers should be from an engineering background, should not be from an engineering background, so that's it, I mean, you don't have the engineering background.. Is it important? - Yeah, I, I mean, I, so the question here is about sort of as a product manager and backgrounds and sort of what, what might work best.. Like, I do think it often depends on the product that you are managing.. So, is it a slightly, just to turn the question a little bit, like, I do think those product manager skills are very dependent on what exactly you are building.. Like, I do think, like, if the product is very, very deeply technical, naturally, having sort of engineering background, I think, makes life easier, whether if it's something less technical and more about kind of user experience and sort of the flows and the onboarding, then I think there are other skills that can become really helpful as well, and I think there's also the matter of, like, what the life cycle of the product is as well..

So, I don't think there is a one-size-fits-all answer.. I think there's a huge number of variables in this.. From my own personal perspective, I think having experience from lots of different areas has helped me a huge amount, whether it be having sort of that business background that helps me talk to, like, our operations and sort of business team or actually, you know, having a little bit of technical skill myself has made it much easier to work with engineers and designers, and so, knowing a little bit about a lot of things has personally been really valuable because I think yeah, that's probably, it's something that I think is very valuable, particularly when you're working on something on early stage and you're just having input from lots of different specialists.. But again, I think it's one of those questions, unfortunately, you ask sort of 50 different product managers, you probably get 50 different, (laughing) 50 different answers.. - [Listener] Thank you.. - [Attendee] Let's go way in the back.. - [Audience Member] I really loved it at first, the having a team, in terms of perspectives, and I was just curious, as you were growing your company, if you uncovered any blind spots that pertained to the mal-identified people in your community? - So, the question was did we have, like, sort of, as you can see, sort of diversity was really important as we were building our company and now on our own team, were there any blind spots? Did I understand the question correctly? - [Audience Member] Yeah, well, did you uncover and address-- - Any blind spots, so, we, there were some blind, so, less blind spots.. It was more that things we knew that we could do better, but at the time, during the startup, we just didn't have the resources to do, so we were very well aware that there were certain types of disabilities that we were more focused on and that we were kind of, you know, optimizing for in terms of building product, when actually there's so many other, other use cases that we felt we could do more for.. So, less of a blind spot.. There were just a lot of aspirational things that we wanted

to do better but just didn't have the resource at the time..

And again, you know, it's one of those things where you sort of have to make those trade-offs as a founder, but at the same, but it's trade-offs but knowing that those trade-offs are part of a bigger vision where it's still really important and you will just get to it at a slightly later stage.. - [Attendee] So, building products for over-- (object clattering) Building products for overlooked demographics, I think, can sometimes be a little different, and I kinda wanted to know what your experience was when it comes to getting your first few champions, your first few investors when you're building something for people they haven't thought about.. - So, the question is sort of what we were thinking about when we were sort of, because we were building for an underserved community who sort of, was it the question about how did we, what were the champions of... - [Attendee] Yeah, just your experience with your first few champions.. - The first few, what was our experience with the first few champions? So, for those who we were building for, very quickly got what we were trying to do.. I think that is the great thing about when you're helping an underserved community, that underserved community will immediately often recognize okay, this is, this is something we really need.. I think for us the bigger challenge was trying to persuade wider society that this is important, and especially in things like fundraising, you're pitching to people who may not have had that personal experience or have come across these situations before, and I think that for us was the biggest challenge.. It was less champions within our community.. It was more finding folks who could support us amongst the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem.. So, in our early days of fundraising, we had a lot of struggles with people thinking that there wasn't a business opportunity here..

This is not really a need.. This is just something very simple that other companies are gonna do, whereas actually, our lead investor had a son with a disability, and the minute he saw what we were doing, it's like, "I get it.. "I know this is really important." So, in answer to your question, like, champions within our community were pretty easy to come by.. I just feel like I wish we had more champions at the time within, like, the wider world.. (audience applauding) (upbeat electronic music)..