When Landlines Become Lifelines

Digital innovation in elderly care can be a tricky prospect. The need to prioritise the safety and comfort of recipients of care can make it difficult to introduce new systems, while elderly adults can feel intimidated by new technology. CareCalls is a different kind of digital solution: one that delivers reminders through phone calls, using existing technology, but backs up the process with software that means it can operate at scale. At the beginning of the year, CareCalls was awarded £50,000 and one-to-one training as part of the Transform Ageing programme.

Since 2009, CareCalls has a number of uses. The system provides automated phonecalls to remind recipients to take medication. If they don't pick up a call, a message is sent to a neighbour or a loved one to alert them. Both cases free up a carer from making another in-person trip, making their hours go further, especially in rural areas where their patients might live far apart.In one case, a carer set up a phone call to a client at 10pm every night, telling them to go to bed and to sleep well, to stop them from falling asleep in front of the television and waking up cold and sore. It can send personalised messages to clients, to remind them to lock their doors or to get ready to go out at a certain time

This flexibility gives CareCalls the potential to help thousands of vulnerable people become more independent. So far, CareCalls has helped over 1500 carers and care receivers, delivered over 600,000 calls and saved over £1 million for a large public sector client.

The work on automated medication reminders has given CareCalls data to prove its effectiveness with other local authorities. Max Pownall, chief executive, hopes CareCalls will become part of the package of care put together by hospitals when they discharge patients, making it easier for more patients to return home quickly, plus reducing the amount of short and unnecessary carer visits that have to be performed, freeing up carers for longer visits.

But he recognises that local authorities are naturally risk-averse, especially when it comes to caring for the vulnerable. "You have to be patient with local authorities," Max says. He believes the future for the company will also be in its ability to connect directly to the consumer.

Max became interested in developing CareCalls through the simple desire to use tech for good. "I like the idea of using digital technology to have a positive outcome," he says. "It has the potential to make a big impact in social care, by helping people be more independent."

Max was working for another social care start-up called Care Selector when he first heard of CareCalls. The founder of Care Selector, an entrepreneur called Jamie Cole, had come up with the idea for CareCalls in 2009, but it had been on the backburner while he concentrated on the former business. Max was working as head of marketing, building a service that helped people choose the right care solution for their loved ones. He started working on CareCalls in his spare time, convinced that there was something in the idea of a phone reminder service for elderly people.

"When I was doing Care Selector I could see a lot of people were struggling with memory," he says. "My mum was 45 when she had me and my dad is 81 now. So I'm thinking of a service that might benefit them."

Thanks to the programme, Max has started working with the South West Academic Health Science Network, which aims to foster a link between healthcare and innovation. The network has helped him to start thinking more about how to measure the impact of his service using data to quantify its effectiveness.

The Transform Ageing programme has also given Max the funding and training to register CareCalls as a [B-Corp](), a company that has a certificate to say they balance purpose and profit. CareCalls had three days of training with a consultant who took the time to go through their application and make improvements. "It was Transform Ageing that introduced the idea, and I loved it," Max says.

Tim Lages, Venture Manager for the Transform Ageing programme says CareCalls is an unusual addition to the Transform Ageing programme. The programme has most often focused on organisations that have a high impact on a smaller number of beneficiaries. Tim describes CareCalls as low impact, but high volume. "Normally you have a close relationship with the social entrepreneur and the beneficiary count is only 50 or 100 a year, but Max says as he scales he will go from working with 50 to 50,000 beneficiaries."

Max says Tim has helped the company grow by asking the "tough questions" that other mentors might shy away from. "Tim has so much experience with social impact work, I have really benefited from my one-to-one time with him," Max says. "It's nice feeling like you have that next level of support."

Tim says the project has the potential to make a big difference in the South West, where much of the elderly population lives in rural areas with little transportation. "It's a service that works through existing technology, so it can be rolled out quickly," he says.

Tim says that many of the challenges for CareCalls are in building a tech company in a sector that is slow to adapt. "People are not used to thinking about something like this as a must-have," Tim says. "But the sector is catching up. The future is very promising."

Whilst CareCalls had a clear delivery strategy for a programme like Transform Ageing it was clear that their ambitions lay not just in the South West, but had a UK-wide potential. Working as part of Transform Ageing was an excellent opportunity for Max to really test and develop his model at scale with the support of the programme partners but it was clear to develop further investment was needed. Through UnLtd's Thrive – Solutions for An Ageing society investment fund CareCalls have now received a further £30,000 loan to support their growth across the UK and really slingshot them into the next stage of their development.