



International Case Study

Your Growth Journey

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Chanua Health is a digital health & innovation agency solving some of the biggest global challenges in health care, mental health and education. The team work collaboratively to develop and create services and products that foster healthy connections by solving organisational challenges using research, technology, games, psychology, and good design.



Naomi is a social entrepreneur who enjoys working at the interface of business enterprise, technology, healthcare and education. She is the co-founder and CEO of Chanua working on a range of projects including Neurochampions, NeuroLove, Talk and Teleport, Livy Africa, and Hacking Health UK to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. She is a lecturer and tutor for a range of universities in the topics of social enterprise, entrepreneurship, healthcare innovation, digital technology, and mental health. She is Black British woman of Jamaican and Tanzanian heritage, living and working between Liverpool and London, UK, and Tanzania.

What sort of creative entrepreneur are you?

I see myself fitting into a range of different boxes. Creativity off with taking an idea and being able to implement it in practice. To even be able to get to that stage you are already a creative entrepreneur. Also thinking about how you can incorporate different creative elements into the work you do, so think about music, art, psychology and health. At Chanua we integrate a lot of different creative elements into the work and our process is creative, with some of the innovations we are offering in our products are also creative. I am experimenter, as a lifelong learning as an entrepreneur. I like to take inspiration from nature and the historical ways we do things and incorporate these into how we can make ourselves and other people live healthier lives.

How did you get started?

Entrepreneurship was not part of my initial story. I started my working and learning career in psychology, very much interested in people, especially my family as well seeking to understand some problems some people had experienced. I studied psychology leading onto working after studies in research and the health service. Through these experiences I started to become frustrated by the fact I would have ideas and people would say no or I could not implement them. I was frustrated as I could see there were simple things, we could do to improve things, but people within the service were so focused on keeping things the same or working to a system. This just did not sit well with me. About ten years ago I decided to take some of learnings in psychology over to Tanzania, as I am half Tanzanian and half Jamaican. I developed a training programme in mental health in Tanzania, alongside this I climbed Kilimanjaro to raise some money to train and work with basic needs. I remember it was the first moment when I could see I could take something from my head and take something I have learnt and create it into a product. And I could give this or sell this to other people. I came back to the UK influenced by my father, he was always talking about social businesses, and started to research how enterprise could be used as a tool in healthcare. I needed to think about the skills I did not have which included knowing how to cost things up, how to sell, how to be a self-starter as up until that point I had always had a job. My enterprise journey came from frustration and over the years it has evolved.

How have you grown since?

I started off as me, myself and I in my enterprise in 2011 with an idea. At that stage I wanted to provide culturally adapted psychological therapies to communities in London and across the UK. I had to start to convince people that my idea was in any way valid. I started by connecting with colleagues, people who I already knew and began to form my first social enterprise. It was called Community Therapies and Training Service (CTTS) and I remember being so appreciative that anyone would want to work with me and help me put my idea into action. This though meant I did not always get the best out of people and I was slightly taken advantage of with some of the things I was creating.

This is why inner growth, valuing yourself, your skills and knowledge is really important. I made a lot of mistakes and three years later hit burnout, ending up hating everything about my business, even though on the outside I was smiling to everybody.

After this point I connected with a friend I had studied with; Megan Charles, an art therapist. Together we went on to set up Chanua. The lessons I learnt from running my first social enterprise I was able to put into practice with Chanua.

With our business growth we always start off with an idea then invest our own money enabling us to then sell our own products and generate an income. Along the way we have evolved to be known for creating our own products, hosting brands, and we create bespoke services. This business model has enabled us to support more people and create more impact. In some areas of the business, we have generated more income, whilst in other areas we do projects and work on a shoestring. We are agile in our organisation. Personally, I have slowly gained the confidence to make mistakes and continue to venture into new areas where innovation and creativity are needed.

Have you needed to pivot?

The word pivot is very much part of ours, and most business models. This is key to our business, and rather than use the word pivot, we “park”, as there have been some ideas or products that we have been too early with and they cannot come to market, at that time. The first digital product we made as Chanua was an online platform called MyGuvu. I coded the site and Megan designed it and we put all of our own money into it £6,000 into it. We spent evenings, days building it out and we were not technical ourselves, back six years ago. We had to learn and develop the skills on the job. We got the platform to the point of launching and the finance mentor we were working with at the time told us it was not viable. So, this was a surprise to us, especially as we had both put in so much of our own work, time, and money.

But the point was it was a time when people were not talking about mental health as much as they are now. We were early in on the discussion and product development in a digital space, so we chose to pause that project.

This led us to stop and start asking what we knew about, what skills did we have and as we are both therapists, we discovered a shared believe that young people should have access to therapy. This led us to ask, “how could we create a space for young people to do this?”.

We started off by thinking what did not already exist. We discovered through posing these questions that young people were not learning about the brain. Out of this we set up Neurochampions to teach young people about the brain. We both spent a whole night, staying up twenty-four hours writing a funding bid on top of the funding we had already invested ourselves. We mapped out the whole project and these products and we secured £40,000 of funding to launch. From this we were able to create programmes to teach young people about the brain, games; over time this has evolved into its own brand. From there we now have an online platform called NeuroLove which supports young people through social therapy using arts, dance, exercise, mindfulness and talking therapies.

We have always been driven by our heart to use our skills to fill the gaps in the areas we see there is need. We test out our ideas to make sure the product or service can be sustainable and viable. Yes, we have pivoted and certain ideas that have been parked on the shelf and have come off the shelf too.

How do you build in being sustainable into your work?

Social is at the core of everything that we do, so consistently asking “how what does we do help the people and environment we are in?” is key for us. With these questions answered, and the passion we have for the product, we then continue to make it. There are many things we have always wanted to do, because there is always the need within the fields of mental health and health, but often there is not the people or financial resources available to scale up. To tackle these resource restraints we have made a series of training packages to train up lay people to provide the services as well. This enables us to build the teams and skills base we need. We have done a lot of our work in very agile ways.

We are financially agile; rather than waiting to generate a lot of income or for grants or finance we start from nothing a lot of the time and see how the idea can evolve and work up it up from there. We always look at how can have a financial business model to what we are working up i.e., Neurochampions a lot of our beneficiaries cannot afford to pay for our services being they are young people. This was the thinking behind creating digital games and physical products to be able to generate income to help those who can't afford the programmes to still be able to access them. We have learnt that sometimes this works and sometimes it does not, but Chanua as a whole has a head and heart approach some allows for a for profit approach and some not-for-profit projects, we run alongside each other. The income generating projects allow us to cross subsidise with those projects we know will have social impact but less financial income.

How have you developed new products?

We have different people on our team who are involved in the different products we create. Often our team have lived experience of the mental health problem or expertise of working in that area. We use a range of tools like idea sprints that brings our team together either online or face to face. We put ideas together, and then go out to people who have experienced these challenges and they become our co-developers, co-creating solutions with us.

With Neurochampions we trained up our young people to be researchers especially when it comes to speaking the same languages as the professional researchers and developers. Together we co-created the Neurochampions programme and the NeuroLove online platform.

We have developed our own co-creation process that we utilise within our organisation whilst also employing other methods to get our products and services out as quickly as possible. Safety and security always underpin our work whilst we aim to launch products to get the learning from the users who interact with our products. We use different feedback processes, whether this is our online website, or the integration of certain tools so we can track interaction with our products or platforms. We get direct feedback, or we observe people using our products and we get our therapists to give us feedback. We are an always learning cultured company, which allows us to keep iterating our work, and get the proof of concept on whatever we are creating.

How have you diversified existing products?

We are an innovation driven organisation; we have our mental health products for children and young people; Neurochampions and NeuroLove on digital platforms. We are the brand owners of Hacking Health UK. Hacking Health started off in Montreal, Canada. We took on the brand for the UK after reaching out to them and developing a partnership. We run health hackathons, sprints, and other events to support digital innovation in health care. We have just started up a project in Tanzania called Livy Africa working on research and development projects linked to innovation and entrepreneurship alongside ethical food and beauty products. As a company we have a range in the ways we work. Personally, I am involved with a lot of different projects linked to running social enterprises, thinking about how Industry 4.0 can be applied in a tech for good ways whilst I still run my own organisation. In parallel I am always working and diversifying my own skills in other areas and sharing skills, this helps me with thinking about new ideas and products.

How have you moved into new markets?

Many people start by looking global markets, and in fact this can be a hard to do as starting off with local markets. We start off with our local markets, where we were geographically located for NeuroLove then went more national, via brokerage via relationships in different regions and areas. Then based on my personal links; I am half Tanzanian and half Jamaican we have links in Tanzania, and we have set up projects in Jamaica too. I have always had a passionate to see how business can support places of my heritage, so I have used the links that were already there for me.

LinkedIn is fantastic, as well as other online social platforms to enable you to meet new people. With Hacking Health, we initially met virtually, there are still people in the team I have not yet met, as we have built up the relationships and partnership virtually. Rather than going in with the 'sell' we go with the purpose of building a relationship, we need to have mutual values and interests to be able to help things grow.

Now we have sold products in local, regional, national and international markets; be mindful especially if you are in Sub Saharan Africa you are in a continent with each country have different trading regulations. This shows your local market can be as effective as a more global market.

How have you sold more to existing clients?

As soon as you develop a customer the purpose is to maintain them, it is more effective to sell to the same people than it is to continue to keep finding new customers. It is important to provide a good service, whilst building a relationship and be open to feedback. There has been times when we have not done something right, and by being open about it has opened us up for the next project or contract. Selling to new customers is a part of your business growth and just as important is the pipeline you have with existing customers. This is especially the case if you have new products or innovations. When setting up short term thinking, it is important to think for the longer term i.e., with some people it has taken two to three years before they purchased from us. It is important to develop skills to think how this will in the long-term thinking in mind, I am in Tanzania at the moment, and I see a lot of short-term thinking. When planning for your business include the longer term rather than making a quick bit of money.

How we grew the 'culture' of Chanua?

There are lots of lessons out there about how to build a team, for us we see people as we work with as a family. We treat people as we wish to be treated, sometimes that works, sometimes that does not. Our values and how we live our lives are very much embedded into the organisations i.e., we recruit for values, then train up for skills. One of the difficult things as an entrepreneur is that you have the ideas in your head and how you get those ideas out of your head can lead to trying to create mini versions of yourself. This is not what you need as a business, as a business owner being clear of what will and will not accept it vital. Decide what is the voice for the company you want to go out there with. We do that through our actions and the relationships we build through our actions. You can have mission statements and keep repeating them, but most people come to work for a job, however we are clear we want people who are coming to make a difference in other people's live, not just to make a bit of money. Our values and the way we behave has got to be consistent. Megan and I are incredibly open, we are friends, but we are very open to feedback from each other to the level of brutality. Even from the beginning of setting up the business we set up a divorce agreement, and this outlines how we need to act if we 'break up' as a business. By doing this we have been able to have the difficult conversations needed, and there have been many difficult times when we have needed to have incredibly open conversations. It is key to be open and honest with your team and be transparent around what you can and cannot do.

For me personally I went through a bereavement at the start of 2021 yet as much as I am an entrepreneur with a team, I still have a life. My team have been amazing, so the building up of the relationships with the team and our customers has been key here.

Life still happens when you are running a business, being open about things as a leader allows staff to be more open when they are ill or having a tough time. Staff feeling able to talk about their challenges ultimately leads to them being able to be more effective in what they are doing too. Its key to keep it human.

How have you grown your work internationally?

There is my own heritage piece here at play, and we reached out to Hacking Health based in Montreal, Canada. We started our relationship online and this grew to going to Amsterdam, we have gone and done mentoring work in Canada, been to Berlin. This relationship started from an initial email, then we attended a live hack event and have been building the relationship ever since. From this we have developed relationships across the whole of Canada and fifty-five different cities across the world, which has enabled us to open so many new contacts and connections with leaders in the digital, tech and health spaces across the world.

Some key learnings I took into building Chanua with Megan have been;

- ✚ Do not do things alone.
- ✚ Knowing what skills, I did not have and how others with different skills could complement this.
- ✚ Knowing what we needed to focus on, what it was we wanted to do and then being flexible, adaptable and open to change.
- ✚ Know that I can fail, know things will go wrong and be able to stand back. It can be hard when people say no, or do not come back to an email or call. These are framed as 'rejection' so we do not like them, but in enterprise they are very, very familiar. So, if you are a perfectionist, which most people are, then it can take a while to get over this.
- ✚ Learning to be a little less self-critical has help me to be able to keep moving forward.
- ✚ Sometimes it is just not the right time. It is ok to park ideas.
- ✚ Feedback never ends for anyone in business, so if you are in the process of setting up, always aim to be listening. Stay open to how you can keep bettering your product or service.

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