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NEWS: AI Startup Launches Platform and Two Apps to Teach English

by Deirdre Newman April 19, 2019 Home, News

Children in areas like Japan, China and Korea typically pay \$10,000 a year for English-language instruction in their home countries.

A startup with an outpost in OC is capitalizing on that. It's created an online platform and two apps to teach English.

And, it recently launched a Title III equity crowdfunding campaign, the type of fundraising that is open to non-accredited investors.

FluentWorlds, which teaches people how to learn English in a 3D video game environment, launched its campaign on WeFunder.

The company was founded by Linda Bradford. Her husband, David Bradford, has been the CEO for the past 2.5 years. He is a former lawyer.

Company employees work remotely from Newport Beach and Utah.

FluentWorlds chose not to seek traditional VC funding because it don't want to give large percentages of the company to any VC investors, David Bradford said.

"If we bring in 1000 investors (instead), then our flexibility is much greater," he said.

Funding

The Bradfords have self-funded the company with more than \$5 million.

“It was expensive to build all these 3D virtual classrooms,” David Bradford said. “It’s not for the faint of heart. It’s been very time-consuming and expensive, but it’s done and now we’re ready to launch to the world.”

It’s now looking for \$1 million at a \$6.5 million pre-money valuation. Those who are among the first \$150,000 invested will get the benefit of a \$5.5 million valuation, David Bradford said.

Non-accredited investors can invest for a minimum of \$100 dollars.

Find the link to the campaign here: www.wefunder.com/fluentworlds

The funds would be used for marketing and teaching several new languages.

Foundation

David Bradford is a member of the Utah Technology Hall of Fame, primarily based on his experience with three companies.

He was the EVP of Novell for 15 years. He helped take this company from \$40 million in sales to more than \$2 billion.

Then he was the CEO of Fusion-io, and took that company from a couple of million in sales to more than \$100 million. He also helped take it public on the NYSE. The company was later sold to San Disk, which was acquired by Western Digital.

Then he retired. But that was short-lived. Because HireVue came calling, asking him to be the CEO. He said Yes and helped this company raise \$75 million and put it on the map. They’re now a leader in digital interviewing, he said.

Linda Bradford has a Ph.D. in instructional technology. Her dissertation was about the viability of teaching in a 3D virtual classroom versus a physical classroom.

It turned out, with her studies, that students who took an entire course in a 3D online classroom she created had higher learning outcomes those who took the same course, from the same instructor, in a physical classroom.

“Based on that, we said, ‘What’s the best manifestation to use 3D virtual classrooms for people?’” David Bradford said. “We hit upon language.”

The virtual environment they created to teach English has users interacting with a series of game characters, to enable learning in context.

“So, you don’t have to spend \$10,000 to come to America,” David Bradford said.

They launched the company in 2014.

Tim Doner, a recent Harvard grad who's known as "the world's youngest hyper-polyglot," based on his ability to speak dozens of foreign languages, recently joined as VP of Strategy for business development.

The original FluentWorlds software architect is Iman Khabazian. He and his sister, Ellie, launched Hitsfu a few years ago here in OC. The startup developed an AI Analytics platform with the goal of providing outcome-driven decision making to app developers.

But in March, a LinkedIn post by Iman Khabazian showed that the startup ran out of the funds required to survive long sales cycles and is now looking to sell its IP. He's now the CTO of Sorna AI, which is working with an AI-empowered tool for radiologists.

Why OC?

The Bradfords chose OC because of the community of other successful entrepreneurs, David Bradford said.

"We learn from each other and advise one another," Bradford said.

And, they also appreciate the tech community, as they're always on the lookout for software technologists and linguists.

"It may not seem as diverse, but it's certainly more diverse than Utah, when it comes to personnel and recruiting people who have bilingual or multi-lingual capabilities," he said.

Bradford has been a member of Tech Coast Angels for 11 years.

How It Works

The company has an online training platform and two apps.

The first app, known as FluentWorlds, enables users to become an avatar and explore 55 virtual adventures. It also gives them the tools to learn up to 3,000 English words and phrases, while immersed in a video game.

In its first year, it was rated by iTunes as a top 100 educational app out of 220,000, David Bradford said.

This app is for beginners and intermediate English language learners.

The second app is Perfect Accent and is a sequel to FluentWorlds. It's for those who want to polish up their accents. It analyzes speech at the sound/phenome level.

The Bradfords consider this speech recognition at the sound/phenome level as the main way for FluentWorlds to differentiate itself from the competition.

It was built with the collaboration of Jeff Adams, who led the software development team that worked on Amazon's Echo and Alexa systems. Adams is on FluentWorlds' advisory board.

The Bradfords also consider the immersive nature of what they've built, as opposed to a flash-card method, to be a differentiator.

Both apps use machine learning, a subset of AI, to figure out where users are stumbling. For example, at the beginning of Perfect Accent, a voiceprint is created for every user.

That voiceprint analyzes each user's fluency level in English and gives them a numeric score from 1 to 100. Then the app's AI provides lessons and sentences specifically designed to help them with their accent challenges.

And, the apps have a vocational focus as well. So, if users want to learn vocabulary conducive to working at a hotel front desk, for example, they would click on the hospitality category and could learn phrases like, "When are you planning to check in?"

The online platform is FluentWorlds Academy. The company provides an English-language tutor who instructs via webcam. This platform is partially launched.

Philanthropy is a Component

The Bradfords plan to give a free version of the beginner's app to a refugee for every paid subscriber. And they want to do that retroactively based on the number of current subscribers, which is about 6,000.

They would do this by getting in touch with refugee communities, whether they're here in SoCal, are international, like those in Jordan.

Jordan, has five million Syrian refugees, David Bradford said.

"One way they can elevate their lives, is to speak fluent English," he said.

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About The Author / Deirdre Newman

Deirdre Newman is a long-time journalist, who's covered OC startups for a few years.

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