Featured interview:

Herb Kim

Founder & CEO of Thinking Digital Limited

Thinking Digital, the now globally famous annual conference that takes place on the banks of the Tyne, recently celebrated its seventh successful event. When the conference first began, the Apple iPhone was just hitting our shelves, now mobile communications are ubiquitous and have transformed the way people and businesses interact.

"The next Thinking Digital takes place between the 19th and 21st May 2015 and we're looking forward to making it better than ever."

We caught up with event founder Herb Kim to talk about how the conference has evolved with the times. He also explains what the future holds for Thinking Digital now that it's a private enterprise, as well as giving his insights into the region's evolving technology industries.

This is the second year since the Thinking Digital Conference became a private company. Has the decision to keep the conference going, post Codeworks, been a good one?

I feel like it's been a great decision. All of the good work that Codeworks did, in terms of promoting the digital and creative sectors here in the North East, hasn't gone to waste. The different bodies that made up Codeworks, such as Thinking Digital as well as Game Horizon and Codeworks Connect, essentially all still exist here in the region, but they exist in a far more sustainable way. Codeworks Connect was successfully absorbed by Digital Union, Game Horizon is now being effectively promoted by GamesIndustry International and, obviously, Thinking Digital has just had its second post-Codeworks event, to great acclaim. It was the biggest Thinking Digital we've ever had, with 826 participants in total. Given how stressful that whole process was, it couldn't have worked out much better.

Could you describe what the Thinking Digital business looks like today?

Essentially, we're an events production company. As well as the Thinking Digital Conference (TDC), we produce four TEDEX events in Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Newcastle, and another conference, as a joint venture with Newcastle University, called Return on Innovation. In many ways, all of these events are inter-related. Now that we're in our second year, we've stopped focusing on maintaining our survival and have begun to think about where we're going next. Part of that process is finding ways to make the business more efficient and scalable.

Does that mean potentially moving the location of Thinking Digital outside of the North East?

I sold my house to finance the purchase of Thinking Digital and set up the working capital for the

company. So, naturally, I have considered areas outside of the North East, such as London, as being more profitable and sustainable locations for the conference, moving forward. But, I have a lot of emotional investment in Thinking Digital and really believe in what it stands for here in the North East. So, the intention is to stay here for now and continue working hard to establish the reputation of Thinking Digital, within the context of the North East digital and creative landscape.

What do you feel were the highlights from this year's TDC?

Because the event is an all-keynote conference, it's difficult to choose one standout speaker. Last year, designer Aral Balkan delivered the most downloaded Thinking Digital talk of all time, and he returned again this year with another scorching presentation on the state of privacy on the internet. The Thinking Digital Startup Competition, now in its third year, was excellent as usual. The fact that the two finalists came from Newcastle's Ignite accelerator programme, really shows the quality of digital businesses we are growing here in the North East. Perhaps this year's most fascinating presentations were delivered by Google's Blaise Aguera y Arcas. In his is first presentation, he made a highly convincing argument for why we are very close to developing real artificial intelligence. In his follow-up presentation, he then discussed what the implications to everyday life would be, if this incredible technology became available. He argued that technology will continue to destroy service jobs at an ever-increasing rate and white collar jobs such as those fulfilled by doctors, solicitors and accountants, etc. would begin experiencing real competition from computers. He also highlighted how that technology was increasingly tilting the playing field towards women and that we are already seeing undeniable evidence that women will increasingly lead and manage our future companies and organisations. The next Thinking Digital takes place between the 19th and 21st May 2015 and we're looking forward to making it better than ever.

Last year you collaborated with Newcastle University Business School to launch the Return on Innovation Conference, which I understand is

returning again this year. What was the motivation behind this event?

We wanted to create a conference that would appeal to a broad range of sectors and businesses. Return on innovation is clearly a topic that fits the bill. We also felt by partnering with Newcastle University Business School, we could access a broader range of people. Although TDC's content is intended to appeal to a wide audience, those who attend the conference generally come from the digital sector. This is frustrating but we accept it. Return on Innovation, on the other hand, had attendees from Banking, Oil and Gas, Farming, Bio-Sciences as well as the Public Sector, to name a few industries.

Would you agree that the North East is now a 'major player' in the global tech industry?

I believe that we are the only UK region outside of London that can call itself a 'major player.' Given the relatively small size of the industry here, this achievement is all the more remarkable. So, start-up businesses like Palringo and mid-tier companies such as Scott Logic, Th_nk and Nomad Digital are now national and international success stories. Hewlett Packard employs 1500 people here, Accenture is expanding to 400, HMRC is setting up a new digital services facility and a lot of Virgin Money's innovation and development team are now based in the North East. Although it's difficult to really measure how impactful our industry actually is, the demonstrable success of the region's home grown companies, together with the global firms and organisations that have chosen to establish offices here, gives an indication of its strength.

Is finding talent a problem for companies operating within the region's tech industry?

It's certainly the most commonly quoted issue. Technical web or software developers are always in short supply. IT, digital and technology strategists are also in demand; people who genuinely understand the sector and have credibility and influence at the most senior levels of business. This dearth in talent has led companies like Accenture and Hewlett Packard to launch apprentice programmes, where they are actively seeking younger and less experienced talent, to develop into the type of candidates they need.

Outside of London the North East has more tech start-ups than anywhere else in the UK. Is an abundance of tech start-ups actually a good thing though? Are we not in danger of there being a start-up 'bust' in the near future?

I personally don't feel like there is a start-up bubble. You have to remember that the whole

market and infrastructure for businesses operating within the broad online industry is vastly different now compared to what it was when the dotcom bubble collapsed in 2001. Before 2007, in fact, the internet was very much desktop based, but since the launch of the first iPhone, mobile devices have become ubiquitous. As a result, virtually everyone is now using the internet, not just the geeks. This, of course, was the original vision behind the internet. Consequently, the environment to support businesses operating within this global sector very much exists now.

Dynamo recently had its inaugural conference. How does it fit into the regional technology clusters?

Traditionally, people making computers, writing software, building websites and running web-

based businesses in the North East have always been collectively grouped under the digital sector banner. Yet, because of the abundance of those types of companies and services now, separate verticals have been established to distinguish between different areas. So, whereas entrepreneurs, start-ups and creative agencies are still associated with the digital sector and attend events like Thinking Digital, Game Horizon, Digital Union and Super Mondays, Dynamo is very much a celebration of the North East IT community. It represents businesses such as Hewlett Packard and Accenture, as well as, for example, IT Managers within local councils. Ten years ago, no-one would have anticipated all these separate communities existing in the region, which again shows the remarkable evolution of the North East technology industries.

What technologies do you anticipate being the most 'disruptive' to current business practices over the next few years?

I'm not sure about businesses practices per se, but I'm particularly excited about Spritz, which is a digital product with the potential to significantly change the way people read. Spritz is the brainchild of German entrepreneur Maik Maurer. He has perfected a method of effectively taking digital content and converting it into a 'word-per-minute' feed that enables you to read content faster. So, instead of reading lines of text, you're actually reading one word at time, in quick succession. For a lot of people, there's no inherent joy in spending hours reading news stories on your phone. This will make the whole process much easier, by literally halving the time it takes.

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