

“How to think like a start-up”

Avril Chester, Founder and CEO, Cancer Central

Avril Chester was carving out a comfortable niche as an interim charity CIO when her career was rudely interrupted by breast cancer. Her priorities changed overnight – suddenly nothing was more important than finding a hat shop near to where she lived so that she could find a nice hat before her hair fell out. But she couldn't find one – all her internet searches returned stores in the USA.

This was frustrating – but it sparked in Avril an idea that refused to be ignored. So in January last year she announced on LinkedIn that she was no longer available for interim CIO roles – she was going to build her own start-up social enterprise.

Cancer Central is an online resource that connects people affected by cancer with the businesses and charities that offer the products and services they need – from wigmakers to meals on wheels to insurance to respite care and much, much more. All results are categorised by the searcher's geographical location and cancer type. A digital chat assistant called Ave – yes, Avril's nickname – also finds medical information from the NHS and in time, will connect users with each other, to build communities of mutual advice and support. The success of this fledging Community Interest Company won Avril Entrepreneur of the Year at the 2019 Women in IT awards and HealthTech Innovation Winner of the Year. But perhaps most impressive is that Cancer Central was created entirely pro bono, with over 25,000 hours donated by more than 200 individuals and over 30 organisations.

Avril says the lessons learned along the way can be applied to any organisation, no matter where they are on their journey. She shared these with delegates in an inspiring session called 'How to think like a start-up'.

First, she busted some myths commonly trotted out by organisations: “We must be digital!” “We must do transformation!” “We must do agile!”

“Digital is just a mechanism, it makes things convenient,” she said. “So is agile – it's just a method. Transformation suggests an end state – the very word causes so much angst and expectation. These are all just ways of doing stuff.”

She also warned against allowing yourself, and your organisation, to be limited by the dreaded word “legacy”.

“Legacy should not stop you from innovating. Pretend you have no legacy, no processes, no political shenanigans. You have people with passion, so get them in the room, and do an ideathon workshop. Get everybody to leave their job roles at the door, then start with a blank piece of paper, with your cause in the centre, and think like a start-up. Break the mould, see what comes up. Because when they think fresh, people forget about legacy.”

She also refused to accept that lack of funding was an excuse for not innovating. “Start-ups still have to argue for funding too. We're all starting from the same place, we just have different hurdles.”

All charities have plenty of people in their networks who want to help them, Chester said, and should leverage that much more than they currently do.

She concluded by challenging charities to hold “cominovation” events – communities of innovators who come together to brainstorm new ideas or develop prototypes to see if ideas can work. “Cancer Central is proof that this model works,” she said.

Avril’s vision is to eventually expand Cancer Central internationally and, in time, beyond cancer to build platforms for other health conditions such as mental health, dementia and stroke.