

Karen Wilkinson

Welcome to Age Innovators the series from the Healthy Ageing Challenge Community of Practice in which we spotlight pioneering innovations in longevity. We asked leading researchers and innovators what inspired their work and how it has the potential to impact people's lives. I'm Karen Wilkinson from Innovate UK KTN and in this episode, Julia Glenn, Design Innovation Lead from the Innovate UK Healthy Ageing Challenge talks to Jon Hymus, Managing Director of Innerva. Innerva are developing inclusive exercise equipment that older adults and people living with long term conditions really want to use. Helping more people adopt exercise into their lives.

Julia Glenn

Hello, I'm Julia and I'm the Design Innovation lead on the Healthy Ageing Challenge, and I have the pleasure today of introducing Jon Hymus, Managing Director of Innerva. And I'm so looking forward to this podcast because today we're going to really probe an amazing proper engineering company that has done some extraordinary co-design work to develop a really amazing service for older adults to get some exercise in a very inclusive ways. So Jon without further ado, let me start with the questions. So, Jon I mean, obviously you and I have worked together for a while, so I kind of know what Innerva is all about. But did you want to start a bit about telling us about some of your amazing chair based products and the services that you've kind of extended from there and \_ perhaps a bit about what inspired you to start?

Jon Hymus

Yeah, no problem at all. Hi Julia. And yeah, so I'm Jon Hymus, I'm the managing director of Innerva and Innerva are a UK designer and manufacturer of power assisted exercise and wellbeing equipment and solutions. We're based in Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, and our products really service several markets. The over 65s, the active ageing market, people living with disabilities, poor mobility, long term health conditions and rehabilitation kind of therapy. You may not have heard of power assisted exercise before. It's a really interesting concept. It's in essence, it's very similar to how an electric cycle works actually. So if you have really limited sort of capacity, then effectively you can get on the equipment and say for example, if you've had a stroke and a part of your body isn't particularly mobile, it'll move you. And actually as you then sort of rehabilitate or improve or can or have a slightly better levels of ability and you can work isokinetically. That's a, that's a sort of an interesting way which effectively is a form of strength training that maximises your strength, at a sort of constant speed. We've been in existence for sort of over 30 years. We originally started as a provider of vanity products, so toning tables and what have you. But then a number of years ago there was, something happened to the founder, a gentleman called Howard Blackburn. And in essence what had happened was his grandfather had gone into a care home and he'd gone from being really, really active to having everything brought to him and not really moving around. And unfortunately, sort of within 12 months he passed away, which was really sad. And Howard kind of knew that with his engineering background and skills and the products that he produced it, could he could certainly re-engineer something to effectively, you know, give him an improved level of activity that would have probably extended his life overall. And so that's where really sort of the products that we now produce, the power assisted exercise products sort of came from and, you know, from sort of our perspective, it's something that we have as a bit of a mission from what we try and actually sort of do, so we have got deployments all

across the world. We export globally with a strong presence in Scandinavia. In the UK, we've probably got installations in sort of 150 facilities and that's in the range of different sort of markets. That's from local authority, leisure through to MS therapy centres, rehabilitation centres, hospitals, care homes on a whole range of sort of things in between. We really got involved with this sort of project for a couple of reasons really. Being a real engineering based sort of organisation. Our products needed digitisation and needed support around that sort of digitisation sort of side of things. Our clients are asking us to sort of be able to capture data and information and so this is really allowing us to build on the foundations of what we kind of do and improve them and gather data. And actually generally improved the overall sort of user experience. So it's a whole sort of combination of things that give us this platform to sort of work upwards and then introduce things like gamification or the other sort of buzz words that come around with technology.

Julia Glenn

And I think what's absolutely fascinating about this inclusive exercise programme and the equipment that helps everyone get more active is the way that you've been able to deploy to so many different kind of use cases and user scenarios. So I suppose that speaks a bit to your vision of the future for Innerva doesn't it, because you're working with local authorities. You kind of got some export activity taking shape and I know that you work with quite kind of famous brands that we associate, as they say, with the ageing population in the UK. So I think kind of your co-design journey has been so diverse and the way that you've kind of been able to roll out your product and appeal to your customer kind of speaks a bit about your vision and mission, doesn't it? So do you want to tell us more about your vision for Innerva and your amazing equipment?

Jon Hymus

Yeah, Thanks, Julia. So we really, really want to revolutionise the active and healthy ageing sort of space and provide that for, you know, those older people in the UK who aren't serviced by traditional and normal forms of exercise, or sorts of activity. We talk in Innerva about the five elements of healthy ageing. So that's strength, cardiovascular, flexibility, balance, and then that social and psychological kind of wellbeing base, which is a really major kind of part what we kind of do. Yeah, and this project has sort of helped us or will help us in a number of kind of ways really. And, you know, primarily it's that baselining or improvement of technology, but it's also about trying to understand what the blockers are from actually putting our solution out there. And I'm at some sort of two fronts you know, we have clients that we sell to who provide the services, but it's then also understanding the user experience. And so, you know, a major part of what we're doing is testing in a live environment. We've sort of got five or six trial sites where we're going to, we've either launched or we're launching iterations of our products. And getting that feedback and sort of, you know, working with our partners to go off and gather the information and the information that we need to continuously improve and actually test what it is that we've actually sort of put into place. So, you know, it's a real mission for us. Everybody involved in the organisation is absolutely passionate about that, you know, and that's sort of, you know, one of the things that struck me about Innerva is, is that sort of, you know, that's a real core kind of piece. We've been talking recently about adjusting our actual organisational mission and vision and you know, there's going to be definitely a piece in there about having an objective to get millions of people around the world more active and more healthy.

Julia Glenn

Yeah, So you're definitely on a mission to kind of revolutionise activity amongst older people isn't it? What is interesting I think is how you've been able to overcome some of those barriers because many people and it's not just older people is it, but many people feel kind of nervous or bashful about approaching exercise or new experiences. But I suppose part of your methodology and part of your research has been to kind of overcome some of those barriers hasn't it, and make people want to jump into a chair? Make people want to engage and maybe add little mini community. Go on the chairs and work together or go into the local leisure centre and have a chair based experience. So I suppose it'd be interesting to hear more about some of those kind of research methodologies that set you apart in terms of the way that you have been able to get users to engage, to have a kind of compelling service that people want to consume. I think that would be really interesting for other innovators to hear about.

Jon Hymus

Yeah, it's the testing piece that I think is really, really important. And, you know, I referenced before about the five elements of healthy ageing and certainly, you know, one of the most important pieces is this sort of social wellbeing and, you know, our circuit equipment when it's deployed in say a leisure setting, that would usually be a larger amount of equipment, is designed in the circuit so that, you know, users can interact and talk to each other and it's giving people a reason to sort of attend and do something and sort of socialise. You know loneliness is a real challenge in society, especially for sort of older people. And, you know, if there's a reason for them to attend, which hopefully our solution provides, they'll probably leave their house for at least once a week. And some of the research that we've done shows that they often travel, come more often than that. They'll actively travel, they'll hopefully interact with members of the community on the way. They'll certainly interact with people when they arrive and have a cup of coffee and sort of get involved. And so, yeah, that's a real sort of positive and there's definitely a big piece there around that kind of sort of social well-being, you know, kind of piece. Now we've also then gone out and been speaking to these sorts of users. So part of the process was engaging with user groups to sort of understand firstly what prevents them from sort of undertaking activity or socialising or what have you, you know, what are the reasons that they wouldn't necessarily attend a traditional gym? Now only about 15% of the population use gyms sort of proactively, so there's whole 85% that aren't. We've also then gone out and spoken to operators and providers of services to understand what the challenge is there and some of the things then we've been able to integrate into the design. So an example of that would be the active wellbeing brand that has come up as a consequence. Yeah, what we were sort of picking up is that, some yeah, this is a relatively new concept is absolutely not a gym, so what do you call it? You know, and so we've helped, we now help operators to sort of be able to sort of overcome that providing effectively a brand in a box which then, you know, tells them how they operate, what they need to and provides all of the marketing and so the design stuff basically around that. It's also enabled us to sort of build things like accessible options into the equipment and then begin to work and think about how we're going to develop this technology in an inclusive kind of way, but at the same time doesn't sit to necessarily a screen in front of somebody's face, which then prevents them from speaking to of the other people and get that sort of social wellbeing. So it's been really, really helpful and useless. Useless, useful for the number of fronts and actually we can see some

real tangible benefits in terms of how that's iterating into our co-design and the designs of the products.

Julia Glenn

Yeah, it really is. With this project, I think it really is a really good example of how working in the community and really, really taking the co-design piece seriously and really wanting to understand the issues that prevent people from changing or prevent people from adopting sort of long term changes in behaviour. It's that co-design piece that you've been able to kind of really successfully, kind of get under your belts and benefit from. So I think that your co-design journey is really interesting I'm glad you've been able to kind of talk us through that a bit in terms of the different groups that you've been working with, and I suppose that takes me to my next question about your co-design journey, because you've always had an amazing engineering prowess as a company. So I think it's also really interesting for other innovators who kind of want to pivot towards a slightly different service or a different way of serving the community.

So I think it's really interesting to kind of hear about how that co-design journey has helped you to do that. But also you talked about community and how you can see people coming together, having a cup of tea arranged in a circle. So you're using space, place very intelligently so people can kind of have a convivial time. Tell us a bit more about some of the tangible changes that you've seen in the communities and individuals who are using the Innerva suite of products and also I suppose absolutely pertinent question of the moment is how you see those benefits playing out in terms of longer term health care issues, some of the real thorny issues that government and other public sector players and all of us society at large have to think about and have to solve in terms of long term health benefits and in society. So it would be brilliant if you could talk us a bit through some of the changes you've seen and what you think those benefits longer term will be.

Jon Hymus

It's really clear that as a society we're ageing, you know, Western society is getting older, that there's an increase in older people. We're less healthy as a society because of inactivity and our solution provides something that that segment of society wants to undertake it. It gives them a reason to sort of attend and exercise and become more active both socially and physically. And you know, what that then leads to is, is ultimately a reduce in health care spend, because if people are moving, they're more active, they're more psychologically and socially engaged, they feel better. The demand on health care services should reduce. And, you know, that's \_ a really interesting piece. You know, one of the some of the stuff we're beginning to work out, to look at is around social value and return on social, and return on investment. Social return on investment, sorry, which is some of the things that we're beginning to try to measure and actually will be measured as part of this kind of process. So, you know anything that we can do to help people remain independent and active is going to have a benefit and it needs much to be more about prevention than, \_ than sort of giving people pills.

And \_ we are absolutely seeing that and seeing that all solution provides this \_ and \_ is absolutely suited to that marketplace and that's why it's successful.

Julia Glenn

And it's, I've really loved learning about all of the use cases where people are actually benefiting from having more independence because they're actively wanting to leave the home and use an Innerva chair. So it's kind of people become more autonomous, don't they, because they want to enjoy this service. So really, really interesting how you've been able to kind of galvanise the community to do that. And so I think something that we must get on because I know that you have a wealth of stories in your cabinet, as it were, in terms of some of those personal case studies and success stories. I remember Howard, as you've mentioned, the founder telling me about this lovely lady who used an Innerva chair and she was worried that she was going to kind of mess up her hair. And tell us a bit more about some of those individual stories that really bring this wonderful product and service to life. So give us some insights on that.

Jon Hymus

That's, I mean, that story in itself is a good example about how we listen to our users and, you know, that particular example was the equipment used to be very much sort of laid down. And the lady in question on that particular story was worried that by laying down it would mess her hair up. So actually then by rotating it through 90 degrees to create a seated range, you address that kind of issue. But there are so many stories. And certainly one of the reasons that I joined the business is because you'll go into an Innerva suite and I've never experienced it before, people would proactively come up to you and tell you that that this solution had changed their lives. And this wasn't actually us, you know, proactively going and getting that kind of feedback. It was them coming up to us and saying, I've got to tell you this, this is amazing. It's absolutely impacted on me so dramatically and changed my life. And, you know, there were other great stories. So to look inside that we went to a centre recently and a lady said that we'd made her kitchen bigger and we were like, what on earth does she mean? And what she actually meant by coming by attending, her balance and flexibility had increased to such a degree that she can reach a Christmas cake up on the top shelf. And so therefore her kitchen had actually increased in size. And what she meant she could use it far better because she was more, more active. Another great example to do with hair was a lady who said that previously she hadn't been able to actually brush her hair or get a bra on or undo a bra or what have you. But because of the flexible, improvements and flexibility, she now was able to brush her hair at the back and was able to get a bra on without having to twist it round. So, you know, there were lots of these simple things. But to people that's really, really important - this day to day kind of activity. And when we're younger, we don't appreciate that. But as we age, you know, actually it can be, you know, quite a difficult kind of experience. And so we constantly hear things around this. One of the most powerful things that we've done recently is, we've recently undertaken a survey across eight of the facilities in the UK surveying about 800 people. And one of the questions we asked was around NPS Net Promoter Scores and if you know anything about Net Promoter Scores, a good score in the UK for something like technologies is in the 30s. It can range from -100 up to +100. Someone like Amazon have 44, energy companies have -10. So bit controversial there. But actually the, all of the sites that we took the net promoter score for scored over 70. Now that's just unheard of but what really shows the advocacy for the for the solution and what the guys working with this solution data is really brilliant.

Julia Glenn

Yeah, no that's brilliant. There's wonderful stories and it's those stories, isn't it that want you keep on innovating because they're so inspiring and giving people more mobility, giving people kind of you know, reason to get up and get on a bus. It's fantastic. So in the interest of time I'm going to kind of move on to the last question, sadly, Jon but I know that you've recently been to Norway and we don't necessarily want to hear about the sauna as etc., etc., but it would be wonderful to hear a bit more about what that trip kind of might be shaping for Innerva and a bit more about what's on the horizon. It would be really exciting if you could tell us a bit about that.

Jon Hymus

Yeah, the Norwegians are really, really interesting. They they've been really successful. They've taken yeah, we always look to Scandinavia, don't we as being sort of you know, ahead of the curve and they've absolutely taken our solution and embraced it. They're in sort of 60 facilities across Norway. They're actually the second largest wellbeing kind of provider in the whole of Norway in terms of the numbers of sites. And they're really, really proactive and they've absolutely, absolutely understood and embraced what it is that we're trying to do and made it live and breathe. And so they're a really good example of that. And what they've been really clever about doing it's how they think. They sort of describe that. We work really closely with them in terms of what their needs and their wants are. And certainly simplicity is a really, really important piece, which actually is when you're exporting and language can sometimes be a \_ difficulty you know, the simpler it is, the better So from, from our perspective, I think everything that we're going to be doing is going to be user appropriate. You know, that's one of the big sort of major pieces that we take out of this. I think far too often in technology or at \_ in general sort of design, designers will maybe make things that they like and they forget about what that kind of market needs or wants. And so, you know, certainly from our point of view, digitisation is certainly on there. You know, they're keen around that as well. Our clients want to know, these are the people we sell to, want to know that information, may be not so much for the older people at the moment, but as we become older, actually we're going to be much more comfortable with technology. So the foundations that we're building will allow us in the future to develop that and actually introduce things that are very much based around fun or gamification or, you know, a whole range of different things. You know, we've got a number of projects that we're working on at the moment sort of behind the scenes for further iterations around health, around the digital kind of journey and what other things we can do, and \_ without giving away too much, I think there's an exciting future planned.

Julia Glenn

Yes, fantastic. Well, I've had a few conversations with Howard and know a bit of insights about what you're doing, and I can promise everyone listening that it is super exciting. So, Jon it's been such a pleasure and it's been a pleasure to kind of work alongside you and it's been a privilege to kind of talk to you today and hear about that amazing kind of fluidity of amazing engineering and good user based service and so, thank you so much for your time. It's as I say, it's been a pleasure. Thank you, Jon.

Jon Hymus

No problem. Thanks and great to talk.

Karen Wilkinson

Thanks for joining Age Innovators and watch out for more episodes. This series is brought to you by the Healthy Ageing Challenge Community of Practice hosted by Innovate UK.