

Building Mobile and Cloud Hosted Products, Social Enterprise Dimagi, Inc. is focused on building Open Source Software for Underserved Communities Everywhere

Technology

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Jonathan Jackson
CEO

BIO:

Jonathan Jackson is an entrepreneur and innovator with extensive health technology expertise in both developed and developing countries. He leads several efforts to build software engineering capacity in low-resource countries through partnerships and collaboration.

During his master's work, Jonathan was awarded a Department of Homeland Security Fellowship at MIT and the Brigham and Women's Hospital, where he developed neural network informatics software for cancer classification. While completing his degree, he also led the technical development as founder and CTO of Infinidex, an award winning contact search management startup.

Since co-founding Dimagi, Jonathan has overseen the development of multiple innovative health projects, including SmartCare, the National HIV medical record systems in Zambia and CommCare, a mobile phone based system for community health-care workers. From 2006, he has led Dimagi's research on patient-centered technologies and care coordination in the United States with grant funding from the NIH.

Jonathan earned bachelors and masters degrees in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Jonathan also co-founded Cogito Health, a pioneering company using speech analytics for depression management, and Doctor Kares Hospital, a low-cost orthopedic surgical hospital in New Delhi. He is also a visiting scientist at Brigham and Women's Hospital Decision Systems Group, and a lecturer at the Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology.

About Dimagi, Inc.:

We deliver open and innovative technology to help underserved communities everywhere

It is no secret that the distribution of wealth in the world is highly unequal. Billions around the globe do not have access to basic food, health, and education resources that most people in the developed world take for granted.

At Dimagi, we believe that many of the world's problems can be assuaged with low-cost technological solutions. Whether it is incentivizing people in Bangladesh to access educational materials in return for free airtime or enabling a patient in Zambia to carry her entire medical history in her

pocket, our goal is to utilize modern technology to improve overall quality of life around the globe.

The developing world stands to massively benefit from the technological advances that have been made in recent years, and Dimagi wants to bring those benefits to fruition.

**Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine**

CEOCFO: Mr. Jackson, would you tell us the concept for Dimagi?

Mr. Jackson: We are a social enterprise that focuses on building open source software for underserved communities everywhere.

CEOCFO: Would you tell us a little bit about the underserved market? Who are you reaching, or who would you like to reach?

Mr. Jackson: In the U.S., it might be the homeless population or those dealing with psychosocial issues. Internationally, it can be individuals anywhere, residing in very rural areas to urban slums. Often, we work with those facing difficult economic circumstances and some may be living on less than a dollar a day. Our software is also designed to help those healthcare workers giving care in low-resource settings.

CEOCFO: What was the impetuous for the company?

Mr. Jackson: We founded the company in 2002 out of MIT and Harvard. The idea was sparked by a conference we attended which introduced a few public health individuals to some relatively simple technologies being done at the MIT Media Lab. People

were in awe of what some of these innovations could do, and we thought they were really not that tough to operate and create from a technology standpoint. So it really created a spark in our minds that there was a big opportunity to bring technology to the public health sector.

CEO CFO: How are you doing so far?

Mr. Jackson: Prior to 2008, we were basically a custom software-consulting firm. Any project that had a technology need we would bring our expertise in software development and design to that project. Then in 2008, we realized that we needed to shift to a more product-focused approach to maximize our impact. Since 2009, in addition to our open source consulting, we have been building mobile and cloud hosted products. Our products have been well received so far and we support mobile workers in many different fields.

CEO CFO: Who is using your services and how are you selling them?

Mr. Jackson: Our clients range from large and mid-sized entities and we implement both for nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Generally, these organizations are responsible for deploying a mobile worker program and buy our software services to support that project or program. We do have other contracts directly with some major donors, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID, but most of our contracts are with implementing organizations buying our technology to support their programs.

CEO CFO: What are the challenges in creating programs for the population you are focusing on?

Mr. Jackson: They are numerous. We face the typical challenges seen in software related design and scalability and these are not very different between low- and high-resource settings. But then we also encounter design constraints that are fairly unique. For example, you cannot design your solution assuming that there is Internet connectivity or power available. Such issues naturally create a lot of interesting design challenges that in-

evitably affect how we create software. For example, if a client wants to enable a feature that must be available 24/7, that product will require a very expensive deployment solution because it means our field managers would have to deploy a satellite with internet and battery backup generators. However, we have been doing this for long enough that we know how to have very refined methods that allow us to build a feature that can be available for 90% of the time for a only a fraction of the cost. Building a product for low-resource setting also requires a lot of work that would not be necessary if we were building a solution purely for the U.S. For example, in our target environment we do a lot of work that allows us to service a robust offline mobile application until a user can access Internet connectivity. This approach has enabled us to meet the needs of our target customers quite well.

“We are a social enterprise that focuses on building open source software for underserved communities everywhere.”- Jonathan Jackson

CEO CFO: Do many of the people that would benefit from your services know that you exist?

Mr. Jackson: We actually have no marketing budget. But, we have very high referrals rates and try to maintain great relationships with our partners and clients. We do occasionally reach out to some organizations if we hear they are seeking software solutions for their projects. Once we hear about a project, we are fairly successful in terms of engaging with them if our technology is appropriate for that project. But it could be the case that there are a lot of projects we are not hearing about in part because of our limited marketing outreach.

CEO CFO: Are there many or any other companies that focus in the same area as you do?

Mr. Jackson: Very few, if any, in the same way. There are other open source software platforms out there and there are other for-profit proprietary platforms. But our open source product approach is fairly unique. All

of our software is open source and that creates a very unique value proposition, because governments and partners can have the confidence that if they want to take it over and host it themselves they can. Alternatively, if they are happy with Dimagi and think that we provide a lower total cost of ownership, they can stay with us.

There are other projects in the field that are purely open source, but these generally don't provide hosting options and that creates a barrier for users facing resource constraints. Or, in the proprietary case, you have to go with a vendor. Our approach has been very successful and the way we have deployed that type of approach is, I would say, fairly unique.

CEO CFO: Are you typically working with people that are implementing the service for the first time, or are you replacing something that they already have?

Mr. Jackson: They typically already have a paper-based process and are seeking to shift to an electronic or mobile process. We are often the first to deploy technology for a particular project. Although we have had projects in which our partners choose to migrate to our software and use our tools to go operational with their mobile workers.

CEO CFO: What was one of your more difficult projects to implement and how did you figure it out?

Mr. Jackson: That is a great question! I will tell you we have had plenty of tough projects that have not ended well. We have overcome many hurdles, but I think a lot of our more difficult projects arose when a client's priority was not aligned with working directly with the mobile health workers, but rather emphasized data or reporting needs. When that has been the case, it has created a tough challenge for us, because if you jump to the data and reports first without creating value for the mobile workers, you can lose out on the main benefits from our product. We are really passionate about demonstrating the value to the mobile worker first, and sub-

sequently building value from the data and reporting. And when we have had to switch those two around based on the client priority, it really creates a struggle for us in the process. Sometimes, frankly, we just cannot create enough value because we do not trust the data. In those cases, we warn the client not to trust the data, because the mobile workers are not really engaged in the program.

CEOCFO: You have opened an office in South Africa. Why there?

Mr. Jackson: We opened the office at the beginning of last year in South Africa, and this was really because we saw a growing market opportunity in Africa and also because we had an amazing partnership with the current country director. We actually also opened an office in Mozambique earlier this year and are opening another one in Senegal right now.

CEOCFO: What do you look for in your people, over and above technical skills? I would suspect there are a lot of people skills involved.

Mr. Jackson: We have a pretty rigorous recruiting process, both for our field staff and our engineering staff. We look for a variety of factors, but the biggest is really the desire to have an impact. We are a social enterprise B-corporation, and so impact is very important to us. On most of our cor-

porate slides and discussions you will find a line: “We care about impact, team satisfaction, and profit—in that order.” It is really important that the employees all have the same sense of priority. For them it is really their impact, their satisfaction, and their pay. That is something that we are very upfront about very early on in the recruiting process, and it has allowed us to find a very passionate workforce that is doing amazing work. Also, our technical team is among the best engineers we can find; these are people who come from some of the biggest organizations and have turned down offers at highly competitive company to work for less at Dimagi. People are really here because they want to be, and they are here because they believe in the impact of our work. Since they could be making more money elsewhere, we know we are doing a good job of maintaining team satisfaction; otherwise, they would just quit. So there is sort of this automatic measurement of whether we are fulfilling our mission. Everybody would just quit and go make more money if they did not believe in either our impact or enjoy our company culture.

CEOCFO: Why should investors and people in the business community be paying attention to Dimagi, Inc. today?

Mr. Jackson: As a company, we are very excited to be in our position. We have done a great job of building up our product lines around community health workers. We are moving into agriculture and education, so there are a lot of opportunities to partner with us in emerging markets. We also think we can convince donors and clients we work with to engage us in more of a “pay for value” model. We think that our software has still unrealized benefits, and we would be more than happy to go at risk to achieve those benefits as long as our clients were putting in sufficient resources to their projects. It would be a lot of fun to compete in that type of market.

CEOCFO: Final thoughts?

Mr. Jackson: If you were looking to figure out how to incorporate impact into your business model, I think the work we have done so far is exemplary in terms of how we balance impact with profit. It is always important to go back to the fact that we are mission-driven company. If you asked any of our team members “What is the most important thing to you?” I think they would all answer that they joined Dimagi in order to make an impact on global health and we are all excited to achieve that goal together.



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