

S3, E5_ Starting Up With Be My Eyes

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SPEAKERS

Molly Lazarus, AI, Hans J rgen Wiberg, Team

M Molly Lazarus 00:01

Welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability innovation podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation or CPARF. I'm your host, Molly Lazarus, and in this season, we're excited to bring you cutting-edge stories and insights on research, technology, and innovation for people with CP and other disabilities. This is the first episode of our "Starting Up" series where you'll hear from established startups and learn how they got where they are today.

M Molly Lazarus 00:33

But before we introduce you to today's guest, I'd like to take a moment to tell you about three for CP, CPARF's grassroot fundraising initiative for cerebral palsy research and disability innovation. Whether you level up a read-a-thon, a sip- and-paint event, a comedy show or something else that you love, 3forCP gives you the chance to make a difference in your own signature way. Head to 3forCP.org to get started, that's the number 3, f, o r, c, p, dot, O, R, G.

M Molly Lazarus 01:06

And now I'm thrilled to welcome Hans J rgen Wiberg of the company, Be My Eyes. Be My Eyes connects blind and low-vision users who want sighted assistance with volunteers and companies anywhere in the world through live video and artificial intelligence. Thank you so much for joining me, Hans.

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 01:25

Yes, I am from Denmark, and I am 60 years old now, and I am almost blind, and I have been low vision for many, many years, but it has progressed so now I am almost blind, and I'm the founder of Be My Eyes, and I have been working for the Danish Blind Federation for many years, and have had other jobs as well. So, yeah.

M Molly Lazarus 01:51

Amazing. Well, we're very excited to have you joining us. So, now walk me through where you were before you founded Be My Eyes, and kind of what led up to that moment?

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 02:02

Well, I'm not a tech person myself, but I was working for the Danish blind Federation as a consultant, and my job was to visit blind and new members of the organizations and introduce them to audio books and Braille and the meetings we are hosting at the Federation, and so on. So as at the time low vision person, I really got to know a lot of totally blind persons, and also people who were very new to being low vision and so on. So I think I was the person who learned the most, even though I was supposed to teach the other ones. And at some point way back in 2012, I met a young guy who was telling me about using FaceTime with his family and friends when he needed to see something and he was alone. And then he said, but I always had to think about who to call.

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 03:03

And then I was thinking, Oh, maybe we can make a group you can call. And that was kind of the starting point. And then I went back home, and I asked my daughter to make a FaceTime call with me. And then I remember, I closed my eyes, and then I walked out of the house, and then I said to her, now you have to guide me around the house and back into the house. And she did exactly that. And I realized, whoa, this is actually possible to guide a blind person remotely. And I remember very clearly when I was entering the house, and I said to my daughter, please make sure I put my hand right on the door handle. And she was able to do that. And I was kind of whoa, this actually works. And that was kind of the starting point of Be My Eyes. I still had no idea how to make an app or anything. So I went to a Startup Weekend in Denmark, where I presented this idea, and I was lucky to find some people who also thought it was a interesting idea to work on. So that's how we got started.

M Molly Lazarus 04:15

I love it, you know, I actually had a similar story. I started some technology that I didn't know how to build, and went to a Startup Weekend and found my cofounder. So it's so interesting that that I have a parallel in that and how helpful the community of Startup Weekend can be to finding cofounders. So what happened after that weekend? How did it all start gaining momentum?

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 04:37

Well, at the weekend, we did win a prize as the most innovative idea, and we were super excited about it. We didn't win the main prize because we had no idea how to make this into a business. But we went back home, and then the group and I, we started to have weekly or

every other week. Had a soon call and simply talking about, how do we take it from here? And we decided to try to narrow it down a little bit and then start writing some application to some of the foundations in Denmark who would be likely of supporting such an initiative. We spent more than a year raising the first money, and we managed to raise \$300,000 and that was basically day one in our business, because then we could start hiring developers who actually knew how to make an app. And also we had to spend some time finding developers who knew about making an app accessible for blind people. I mean, back in 2013, there were other apps for blind people, but not that many, and not many in Denmark, at least, so we had to find some developers who were willing to spend time on accessibility as a term, and learn how to do that. So that was super interesting, but also something that took some time.

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Molly Lazarus 06:07

Yeah, I can imagine. And how many of those developers continued on with you after that initial first couple years? I imagine it's hard to find accessible developers.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 06:15

Yeah, but in the beginning we were, we had some super young one who got acquired by other companies and so on. So we don't have any of the very first developers, but some of the people we have now have been with us for quite some years.

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Molly Lazarus 06:32

Yeah, and you guys have been around for over a decade, so you've definitely had longevity. But I kind of want to come back to the beginning where, like this is a big idea, and to know that there will be a volunteer available for the blind person when they need it is a large assumption, which turned out to be quite a correct assumption. But I'm curious, how did you go about, in the beginning, building a volunteer base such that they would be available and ready for the blind user to access.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 07:01

It was a major concern, because when I asked my friends and family, they said, Oh yes, I want to be a volunteer, but they are my friends and family, so of course, they want to make me happy. So in the first version of Be My Eyes, we had a gamification element where you could earn some points, when you have been helping someone, then you would get some point, and then you could level up from first volunteer to professional volunteer, or whatever we have some levels you could clean up simply because we said, we better make whatever we can to kind of engage the volunteers in being volunteers, and then, as you can see now on our website, we have more than 7 million volunteers. So after a few updates, we simply removed this point system, because we very soon got totally overwhelmed with volunteers. So it was not meaningful to have this point system, because just to get a call was difficult as a volunteer.

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Molly Lazarus 08:06

Molly Lazarus 08:00

Believe it or not, I remember that because I remember the moment that I learned about it was probably, like, eight years ago, and I signed up as a volunteer, and I remember being like, Oh, I'm ready to take calls. And I think I got, like, two so kind of, how did you get that many volunteers, though? Was it marketing? Was it media? Like, what kind of pushed you over the edge in terms of, like, having enough?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 08:32

The thing is that people want to help, and at the time, when we launched the app in 2015 there wasn't that many ways you could be a volunteer without going to a specific place every Wednesday and do something, or maybe once a month or sign up to do something, but you had to kind of be there physically. With Be My Eyes, you could just download this app. I mean, you can stay on your couch and do something good, and I think that kind of intrigued a lot of people, and this is totally amazing. We when we launched, within 24 hours, we had 1000 blind people signed up and 10,000 volunteers, and we had not done any marketing as such. We managed to get into the national news here in Denmark, but very soon we were picked up by tech sites products hunt and other tech sites in the US. And this story about this little, cute Danish startup helping the blind people spread like wildfire. And I and my CEO, we were giving like 2, 3, 4, interviews a day for two months, completely madness, but also kind of, I mean, what any startup dreams about having that much publicity? And that was all over the world. I was interviewed to Russian radio and Japanese television. I don't know what

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Molly Lazarus 10:07

Incredible.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 10:07

It was absolutely amazing. So till this day, we have not spent any money on marketing. And you can use Be My Eyes in any country except the North Korea, a few more. But we Be My Eyes is available. You can get online, and we have 185 different languages. We can connect people in that many different languages where we have volunteers, and we can only do that because the volunteers has helped us spread the word on X or Twitter, as it was named at the time, and Facebook and LinkedIn and all kind of social media. Mastodon was not even invented at the time, but that's a great place for black people, by the way. So yeah.

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Molly Lazarus 10:53

Oh, interesting. I didn't know that. So that sounds like so much of a Cinderella story. And to have that many users so quickly would be both exciting and probably terrifying, given that, you know, it could break. Did you kind of have those issues in the early days, or was it all just dreamy?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 11:12

I clearly remember the developer who was in charge of the servers, he called me and said, We are not ready for this. And I said, that's your problem, and then I hang up. But we had to upgrade the systems, I think, three times within the first few weeks. So it was really on the edge of what we could handle, but we managed to do it. And the good thing is that when you have built the system the right way, it's quite easy to spin up a few more computers in a server park somewhere, so we managed to do that.

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Molly Lazarus 11:45

That's amazing. I there's a lot of different ways I could have gone, and it sounded like it worked out pretty well. So when you started, you were a nonprofit. Am I remembering that correctly?

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Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 11:57

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's also kind of an interesting story, because we were pretty proud of being a nonprofit, and basically we think we should be a nonprofit, and we raised the first 300,000 as a nonprofit, and then when we developed and we launched, a little sooner than we thought, we could see the end of the money, and then we did reach out to the foundations again, and said, Can you extend us a little bit? But that was not possible. Some of them are simply not allowed to give money to run a service. They can give money to development and new ideas and all that. But when you have a company and a service and you just need an office and a few developers to maintain and all that, that was really difficult for us to raise money. Maybe we were not good enough at it, I don't know, but we could see it was really difficult. And then the foreign minister in Denmark, they have kind of a program where they invite small, interesting startups for Silicon Valley, and we were one of them who were invited. And we got in contact with some Danish, American investors, and some of them said, Oh, if you were a for profit, we would love to support you or to invest in you. So we, after reaching out to a number of organizations and foundations and so on, we simply decided to flip the company to a for profit and say yes to those investors.

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Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 13:26

And then we also had to invent a business plan. Why do you have investors? They want to see a business plan for good reason. So when we had also decided, and this is super, super important, we decided on the Startup Weekend that Be My Eyes should be a free service, simply because it is volunteers who are doing most of the work, and also because we simply believe that eyesight should be free. You should not pay to see something. And also, we could see that, and this was a major reason. 90% of the blind people in this world, they live in the Global South, as we call it. And we also, we looked at the numbers of smartphones, and we could see that number is growing rapidly, also in the continent of Africa and so on. But we also realized, yeah, maybe you have a smartphone, but we cannot charge any blind person in Africa or very few at least \$10 a month for anything. So we simply decided that it should be a free service. And I'm proud to say that our investors has never questioned that. So that's just amazing that they went along with that, also when there was not that many money in the bank. So I'm super proud of that.

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Molly Lazarus 14:47

That's amazing. And so, you know, you have to ask the question, since you are now a for profit, how did you go about making money? And you've been doing this for a long time, so there must have been some different strategies that you tried, and maybe some that were more successful than others.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 15:03

Yes, what we did was actually one of my colleagues went to CSUN, which is one of the biggest blindness related conferences in California, and he met up with Microsoft, and the Microsoft was talking about how frustrating it was when a blind person called their call centers, because the agent would ask, okay, what's on the screen now? How can I help you? And when you're blind, you can't see the screen, and the reason why you're calling is most likely because your screen reader has stopped working, or something like that.

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Molly Lazarus 15:38

Mmm.

H

Hans J rgen Wiberg 15:39

And that was super frustrating for the agents and also for the customer, of course. And then my colleague said, Oh, maybe we can help you with that, because we have this be my eyes where you are using your phone, and you can point your phone at the screen. And then if we can connect the agent to the camera on the phone, then they can see the screen. And then, together with Microsoft, we developed what we now call a service directory, where you as a blind person, you can open the Be My Eyes app, and you can go into service directory and find companies like Microsoft, Google, Spotify, LinkedIn, Proctor and Gamble and a number of other companies. And then you can place a call to their agents, and then they know it's a blind person. So if we go back to Microsoft, when you request help from Microsoft via Be My Eyes, then we can route the calls to, I think, 10 or 15 specific agents that get all the calls from Be My Eyes. I mean, some of the Microsoft agent has had more than 10,000 calls from Be My Eyes, so they know before you call them. They know where to go to ask them, and this means that these agents can handle the calls from their blind users twice as fast as normal, because they know what a screen reader is. They know how to explain. They know how to do all kinds of things blindness related with your PC. So it's also, it's not only Microsoft doing the right thing, it's also good business, simply because they can save minutes and have more satisfaction with their blind customers. And on top of that, maybe to jump a little bit, but we have also added AI into that, so you can choose if you want to use the AI to have your Microsoft question answered, or you want to talk to an agent. Surprisingly enough, our users really love to use the AI because they get a written answer, they get like a five step thing to go through, and they can go back and see, okay, what was step number four? Because you always forget what step number four was. So this helps our users do things on their own and in their own speed. So to speak,

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Molly Lazarus 17:58

so interesting. And that kind of brings me to my second question, which is, I imagine having been around for so many years, there's been so many shifts and change in the ways people work and the ways people use Be My Eyes. Would love to kind of learn in your perspective those shifts, and kind of understand the AI strategy moving forward, because I know that you've been working really closely, I believe, with the open AI team, to kind of think about the next generation of what this could do for blind users.

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Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 18:29

Yeah, one more thing about I never got to say how we make money on this.

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Molly Lazarus 18:35

Yes, please tell us that.

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Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 18:38

But Microsoft and the other companies are so happy about this. So they are willing to pay Be My Eyes, a monthly subscription to be on the Be My Eyes platform, and that is how we can keep Be My Eyes as a free service to every blind person in this world who wants to use Be My Eyes. And it is also free, of course, to call to Microsoft. So we kind of made a win, win win situation where our users get a free service, and our companies get an easy way to support their blind customers. And all this together is kind of paying for the whole thing, so we're super happy about the setup so we can keep it free. Yeah.

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Molly Lazarus 19:23

That's incredible. And those partnerships have continued to fund the companies in those ways. Or has that shifted?

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Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 19:28

Yeah, we have continued with most of our partners, and we always try to have new partners be part of the Be My Eyes community. We are successful with that. It always takes longer than you wish, but it's yes, we add new companies on a monthly basis. So yeah.

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Molly Lazarus 19:46

that's incredible, and kind of, I'll go back to my other question a sec, because I want to dig into this a little bit more. But partnerships with larger companies are hard, and as you said, it always takes longer. And I know the startups that we work with are always kind of itching to figure out a way to work with those larger companies. Do you have any advice or recommendations on what's worked really well around building those paid partnerships with larger organizations?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 20:14

Be very, very, very patient, and we have been super, super frustrated sometimes, because, I mean these world's largest organizations, I mean they have hundreds of lawyers and security people and so on, and we have, like none, and they send 300 questions that you should answer in order to get to level two out of six levels and so on, and some of them just don't think about that. Hey, this is the world's smallest company. We are trying to make a deal with, or that's right, to make a deal with us, but they have the rules and the standards and all that. Also to live up to this level of security, to at all get a deal with Google or Microsoft is pretty difficult for a small company, so that has been a challenge, and that's also why you need to as a new small company. Really is this necessary for us to start with the biggest companies, or should we kind of try to build a base with smaller companies. And the reason why we kind of had to start with the biggest one is in order to be relevant for a lot of blind people globally, you have to be a global tech giant company. I mean, we could easily sign up your local grocery store or something, but then we will have to do, I mean, a million deals, and maybe there's only one blind person living in the area where there's grocery and so on. So in order to get some kind of volume, we have to engage with the Microsofts and Googles and so on. And that was a difficult thing to do, absolutely

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Molly Lazarus 22:01

so interesting. And you know, the question that we often hear from our startups is like, who are the right people within these gigantic organizations to speak to about?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 22:12

And that is, I mean, finding a way into a company is maybe the most difficult thing, and you may not even believe it, but Microsoft, they were actively helping us get in contact with the right persons at Google. I mean, the people responsible for accessibility. They know each other at Microsoft, Google and Apple and all these companies. They go to the same conferences and so on. So they have been very helpful. Oh, you should talk to this person at Microsoft or Google or whatever. So when you get one and you behave the right way, they are willing to help you get in contact with the right person in other companies. But of course, sometimes you are looking into a new segment, and then you're starting from scratch and so on.

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Molly Lazarus 23:01

That's so interesting. So kind of thinking more about how your strategy has shifted from, you know, someone gets a volunteer and they call to being, you know, a partner, to Microsoft or Google or those folks, what have been the shifts in your strategy along the way? And kind of, where are you right now?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 23:20

I can say that we have another source of income, not the biggest one, but we do have

I can say that we have another source of income, not the biggest one, but we do have something we call corporate volunteering, where you as a company can sign up and then on one specific volunteering day, we can make sure that your employees get a lot of Be My Eyes calls, and then that company is paying Be My Eyes, some amount of money, depending on how big and how many and so on. So that is also a way we try to make it into a business. So that is another strategy, but we have been very focused on making companies accessible to blind people. In the beginning, we were very focused on having this video support, but we also realized that that is only the very biggest companies that actually has a call center where you can call and so on. Many companies have blind customers, so now we are more looking into making it easy for our blind users to find the phone number for the company. So now we actually adding phone numbers even without talking to the company. Maybe we will talk to them later on, but simply to help our users to find a way to get in contact with their specific company that they need to call. It can be really, really difficult to find contact information on a company's website. Maybe the website is not accessible, or maybe they are even trying to hide the number a little bit because they don't really want you to call. And we don't want to put up with that, so we had decided that we want to show the phone numbers, even though the company may try to hide it simply to make life easier for our users. And that has been quite a big task to take on, because there's a lot of numbers we need to type in, and also been super, super interesting, because our users and volunteers help us find the information and so on. So it's kind of a joint work that we're doing together with the whole blind community.

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Molly Lazarus 25:34

It's such an interesting point that you're making, and I think a good one to remind you know folks who are listening, who runs startups or businesses? How many blind people prefer to make a phone call versus having to fill out a form or an email? Could you speak a little bit about maybe kind of the accessibility reasons behind that?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 25:53

Well, it's and this has been since day one of the World Wide Web. Most websites are not accessible. I mean, you can go into the website, and then, as a blind person, and your screen reader will start with the text that we're buying, and then you get to an image, and maybe that image is pointing to something on the screen, or that is a button you need to press. But if the developer has not labeled that button, then the screen reader will just say, button, yeah, I know it's a button, then there's another Button, Button, Button, and that is super, super frustrating, because sometimes it's only a few of the buttons that are not labeled. But if you want to put in your credit card, you kind of want to know what you actually pressing on â€œ

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Molly Lazarus 26:43

Yeah.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 26:44

And that is the main reason why it's super, super difficult for blind people to be online and to be a customer online, and when blind people, I mean, it makes so much sense for us as blind

people to do trading online, because it can be difficult to go to the store and all that. So if you can do it from home, that's perfectly fine, and then we don't have to stress about how do I get into the store, and how do I find a staff member to help me and all that. But if the site is not accessible, that's super frustrating. AI is kind of changing that. So even though the buttons are not labeled, sometimes AI can help you explain what the button will do if you press it. But that's also kind of new, but that's something we are really looking into right now.

M Molly Lazarus 27:33

Yeah, talk to me a little bit more about what you guys are doing with AI and kind of where you see this going in the next couple years for Be My Eyes.

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 27:41

Well, a couple of years, that's a long time, but the story is kind of funny, because in November 2022 open AI came with chat GPT three, or whatever it was called, everybody was talking about AI all over the place, and of course, we were looking at that to say, how can we use that? But it wasn't really any, any image thing. And then a little later, the thing you could do with image was, kind of, you could write a text, and then an AI could generate an image. And that was kind of funny. I don't know how useful it is, but it's, it's pretty cool. And then on February 1, 2023 we got a phone call from open AI, where they told us that, hey, we have made this version that can do it the other way around, where you send us an image and then we send you a description. We believe that is something that will be helpful for blind people. And we were all excited about that, and we were honored to be called by OpenAI, and they wanted to make this partnership with Be My Eyes.

H Hans J rgen Wiberg 28:52

So suddenly, within four weeks, we managed to make this feature in the Be My Eyes app where you can take a photo and you can get the description back, and suddenly the whole blind community was in the forefront of what everybody was talking about. And Be My Eyes was the only company at all who had access to this image to text model, and it's almost a rewinding of the press history we had in 2015 because suddenly we were giving interviews to television and radio stations again, about this new feature where you can get assistance from AI, which is pretty cool. And in the beginning there was a lot of hallucinations. Let's go. But that has improved dramatically. It still happens, but now you can actually trust the description you get. So it's totally amazing. I think we are approaching 2 million images a month that we are processing from our users. So it's very well received.

M Molly Lazarus 29:59

How is that working for users? Because I know you have your phone app, do you also have a desktop app? Or how are folks kind of overlaying Be My Eyes AI into the workflow that they're doing?

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 30:12

Thank you for asking about that, because about a week ago, we launched our first PC version of Be My Eyes. When you are using a PC, you can install this Be My Eyes app, and then with some key combinations, you can take a screenshot and have that described. Or you can have a specific image that is on your screen described. Or you can upload image you have on your PC and have them described. So that is how you can, while you are working on your PC and you run into a website that's not accessible, as we spoke about before, you can simply take a screenshot and you can ask follow up questions. And this is pretty cool, because when you take a screenshot, you will get a description of, okay, this is a web page from this company and so on. And here's this and that, and then you can say, Okay, tell me the names of the buttons. And then it will say, okay, in the left up corner the this button that says this, and so on. And then you know where to go and find them and so on. It's a little clunky and so on, but that is how you can actually navigate a otherwise not accessible website, if you're using Be My Eyes on your website. Yeah.

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Molly Lazarus 31:26

That's very exciting, and I'm excited to hear that. So the million dollar question, of course, is, you know, with AI and you're no longer using potentially a call center, how are you planning to monetize kind of this iteration of Be My Eyes.

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Hans J rgen Wiberg 31:41

Well, the interesting thing is that while we have gotten so many of our users using the AI, where you take a photo and get the description, we have also gotten more people using our volunteers. Because we were thinking, Oh, maybe people would have started using AI and not volunteers. We have also gotten more users over this period, but we can see that the general use of Be My Eyes is growing, and the reason is that AI is really great at something, but if you want to, let's say, turn on your washing machine, it's way easier to have a real person. You point the phone at the display and say, Is it now on this degree and all that, and then, oh, you need to turn the knob a little more, and now you are on that program and so on. That's WAY easier with a person you can talk to. And if you have the laundry, and you need to what is white and what is color. Then you can take a photo and wait for the description, and then you can take in a super close one, or you can ask a volunteer, and they'll say, That's white and white and white white. That's a color and color and so on. And then you can do it in a fraction of the time. Other time you have some complex graph or something, and then AI is really good at describing that kind of images. Or if you have a painting on the wall that's super interesting, AI is really good at describing paintings, and it doesn't leave out any details, and you can ask for more details and so on. So there is different thing that AI is really good at, and other things that the real human beings are really good. So that's interesting. Absolutely.

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Molly Lazarus 33:27

That's really interesting. And so I'm curious. I saw or listened to a clip of Be My Eyes, the team, I believe, walking around London where the AI was kind of describing where they were and how to hail a taxi.

T Team 33:42
I'm using open AI's newest model and voice first interface to imagine the world through a conversation with an AI.

A AI 33:50
Nice sunglasses. They definitely add a cool factor.

T Team 33:55
Oh, thank you. What is in front of me at the moment?

A AI 33:58
You're looking at a beautiful, sunny day by the River Thames in London. Right in front of you is the Tower Bridge, one of the most famous bridges in the world, with its majestic Twin Towers and blue suspension cables

T Team 34:13
That's perfect. Can you tell me if the bridge is up or down at the moment.

A AI 34:17
The bridge is down at the moment.

T Team 34:20
As the AI is speaking my mind is building a visual image. I'm now getting a real appreciation of the majesty and scale of some of London's sights as they're described to me. Tell me what you can see.

A AI 34:30
I can see the top of Big Ben peeking through the trees. It's got that classic Neo Gothic design with the recognizable clock faces on each of its four sides. It's such an iconic landmark, isn't it?

T Team 34:42
I can visualize the iconic sights that so many visitors come to London to see. Is the king in

residence at the moment?

A

AI 34:49

Yes, it looks like the king is in residence right now. The Royal Standard flag is flying above Buckingham Palace, which is the signal that the monarch is present. How exciting to be there while the king is home.

T

Team 35:01

Try and tell me exactly what they're doing right now, please.

A

AI 35:05

Um, right now the ducks are gently gliding across the water. They're moving in a fairly relaxed manner, not in a hurry. Occasionally, one of them will dip its head under the water, probably looking for food, and then pop back up.

T

Team 35:22

I even know when a taxi is coming with its orange light on. I think I'll hail it to get home.

A

AI 35:28

Yes, I spotted one just now. It's heading your way on the left side of the road. Get ready to wave it down.

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Molly Lazarus 35:38

How far away are we from that world? And kind of, how are you all thinking about that next stage of what is possible here

H

Hans J rgen Wiberg 35:47

in June 2024, we are waiting to get access to this model. I mean, the developers at Be My Eyes, and then we have to develop a UX in the Be My Eyes app. But I think the most scary and interesting, important thing is, how much compute does this take? Because we can imagine that this will take a lot of compute power, and we have this decision about that, Be My Eyes is a free service. So we are with some anxious ways saying for what are the terms for this amazing new service?



H

Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 36:33

But it still needs to be affordable, otherwise it's not accessible. And that is one of the things about Be My Eyes that we we strongly believe that you can make the best app in the world, but if you charge \$1,000 for it, then most blind people cannot afford it, and then it's not accessible, even though it is made accessible from a technical standpoint. But it's also about the finances, and we simply don't know what the terms are.

H

Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 37:01

So maybe it is something that you can use one minute a day, or five minutes a day, or something like that. We simply don't know. But it looks totally amazing that you can actually do that. And we also, you did ask about how I see the future in two years time, and I have no idea about that, but I very much believe that AI will be cheaper and faster at a very rapid pace. So hopefully it will be possible to use the new version more than five minutes. But I don't think it will be so you can kind of turn it on in the morning and then have your whole day described as you go along. I don't think that will be an option anytime soon, because I think it's very heavy on the compute consumption there. But I I also believe that we will see it will be a lot easier to navigate the Internet, simply because the computer or the phone will understand what you say and will actually do what you say, and not only kind of you can ask questions to Google Siri or co pilot or chatGPT and get a subscription, but you can actually just say to your phone, hey, please find the email from my mother, and please reply this and this, and then without even touching the phone or have to type anything. I think that will be possible in the somewhat near future. I think we can somewhat see it already, but it needs to be implemented into the workflow in a more solid way. And then, of course, I noticed that meta has these metech glasses where you can ask questions and have meta describe your surroundings and make calls and answer SMS and so on. But that's also super, super interesting for blind people, because you sometimes you have a white cane and a guide dog and the suitcase and so on. And then if you can have a pair of glasses that can actually do something for you without touching anything, that's super, super interesting. And that's also driven by AI, so.

M

Molly Lazarus 39:19

That's super interesting.

H

Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 39:20

So if you really had to choose when to be blind, I think these coming years are super, super interesting, because there will be some fantastic technical solutions to things that we have been dreaming about for many years. Yeah.

M

Molly Lazarus 39:34

I love it. This is the best decade to become blind, in your opinion. So what I love about kind of the story that you've shared is that there has been so many evolutions, and you've really stayed current with what's happening, clearly, like we're all thinking about AI, but you've made

some big moves to think about how to integrate it. So for earlier stage disability focused companies, I'm curious what advice that you would give them about building a long, lasting company in the way that you all have.

H

Hans Järger Wiberg 40:06

Well, it's very difficult for me, as a visual impaired founder, having a team around my idea has been absolutely essential. I mean, there would not have been anything like Be My Eyes, if I had not had amazing people working with me and engaged in the idea. And I believe I mentioned that our investors have been very true to the core values of Be My Eyes and so finding the right people and make sure that they are really aligned on the mission that you are on, especially if it is a mission that is not likely to get your money, then you really have to make sure that they are aligned. And also, at least for me, it's way more fun when I have people to talk to about this instead of doing everything myself. And of course, also we have to share the publicity here and so on. But that's absolutely amazing to be able to have people involved that are as engaged in this as I have been myself. So that's wonderful, and that will be my apart from make sure your family is okay when you spend 10 years on this that might be the most important thing. Make sure that your family think is also a good idea. And I have been lucky that I have two daughters, and both of them has been working part time. One of my daughters is actually working right now for Be My Eyes so as a father, that's also amazing to have your family work for your company.

M

Molly Lazarus 41:44

What a special experience. I'm curious. Reflecting back on who you were, you know, 15 years ago, and the ways that you thought your life would turn out. How do you feel looking back and knowing that you've built such a long-lasting and impactful company, really, without probably knowing.

H

Hans Järger Wiberg 42:02

Yeah, I mean, sometimes you hesitate to say that you are happy, but I am, and my job in Be My Eyes. Part of my job is to do support tickets, and every day, even before I get out of my bed, I get emails from both volunteers and blind people, simply saying, Thank you for Be My Eyes, and we are so happy about it. We also have a few ideas to how we could improve and so on. But getting, I mean, 100,000 emails from our users and volunteers who are super happy about what we have done that is really amazing, and also some of the examples they give and all that that is very fulfilling for me as a blind person myself and the founder of this and I have been able to travel across the globe and do talks at conferences and interviews like this and so on, basically talking about myself. It's such a good thing sometimes. So yeah.

M

Molly Lazarus 43:03

That's wonderful. So we're coming to the end of our call together, sadly. This has been such a joy. But I just wanted to end with a couple quick fire questions, just quick answers, whatever comes to mind. First, some of these are data driven. But how big is the Be My Eyes team today.

H Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 43:19

We are about 20 people, half of them in Denmark, where I live, and the other half in the US. And then we have one in Finland and one in the UK. So we are kind of spread over but mainly in Denmark and the US.

M Molly Lazarus 43:34

Amazing. And how many users do you have?

H Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 43:37

We have 640,000 I think, blind and low vision users spread all over the world, and 7.4 million volunteers.

M Molly Lazarus 43:48

Wow. And if you had to pick one thing, Be My Eyes runs on. . . ?

H Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 43:54

Curiosity. People sign up to be volunteers. You don't get any credit. I mean, it is anonymous. You can, of course, brag about it to your friends and family, but it's not that you get posted anywhere because you're doing this. So people are really doing this out of their willingness to help and generosity, and because, of course, when you help someone, it's a good feeling, but the fact that more than 7 million people has actually downloaded this app give me some kind of hope for this world. So yeah, so it is people being generous with their time, which is all we have by the end of the day. So yeah.

M Molly Lazarus 44:38

I love that. What an incredible legacy to build a company that's foundation is generosity. Hans, thank you so much for joining us today. This has been such a delight to get to learn about your experience, and I know our listeners are just going to be at the edge of their seats learning about how you built this. So thank you for being here today.

H Hans JÃ,rgen Wiberg 44:58

Thank you so much for having me.

M Molly Lazarus 44:59



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