

COLLABORATING WITH BUSINESS

by academics in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

The psychologist putting workplace health through its paces

Collaborating on a new desktop wellness app gave Dr Kasia Banas a valuable outlet to positively impact thousands of workers' health and wellbeing.

The \$4.2 trillion US dollar global wellness industry encompasses everything from personal care to nutrition and fitness.

An expert in promoting healthy behavioural change, Dr Kasia Banas welcomes most elements of the increasing interest in personal wellbeing. However, she is sceptical about the potential of awareness alone to reduce illness and help people age better.

"Our environment promotes obesity. We are surrounded by highly calorific food and have fewer and fewer opportunities to move. Simply informing people about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle isn't enough", she argues. "It's much more effective to stimulate them to act at the point they have to make a decision. Whether reminding someone to walk in the morning or eat a nutritious breakfast, such prompts can be very reliable in promoting positive behaviour."

Kasia is the first to point out a critical factor in maintaining a healthy lifestyle is balance. It's a principle she follows in her own life, eating



healthily and exercising but also allowing herself the occasional visit to the pub. It was during one such outing in 2017, when she began to consider how commercial applications could help to increase the reach of her research.

"We were having drinks with some of my partner's former software developer colleagues when Sam Deere told me about his new project to build a wellbeing at work application", she recalls. "His approach to encouraging people to be more active around the office aligned with my research interests. After mulling it over for a few days, I gave him a call and offered to help."

Kasia also brought University of Aberdeen colleague **Dr Turu Stadler** on board, and the pair soon began a consulting relationship with Sam's new venture, **Welbot**.

From January 2018, Kasia and Turu held regular product development meetings with Sam and co-founder Mykay Kamara. Welbot's desktop application features a series of regular pop-ups which encourage people to take a break, breathe, perform a short exercise or a



mindfulness activity. “We gave them advice on ways to assess users’ wellbeing and how to encourage them to follow the prompts”, Kasia explains.

As the relationship developed, attention turned to how the technology’s impact could be measured. The group decided to borrow a methodology from software development and held a week-long ‘sprint’ intensive innovation session. It was an eye-opening experience for Kasia. “You should never underestimate the value of being in a room together, particularly when collaborating with people from different backgrounds and ways of working”, she says. “It enabled us to come up with new ideas, then to try and review them very quickly in a way we could not have done over the phone.”

The session produced a draft funding application for a research project to evaluate the relationship between the Welbot app and the health of its users. “Writing a submission facilitated our conversation, structured our

thoughts and ultimately helped us plot the specific tasks we needed to take to reach the next step”, reflects Kasia.

Together with Turu, Kasia is now jointly-supervising an Aberdeen MSc student to study how people engage with the product. Using activity sensors, the researchers measure the influence Welbot’s desktop pop-ups have on increasing users’ level of physical activity.

At a time when the field of mobile health research is experiencing exponential growth, Kasia is excited about the opportunity to deploy the latest findings to potentially thousands of users. “Implementation phases for academic research are often very long. In some cases, you never have an opportunity to apply your findings. Our collaboration with Welbot means we can see tangible outcomes in real-time and apply our knowledge in a way we hope will help a lot of people”, she notes.

“Like many academics, I tend to take my skills for granted. One of the most valuable parts of this experience was recognising I can use my knowledge of things companies just don’t think about to make a valuable contribution”, Kasia reflects.

“Welbot is excited to have my expertise. The challenge has been to learn how to have open and honest conversations to ensure we stay on track and all get what we need from the relationship.”



Developed in collaboration by:

