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Sandboxes: My experience participating in the sandbox alpha

Posted on [31st January 2020](#) by [Pilirani Kumasewera](#) in [general](#), [innovation](#)

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This is the third in this series about our sandboxes. If you haven't already, [read about our approach to experimentation](#) and [how we tested our sandbox strategy out in Malawi](#).

One of my happiest moments in 2019 was when I received an email with notification that Padziwe, an EdTech startup which I founded, has been selected by the EdTech Hub to test one of our applications in a sandbox. We felt exceptionally lucky considering that out of all the 195 countries in the world the Hub chose Malawi and, more specifically, Padziwe. This sandbox focused on Teachers Desk, an application which Padziwe developed to offer continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers.

Once the EdTech Hub team landed in Malawi, we got to work immediately, having stakeholder meetings and planning our work for the sandbox. We could tell we were in for some steep learning as, right away, we were introduced to concepts such as Lean Impact and organising work through sprints.

The power of assumptions

It is often the case that organisations make project plans and implement these plans based on assumptions which have not been verified in the real world. The sandbox took a different approach by helping us list all the assumptions we have intuitively about the Teachers Desk application and what would make it succeed.

These assumptions focused around three questions that tie back to value, growth and impact as set out in [Lean Impact](#):

1. Do teachers find the application valuable?
2. How will it grow and scale?
3. Will it impact learning outcomes?



The Padziwe team

Each of the four weeks of the sandbox focused on testing and verifying the assumptions we made for these questions. We held sprint planning meetings every Monday and sprint review meetings every Friday.

1. Do teachers find the application valuable?

We went into the field and conducted focus group discussions with teachers and headteachers of two schools. This experience provided invaluable insights as to what the CPD practices are like on the ground and what features teachers would benefit from the most in an application like Teachers Desk.

The research revealed to us that teachers would value training that guides them on how to deliver subject-specific content. This is a significant and important insight because the current version of Teachers Desk only delivers training that focuses on pedagogy.



Interviews with teachers in a school

2. How will it grow and scale?

Through the sandbox, we brought together different institutions with representation from both the implementers and funders side. The aim was to understand what it would take to grow an EdTech idea in Malawi.

One thing that stood out from the discussions of this meeting is how aligned the needs of funders and implementers are in the EdTech space. There was a shared interest in building evidence in how to grow and scale good ideas. The group discussed scalable implementation models and the importance of government buy-in.

This directly impacted the assumptions we chose to focus on during the sandbox.

Sprint plan

What do you believe?

Experiment 1

We believe we can create a scalable implementation model

Experiment 2

We believe government will officially endorse the sandbox

Experiment 3

We believe we can build a commercially sustainable business model working with a development partner

Sprint plan	Experiment 1	Experiment 2	Experiment 3
How will you verify that?	Map implementation options and associated costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Meeting with government – Present findings so far – Ask for a letter of endorsement and access to schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Meet with UNICEF – Present work so far – Ask for a commitment to some of their innovation team time to support sprint 4
What is your minimum proof you need to verify your belief?	Implementation options tested with UNICEF, DFID and other experts	Letter of endorsement and access to schools	Agreement to work in partnership with UNICEF

We developed models considering how best the Teachers Desk can be implemented to maximise reach and how it can generate revenue for sustainability which will be tested further. We also received an official letter of recommendation from the Malawi Government through the Department of Teacher Education and Development.

3. Will it impact learning outcomes?

We wanted to validate our assumption that digital delivery of teaching materials would be more impactful than paper versions. We developed a rigorous user experiment where teachers would interact with Teachers Desk in real-time, and compare this to teachers interacting with paper materials.

However, not everything went as planned and we did not have sufficient funds for this exercise at this time. This is the financial reality of a self-funded startup. As a result, we have had to shift this experiment to January 2020 when the funds will be available.

Through all of this though, we have triumphed as we have gathered important lessons in our arsenal which we are prepared to use in the future.

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