

AMPLIFYING IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS: AMPLIO

“I realized I was not applying the potential I had to make a positive impact on the world. It was a bolt of lightning kind of moment. I knew from that moment on I was dedicating my life to service to humanity.” – Cliff Schmidt, Founder & Executive Director, Amplio

By Lexi Henkel and Cyan Brown

Amplio’s mission is to empower the world’s most vulnerable communities through knowledge sharing. Founded in 2007, Amplio uses technology and social and behavior change communication to impact the world’s hardest-to-reach communities. Using the Amplio Talking Book and through partnerships with the UN, governments, and NGOs, Amplio’s impact spans various sectors – including food security and sustainable agriculture, health, education, nutrition, child protection, land rights, women’s livelihoods, and more. Amplio has impacted nearly two million people in low-literate communities across 14 countries, with a focus on women and girls.

LIGHTNING BOLT MOMENT

Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired Amplio from beyond the grave. This may sound strange, but Cliff Schmidt, Founder and Executive Director of Amplio, credits the civil rights legend with inspiring him to pursue impact entrepreneurship. While visiting the MLK Memorial in Washington, DC in his mid-30s, Cliff had a realization: “I was not applying the potential I had to make a positive impact on the world. Compared to him, I felt really small. It was a bolt of a lightning kind of moment. I knew from that moment on I was dedicating my life to service to humanity. (1)

With an academic background in computer science and prior experience in product management at Microsoft, this was a major pivot

for Cliff. But after nine months of research and conversations, he felt certain he had landed on an issue that resonated enough to change paths: global poverty. With his mission set, Cliff enrolled in a study abroad program at the University of Washington and traveled to a remote corner of Ghana to work with a local nonprofit. There, he observed two major limitations: low literacy rates and poor infrastructure. Simultaneously, he was volunteering with One Laptop per Child (OLPC), a nonprofit on a mission to transform global education. These joint experiences provided two key insights:

- No one was developing local content that was relatable and relevant to local needs (e.g., OLPC preloaded laptops with Wikipedia articles to share knowledge).
- Laptops were too expensive to make an impact in the places that needed them most (the government of Ghana allocated \$60 per child per year for education; a laptop cost a minimum of \$200).

Cliff asked himself, “Could there be a lower-cost way to share locally created content to increase education and thereby help alleviate global poverty?” And so the idea for Amplio’s Talking Book was born.

¹ All quotations are from interviews with Cliff Schmidt conducted by the authors, unless otherwise cited.

AN UNEXPECTED PIVOT

Cliff's original idea was to provide a low-cost audio device to help teachers educate large classrooms of students (often over 100 students per teacher). He envisioned a device that would allow teachers to record a book reading, mark pages, hyperlink vocabulary words, and provide multiple choice quizzes to assess reading comprehension.

To test his thesis, Cliff acquired audio devices and learning toys and brought them to Ghana in 2007 and again in 2008, to share his vision with teachers and organizations. The feedback he received from two non-academic stakeholders was the most interesting. Both Ghana's health service and ministry of food and agriculture expressed strong interest in an audiobook. According to Cliff, one contact explained, "Sure, this sounds like a good device for classrooms, but if I had technology like this I would record everything I know about health and farming and leave the device in rural villages."

Cliff's ears perked up as he pressed for more information. The ministry of food and agriculture shared that they only visited rural villages once every two or three years and during those visits they "drown" locals with dense information. To make matters worse, community members often could not take notes because they are illiterate. On the health side, there was a challenge with training and mistrust. According to Cliff, "Our community health workers make a huge impact by increasing primary care levels, among other things.", said one ministry representative, "But there remain challenges. Despite our best efforts, messages sometimes get lost or forgotten. And it is difficult to gain trust among their peers."

Armed with these insights, Cliff developed his first prototype and received feedback on the design. He iterated with a nonfunctional and then functional prototype and landed on a device that he thought was ready to pilot. In January

2009, he kicked off two pilots: one for classrooms and the other for health and food and agriculture. For the educational offering, he received positive feedback from students, teachers, and administrators. However, Cliff realized the long, slow journey ahead for his small group of volunteers with limited funding to make inroads with school administrators given the extent of bureaucracy within school administration. In addition, he learned that providing measurable results is notoriously difficult to do in education – and even more difficult in rural villages in Ghana.

On the other hand, farmers were sharing tangible results from the food and agriculture pilot. Cliff recalls that one shared, "I grew three times more crops this year than last year because of this information." Others were doing their own A/B testing, planting the way their grandparents taught them on one half of their land and based on learnings from the audio device on the other. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of the new methods.

With limited resources, Cliff knew he had to focus on one program. The path forward seemed clear based on the data and feedback: moving away from his original idea (classrooms) and towards an unexpected area (health and agriculture) could have the measurable impact he was seeking.

MEASURING IMPACT

Amplio has been focused on measuring tangible impact since its 2009 pilot. Cliff and his team compared 35 farmers (households) who used Amplio's Talking Book and a control group of 35 farmers in the same community who did not. In partnership with a social scientist, Amplio ran the numbers and found a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Farmers using Amplio grew 48%

more crops than the previous year. Farmers without Amplio experienced a 5% drop in crop production. The results were presented at academic conferences and published in a peer-reviewed journal.

As another example, Amplio showed that using their Talking Books by Community Health Volunteers in interaction with pregnant women, improved seeking care by those mothers (completing four antenatal care visits) by 110% in Kenya. (2)

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are the key ingredient in Amplio's business model, enabling them to reach more communities and maximize their impact. As a non-profit social enterprise, Amplio relies on revenue from device sales and donations to operate its business, not to raise any equity from private capital sources like venture capital. Describing his approach, Cliff said "This was not philosophical; it was practical. Amplio serves the poorest of the poor who can't pay for the products themselves. We sell to nonprofits and government agencies that rely on grants. I couldn't convince myself or an investor that they would get a return."

Nonetheless, Cliff sought to reduce Amplio's dependency on philanthropy and focus on partnering with institutions to drive revenue. Amplio's main partners are international NGOs, UNICEF, WHO, and district-level health ministries. Beyond this, Cliff believes there is whitespace to partner with for-profit entities. For example, a for-profit agricultural company expressed interest in partnering to deploy Amplio's Talking Books to its customers.

Based on the success the company he has realized through its collaborations, partnership has become one of Amplio's five values (the other four are respect, responsibility, transparency, and learning). As Cliff explained, "We are not a solution by ourselves. We are a knowledge prov-

ider. The resources and services have to come together to make an impact." Amplio relies on partnerships in order to provide a comprehensive solution that builds upon sharing knowledge through Talking Books.

BIG NEW IDEA

Where is Amplio headed? 14 years after Amplio's pilot, Cliff is thinking about a "big new idea": His vision is to create the world's first software application for designing, monitoring, and evaluating social and behavioral change programs. He describes it as a dashboard that monitors and evaluates social change programs and enables feedback from all stakeholders – particularly those who are most impacted by the problem. The company's new product will allow all organizations to implement and measure social change more effectively.

KEY INSIGHTS

Be curious; stay humble.

"We've got to focus. We can't do these very different programs. We ended up focusing not on what I set out to do originally, but on these other ideas that people told me that ended up being brilliant." – Cliff Schmidt

Specialized solutions require partnerships.

"Amplio specializes in sharing knowledge. The only way to specialize and get comprehensive solutions is to partner." – Cliff Schmidt

Live by your values on a daily basis.

"If there is a problem with our devices and any reason the customer should know, we think about our value of transparency." – Cliff Schmidt

Partnerships are crucial revenue – and impact – drivers for non-profits.

“I try to minimize Amplio’s dependency on philanthropy by partnering with institutions that drive revenue through device sales. We are not a solution by ourselves. We are a knowledge provider. The resources and services have to come together to make an impact.” – Cliff Schmidt

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