

# The light at the end of the tunnel: Using technology to help homeless people to help themselves

Gillamor Stephens sat down with Alex Stephany, the Founder of Beam, a crowdfunding platform supporting homeless people in finding work, to talk about his journey, social enterprise and the emerging “Tech for Good” sector that is helping society’s most vulnerable

## The journey to becoming an entrepreneur

In 2010, when I got my first smartphone, I remember turning it on and I realised immediately what the fuss was about. It was clear that tech was going to change everything about the way we access goods and services. I thought this could be an area where I could apply that desire to do things differently and truth be told, I had a slight rebellious streak! So, I began learning more about technology. It was increasingly obvious that technology was a great sector to work in and that there were a lot of people who were very open-minded, smart and collaborative.

Looking further back, my family have always been involved in community and charity work, and

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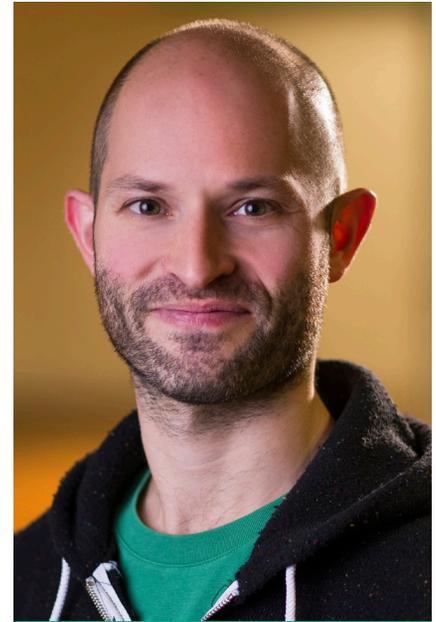
that’s always felt like something that should be part of a rounded life. As I did more in my career, I had the experience of raising what was the largest ever crowdfunding round for a tech start-up. It was €5m - back then, that was a lot of money for a crowdfunding round! I remember thinking, “This is interesting, but maybe we could use this model for social impact.”

## Learning from past experiences

I’m still learning and making mistakes, every day. The reality is that learning makes up a series of very small things that, in aggregate, can make the difference. One piece of advice I would give is, while you do get some incredible natural entrepreneurs who can build great businesses pretty much out of the cradle, generally, it’s useful to get some experience in another business and learn in a fast-paced learning environment before setting out on your own. I wouldn’t have been able to be so successful with Beam if I hadn’t had that experience previously - in my case running a parking app called JustPark.

## Banking on human compassion

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Alex Stephany, Founder, Beam

problems that affect the most vulnerable in society. Tech is not the solution of itself but tech is a great enabler that can make it safe and incredibly convenient to do something life changing. That’s what we do at Beam. When someone funds a homeless person to do training on Beam - they get updates and even KPIs on their impact once they start funding a larger number of people. For those supporters, it’s one of the most meaningful uplifting things they can be doing with their time - and as much or little money as they want to donate.

## Ambitions for Beam

The first thing we’ve really got to work on is increasing the number of people that we’re helping. Each person we help is fantastic, and that’s great, but we really want to have a big impact on this problem. We want to move the needle on homelessness in the UK - all while upskilling the workforce and allowing employers to tap into this new talent pool. There are 290,000 people who live in homeless hostels in the UK; which comprises 130,000 children, and costs taxpayers over £1bn per annum. These are big numbers and we need to make a dent on this problem.

## Charity, business or social enterprise?

We’re a social enterprise which means Beam is a company that exists, first

and foremost, to create social impact. We have a mission lock in our articles and are partnered with a charity, so all donations go to a charity's bank account which allows us to get the benefits of gift aid and corporation tax relief. We think of ourselves as a hybrid model of being a charity and a strongly purpose-driven business. By setting up as a social enterprise, we're likely to be more focused at becoming sustainable by generating revenue and, ultimately, growing our impact. The worst thing would be if for the rest of Beam's existence, we're using donations to pay our salaries and other costs. I don't want to be in that position. Already, someone donating can choose to pay nothing whatsoever to Beam's operating costs and make a 100% charitable donation in training for a homeless person. We also provide the service of looking after the cash and purchasing items - training mostly but also other barriers like transport or tools - direct for each homeless person. You can see the costs of each person's campaign broken down on their campaign page.

## Government involvement

The reception has been excellent from government. Right from the very beginning, we've been working with the Mayor of London. More recently, we've been partnered with Hammersmith & Fulham to help homeless people in that borough to access new training and work oppor-

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tunities. We will likely be partnering with one or two other forward-thinking London boroughs this year who are really interested in how they can create better opportunities for disadvantaged people in their boroughs, but also realise cashable savings at the same time.

## Tech4Good: Other Areas of Use

A lot of people are very evangelical about tech, and think tech is the answer to everything - quite a common attitude in Silicon Valley. I don't subscribe to that, but I do think that tech is a necessary part of the solution to every large and complex problem, whether that is homelessness, cancer diagnosis or urban logistics. I think that there is not a single large, complex social problem or environmental problem that technology does not have to be a part of solving. I think that Tech for Good is just beginning now to come of age, and we are seeing more and

more organisations bring technological innovation to bear on some of these problems. I do hope however, that they won't do it in a classically disruptive sense. A lot of people have thought we are disrupting homelessness, we're not at all. We work with charities closely in order to not disrupt good structures that have already been put in place.

## The reception of Tech4Good by VC Firms

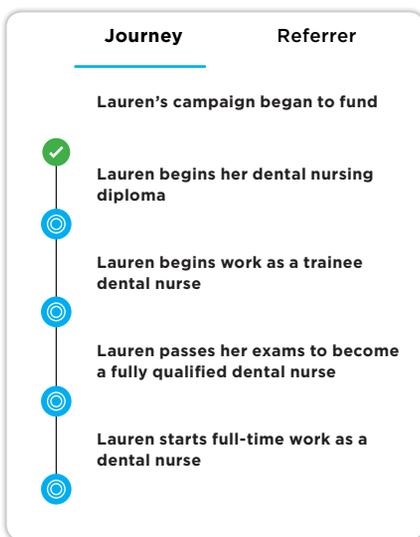
Every VC and PE that invest in technology, needs to be thinking of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the form of Tech for Good. Firstly, because it's the most powerful use of their skills and resources; and secondly, at least in the early stage of VC, you need to convince entrepreneurs that you care about solving the world's problems more than making money. If you make money as a by-product, that's great, but that's not why you get out of bed every day. Given that more and more entrepreneurs are mission driven, I think that every VC, increasingly, will be looking to convince on that. So, in short, helping a Tech4Good company with advising, funding and seeding will be how VCs do CSR. That is how they will have the greatest impact and how they will also attract the best entrepreneurs as well.

Currently, it's tending to be high-net-worth individuals who are more embracing of this segment of technology. In part, because they can be their own free spirits, whereas the tech funds often need to answer to often more conservative LPs.

## Advice for budding Tech Entrepreneurs

Think about where you can add value. Look at what is out there and try and be useful to people in that ecosystem, build your network and take it from there. It's always about being useful and being part of the solution to the problem, so that's where I'd start.

If you are interested in becoming a corporate sponsor for BEAM, or to just learn more visit [beam.org](http://beam.org).



Budget	Qualification
Dental Nursing Diploma	£1,790
Dental Nursing Exam Fee	£485
Vaccinations	£80
Travel to course	£285
Basic life support first aid course	£69
Smart leather shoes	£50
Textbook	£25
Laptop (gifted by Uber)	£0
Contingency	£280
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,064</b>