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Making the World Work BETTER

Alive is dedicated to improving the everyday processes of business through mobile technology.

Images by Scott Ehler

Luke Harvey-Palmer is a pioneer in the mobile and digital space. His fascination with and passion for the industry began in childhood and have led him to launching various digital agencies including Buzzle, Four, and his current business, Alive, where he heads up the organisation as CEO.

With 22 years as an officer of the Australian Army Reserve, Luke learned discipline and structure from a young age and has taken lessons from these experiences to mould his own understanding of business. “People like to associate the military with life and death. I take a more nuanced view: what it teaches you is to put people at the front of your decisions—to think about how your decisions affect your people. In that environment,

what you’re asking people to do a lot of the time is not pleasurable, not enjoyable, so you have to understand the power of influence and leadership.

“The other thing that the military, and boarding school to some extent, taught me was the notion of leading from behind. About 15 years ago, I took a very deep interest in leadership and followship; I believe both are important. In the special operations command, we used to take our rank off. I was an officer, a captain, and there were private soldiers and corporals, but we all took our rank slides off. You have to earn respect, earn the right to lead, and a lot of that came from leading from behind.”

Alive is a young organisation that has already enjoyed unprecedented

success in the mobile space. “We talk about being an application design firm, and what we mean by that is we take a ‘mobile first’ approach to looking at and solving business problems. We’re unique in that we look at the business problems and challenges from the point of view of a business consultant with a focus on user design. We then look at how mobile applications and business process improvement can solve those problems.

“We’re not in the business of just building apps for our clients and walking away. Our brand originates from the notion that we keep the technology we build alive inside the business. We build analytics and insights into our applications so that we’re able to continue to improve on those solutions and refine through >



insights and analysis while staying close to the customer. This means our customers can track their performance against KPIs, giving them an easy-to-use way to improve their organisational productivity.

“This approach works for businesses of all sizes, but the real productivity gains using our design and mobility approach can be seen in companies with large workforces and heavily administrative environments such as financial services, health, and education.”

Luke says the key thing for him was to create a company that people want to work with. “We want to create a purposeful, meaningful organisation by doing great work that everyone wants to be a part of. And you can see that in the design of our workspace, in our culture, and in our behaviours. I really believe we’ve succeeded in creating a company that makes work great. It’s something that has been essential to my make-up in the past 20 to 30 years. There’s been a realisation over the past two or three years here at Alive that



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helping others win, and to achieve their objectives, is where the real power and reward in life exists.

“At Alive, we like to understand the challenges that individuals in our clients’ businesses are facing. We hear a lot of talk about transformational thinking; forget that. If a client is at point A and they need to get to point B, as an organisation we are invested in understanding what is stopping them from getting there. If there is something stopping you, we’d like to be able to redesign that process and use mobile software so you can get to point B and beyond. We know that the technology we have, mobile devices and apps, can do anything. But it’s not about doing anything; it’s about doing the right thing.”

Alive tailors its solutions to suit its customers. One example of this innovation is the company’s work with the University of Western Sydney on one of the biggest education projects for iPad in the Southern Hemisphere. “Our business design team worked with UWS to understand the challenges its students faced accessing the university’s resources and systems. Using data and insights gained from interviews with both staff and students, we developed a user experience tailored to the needs of the students.

“The app that we developed following the design process aims

to help UWS students engage with the university, providing better communication and collaboration. Alive focused on how to best use the iPads that the university distributed to its students to improve their overall learning experience and take advantage of the benefits that mobility can offer its large and dispersed student population, both on and off campus.”

While Alive has enjoyed numerous successes, Luke is most proud of the way the company has kept its management and leadership team together. “If you read about the great failures of Silicon Valley businesses, the thing that undoes them most often is people problems. The failures are because someone runs out of cash, or there’s a clash of wills, or a clash of ideas. Overcoming those challenges and keeping a core team together and building something around that is probably the thing I’m most proud of.

“This has led us to the environment that we’ve built here, which we’re also very proud of. We talk about being a high-performance organisation and having a culture of hiring slow and firing fast. I think we’re in that space now; we haven’t always been there, but we’ve gotten to that in the past six months. We’re now attracting some very talented and purposeful people—people who



connect with our values on a deep level and add to our environment. Our three values are curiosity, focus, and energy. I really believe that they’re central to our existence. So those are the two things I’m most proud of, and they’re really about culture and leadership.”

Luke notes that the company outsources nothing and is almost a vertical organisation. “One of the great challenges for Australia today is the cost of doing business here. Cost manifests in one fundamental way and that is margin. As businesses, if we are driven by the pursuit of excellence, driven by customer experience, and driven by doing things right, that means we have to sacrifice. In a publicly listed business where you’re reporting on earnings per share and share price, that’s a tough story to have to tell because they’re held accountable and have to find more and more margin. I think the standard driver in a business like ours is a 10 to 15 per cent margin; I think we projected 20 per cent. The point is that I’m happy to give some of that up to pay local labour prices and have our team living here in the one location.

“What that give us, in terms of excellence, in terms of focus, clarity, collaboration, and the effect on our customers, is far beyond anything margin could ever give. I’m happy to give up margin for that, and I think it’s a sign of confidence in the great people we’re able to attract in Australia.

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Luke is hopeful for the future of the company and understands that the real prospects for digital media and mobile technology will come from later generations of entrepreneurs. Because of this, Luke is a mentor with Club Kidpreneur Foundation. “We went into schools and worked with their after-school programs to run an eight-week program, teaching 8 to 12 year olds to be more entrepreneurial. We ran them through how to market, how to brand, how to buy input, how to build a product, and how to sell it at a profit. We felt that the education system was never really committed to understanding at what age young people have great ideas that they can turn into something more. No-one knows the answer to that, but it can

happen a lot more if we intervene at a young age.

“One of the things that made us realise the importance of that work was when mothers or fathers could come up to us. I remember one mother coming up to me and saying, ‘You’ve changed my life; I resigned last week. Through my children, you’ve taught me how creative I actually am and how important it is to value myself’. That was far more rewarding because it made me realise that the parents’ generation had been misled. They’d been led into a life without purpose, and we were awakening something in these children that was in turn awakening something in their parents. It just tapped into that innate curiosity that all young children have.”

Alive is a young and ambitious company that is making a significant impact within the industry. The passion of its people and the calibre of its clients are a good sign of the many successes it has already accomplished and the numerous opportunities that lie ahead. ●