

## A conversation with what3words Co-Founder Jack Waley-Cohen

Recently, we hosted our first Founders Live in Cambridge. Our launch event saw five tech companies pitch their businesses in just 99 seconds before a live Q&A with our audience and vote for the winner. Our host also had the pleasure of interviewing what3words co-founder, Jack Waley-Cohen, who shared details of his journey and gave invaluable advice to other founders in the room.

### Firstly, could you explain what what3words is?

what3words is a way of describing a location in a very human-friendly way. It divides the entire world into a grid of three-metre by three-metre squares, each containing a distinct combination of three words. This approach enables precise location communication using just three words, making it accessible to people in 59 languages. We work with a diverse range of industries, from emergency services to logistics and delivery, aiming to make location sharing more efficient and accurate.

### How did you start what3words, and what was the trigger for this innovative idea?

The idea for what3words was conceived when one of our co-founders, Chris Sheldrick, encountered difficulties delivering bands' equipment to music venues in Italy due to inadequate address information. He tried using GPS coordinates to locate the venues but decided that words were better than numbers after a one-digit error led him to the wrong location. This revelation led him to his friend Mohan, a mathematician, who proposed the concept of dividing the world into three-metre squares with unique word combinations.

With neither of them having prior experience in scaling a business, they decided to seek guidance and support from me. We then made some very early design decisions such as the size of the square and finding a consistent way it could work from a branding perspective.

### Has the combined vision of the cofounders for what3words remained consistent, or has it evolved over the years?

When we launched what3words, we didn't tell people until about the day before. People were excited but didn't really know what it was for.

We had no structured plan in place, but we built it as

quickly as we could and then put it out there with PR support. Lots of media platforms covered it initially and we benefitted from headlines such as 'Is this the end of the postcode?', which resulted in more press which was very exciting.

We then had people from companies that we hadn't heard of, even industries that we didn't know existed, messaging us in the first week saying 'we think you've solved a big problem for us'. This blew our minds initially, but we knew we had to knuckle down to find our focus. We still haven't solved everything, despite being 10 years in and raising a lot of money. We still have resource constraints and we're still not profitable. That said, the vision is still pretty much the same as when we started, although we've developed it and refined it. Ultimately, we're still trying to change the world by making people savvy about locations and not wasting time wandering around aimlessly.

### What is the most significant change in your role over the last decade from startup cofounder to COO of what3words?

Over the years, my role as a co-founder has evolved significantly. Initially, I wore many hats, from head of HR to CFO and CTO, and even did some sales. As the business scaled, I learned to trust others to handle various aspects, which allowed me to be more hands-on in the early stages. This transition is quite typical when scaling a tech business. While it's been challenging at times, the excitement of new developments keeps me going.

### Can you share any early hire examples that you feel were particularly important for what3words?

Two hires stand out as crucial for our growth. One is our commercial president, who has been with us for six to seven years. Although we initially hired her for a different role, her energy and creativity made her an essential figure in our team. The other vital hire was the head of HR, who played a crucial role in taking care of our people as the business expanded. There comes a point when growing a business, where both fortunately and unfortunately, you have to do things other than just managing people.

You have to look after the people within the business and you have to make sure you do that right, which is something I care deeply about but I found quite difficult, so the head of HR hire was crucial.

### How important was having access to an ecosystem like Cambridge for what3words' growth?

Being part of an ecosystem like Cambridge provided us with credibility and opened doors that might have otherwise remained closed. While it's frustrating that you sometimes need such associations for credibility, it's the reality. It helps you gain equity and access to a pool of talented individuals. If you have the opportunity to be part of a strong ecosystem, it's wise to leverage it.

### Any advice for founders looking to attract investors and open doors to funding?

Attracting investors can be tough, especially in today's competitive landscape. However, the key is to sell your vision. In the early stages, the numbers may not look impressive, and your business plan might seem uncertain. What investors really want to see is your unwavering belief in your vision and its potential to make a significant impact.

Focus on the big picture and the problem you're solving rather than just the financials. Building relationships and trust with potential investors is vital, so be genuine and passionate about your mission.

### Want to hear more from Jack?

This isn't the first time we've interviewed Jack, so [click here](#) to read our interview from 2019.

In conclusion, what3words is a testament to the power of innovation and the impact it can have on the world. Jack's insights shed light on the journey from a groundbreaking idea to a global movement, proving that a shared vision and unwavering determination can transform the way we navigate our planet.

If you're interested in pitching or attending the next Founders Live Cambridge event, please visit [our website](#) for further details



Jack Waley-Cohen  
Co-Founder of what3words  
[linkedin.com/in/jackwaleycohen](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jackwaleycohen)

