

SYDNEY AI STARTUP LAUNCHES HR TECH SERVICES IN SILICON VALLEY

LANDING PADS CASE STUDY | JULY 2020

Australia's tech startups are triggering global interest. Sydney-based HR specialist Curious Thing is pioneering new recruitment tools, and creating voice applications powered by conversational artificial intelligence. With the help of Austrade's Landing Pads program, Curious Thing has been selected to help the United States Air Force (USAF) to reimagine its recruitment process.

Founded in 2018, Curious Thing is a game-changer for recruiters. It enables Human Resources (HR) departments and Talent Acquisition (TA) teams to provide automated digital phone interviews using voice-based AI. This enables TA teams to interview every candidate who applies for a job – quickly and in a neutral, non-biased way.

The multi-award winning company is part of Australia's fast-growing HR tech sector. The company is also part of the next generation of artificial intelligence (AI) and 'conversational AI' applications, which will steadily revolutionise many HR processes. According to Chief Strategy Officer and Co-Founder, David McKeague, automated HR screening delivers three benefits.

'The first benefit is scalability,' he says. 'Once the tool is programmed with a role's key attributes, it can be scaled via the cloud to conduct hundreds of interviews anywhere in the world. The second is speed. A HR department can conduct thousands of interviews over a single weekend.

'The third benefit is objectivity. According to executives, there are many ways an interview can fall victim to unconscious bias – according to a candidate's accent, manner, appearance and age. The tool cuts through "surface characteristics



The Curious Thing team. Sydney, 2019

'Austrade's network has helped us generate leads and the result is that we are now successfully selling into businesses in North America.'

David McKeague, Chief Strategy Officer and Co-Founder, Curious

clutter" and identifies candidates that will reliably demonstrate the required attributes.'

Curious Thing had a major growth challenge, however. While the global target market is huge the company's resources were limited. After examining potential markets, the company realised it needed to launch simultaneously in North America as well as Australia.

Targeting America's tech hub

The trigger for the company's North American strategy was an Austrade Landing Pad program. The Landing Pad took place in San Francisco in mid-2019: it was a combined residency for defence and technology scale-ups that was jointly delivered by Austrade, the Australian Defence Export Office and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

The program included one week based at the Australian Embassy in Washington, where the Australian Defence Export Office and Austrade drew



Australian Government

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on their networks to provide advice and connections to US defence industry and the US Government.

‘The San Francisco Landing Pad was a fantastic way to launch into the North American market,’ says McKeague. ‘We were in the heart of the technology area and learning all about the US market.’

The Austrade Landing pad enabled Curious Thing to establish its North American business right in Silicon Valley. It also helped executives to navigate the inevitable business hurdles that companies encounter when they start trading in the US.

‘The program was a success for us,’ says McKeague. ‘Austrade’s network has helped us generate leads and the result is that we are now successfully selling into businesses in North America. We have hired a Vice President for North America to build up a solid base of business deals.’

Austrade spots a solution

While in Washington, the company’s fortunes took a curious turn. In mid-2019, Austrade was gearing up to hire a new cadre of trade commissioners. While Curious Thing was in residence, officials took a closer look at the Curious Thing solution.

‘We learned that Austrade wanted to hire up to 25 new trade commissioners in one round,’ says McKeague. ‘Austrade wanted to do something cutting edge for its global recruitment program. Creating a CV shortlist can take weeks, yet Austrade’s was targeting a truly global audience.’

As part of a strategy to embrace digital technologies, Austrade decided to try out the HR tool for itself.

‘We had the clearest possible direction from our CEO to be the kind of organisation that trials new technologies,’ says Patrick Hanlon, Talent Director, Austrade. ‘We wanted to minimise unconscious bias in the recruitment process and increase efficiency. With hundreds of applicants from around the world, we are limited in how much time we can spend reviewing every CV we receive.’

640 interviews in 1 weekend

Hanlon initiated a pilot, pitting Curious Thing against the agency’s traditional recruitment process. Interview requests were emailed to approximately 750 candidates on a Friday. By the following Monday morning Austrade had an 85 per cent completion rate, and the data to compile a shortlist.

‘The Curious Thing app identified several candidates that would not otherwise have made it to interview – and two were subsequently hired,’ says Hanlon. ‘It also identified instances where we needed to be cautious and execute rigorous background checks.’

‘As a result, we have been able to bring star performers into our global team of trade commissioners – people we would otherwise have missed.’

Targeting US Government

The week in Washington has also generated longer-term opportunities. Some months after the residency, Austrade market intelligence notified McKeague of a United States Air Force (USAF) AFWERX Recruitment Reimagined project to transform the way it recruits.

‘The USAF believes that each year, approximately four million potential candidates people reach an age where they could apply to join the USAF,’ he says. ‘The USAF wanted to actively recruit among these four million and give everyone a fair go. Our technology could help them do it.’

In June 2020, Curious Thing was selected for the USAF program, called AFWERX Recruitment Reimagined.

‘We were the only non-US company selected for the USAF AFWERX program, says Zubin Fitter, Head of Sales and Partnerships. ‘This is a huge validation for an Australian tech company with fewer than 30 employees. We are indebted to Landing Pads and the network created by Austrade and the Department of Defence’s staff in Washington.’

About Austrade

The Australian Trade and Investment Commission (Austrade) is Australia’s leading trade and investment agency.

We have the power to open doors, unlock opportunities overseas and help Australian businesses go further, faster.

Austrade is also the national point-of-contact for investors. We partner with state and territory governments to provide the information and contacts you need to establish or expand a business in Australia.

Promoting Australia’s growth and prosperity is why we’re here.

To discover how we can help you and your business, visit austrade.gov.au or contact us at info@austrade.gov.au or on 13 28 78 (within Australia).

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