

Susanne Mitschke: Innovating for a Changing Industry

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FESTIVAL of INNOVATION SHOWCASE



To introduce myself, I'm Susanne Mitschke, CEO & co-founder of Citruslabs. My two co-founders and I have been working with SIE for a long time and won a couple of awards such as the Young Innovators Challenge in 2015. We've come a long way since then and can proudly say that SIE played a big role in where the company is today. Back in 2015, our company name was MindMate and we did something entirely different compared to what we do today. We developed an app for people with memory loss, such as Alzheimer's, but struggled for years to find a suitable business model to monetize the app. Even though we gained a lot of traction, had many users, nothing seemed to work. And this is how Citruslabs was born.

What is Citruslabs?

Citruslabs is the most advanced platform for clinical trial patient recruitment. 86% of trials don't meet their patient targets, a number that is often neglected by research organizations. On top, most individuals don't know a lot about clinical trials. At the same time, clinical trials are the only way to test new drugs, treatments, diagnostic methods or medical devices to see if they actually work and are safe to use.

Two years into our journey with MindMate, we were approached by big pharmaceutical companies. They told us about their struggles with clinical trials and that they're currently investing heavily in Alzheimer's research. They wanted to partner with us to see if we could help them overcome their issues with recruiting Alzheimer's patients into their clinical trials.

Fast forward, we developed the company further in the past years and continued to grow into one of the leading companies for clinical trial patient recruitment.

Why start a business in the healthcare industry?

I'm not a medical professional, but just because you're not a medical doctor doesn't mean you can't innovate in this industry. In fact, patient recruitment has nothing to do with "medical research". I got very excited about healthcare, because I lost my dad when I was 21. Additionally, my mom was diagnosed with cancer. This was a shock! But I didn't worry too much, because I knew that the cancer she was diagnosed with was well researched and that the 5-year survival rates were very promising, especially because of all the new medical innovations. Every country struggles with an aging population and yet most common diseases like cancer, hypertension, stroke, heart attacks are all age related. Many people live with diabetes and many people die because of diabetes-related side effects. We're also seeing a rising trend in antibiotic-resistant supergerms and recently seen a new coronavirus take over the world: COVID-19. We desperately need new antibiotics to ensure that nobody dies because of an infection, and we need a COVID-19 vaccine and better treatment methods that we can all continue with the lives we once knew pre-COVID. And this is what we strive for at Citruslabs: medical research. And the number one roadblock for releasing new drugs or treatments is patient recruitment. Something that seems so trivial and has nothing to do with the research itself is jeopardizing 10, 20, sometimes 30 years of hard work from amazing scientists.

Doing business in a heavily regulated industry

Healthcare is a heavily regulated industry. But, when it comes to medical innovation, this industry is thriving. However, when you're looking at **technological innovation** in the healthcare industry, i.e. doing things differently or changing up workflows, there is a lot of scepticism, even though it may save time and/or money! In all other industries, enterprise software developed dramatically, from interface to user experience. Software doesn't have to be complicated, and saves many organizations a lot of time. But, when you are looking at healthcare software, it often looks like it's from 1996. And the reason behind that is regulation. Because of the heavy regulation, many research organizations rather use spreadsheets or organize everything with pen & paper so that they are not breaking any laws regarding personal health information. This is frustrating for administrative staff, but also for the patients. I believe that patient experience is fairly underrated in our industry and one of the main drivers why so many clinical trials fail to attract enough patients.



<https://youtube.com/watch?v=>



Healthcare innovation – a changing industry

To me, the most exciting industry any founder can be in is the healthcare industry. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed healthcare towards telehealth in a speed that is unprecedented. Similar to patient experience: usually, when you go to the doctor, you have to wait. Now, this is different! Doctor's offices are planning their visits better so that waiting times are minimal and that you don't have any contact with other (potentially sick) patients. Scheduling software, virtual check-ins and more time-appropriate patient-doctor communication is taking over. Patients can upload their full health records into apps, transfer them easily to new providers and can even enrich this rather static medical information with dynamic information that their devices are tracking: steps, exercise minutes, weight changes, water intake, sleep and so on.

What will the future of clinical trials and healthcare look like?

I believe that the future of clinical trials and the pharmaceutical industry is very bright. The biggest shift right now is **from reactive healthcare** (i.e. you only go to the doctor when something is wrong with you), **to proactive healthcare**, which also relies on data to paint the entire picture for the patients and their needs. This is being amplified by consumer products like the Apple Watch, FitBit, smart blood pressure devices, smart insulin tracking devices, devices that take your weight and temperature, track your sleep and so on. **Consumers are more and more aware of their health and also work to become more healthy as a whole.** Because consumers demand it, more and more innovators are entering the healthcare industry. Also the clinical trial industry is changing towards a system that is catering more towards the patients. In the United States, a big trend goes towards virtual clinical trials, in which individuals can participate in a clinical trial from the comfort of their own home, reducing friction for interested patients. And companies like Citruslabs help to administer the clinical trial recruitment process and bring it into the 21st century, not only for the doctors that conduct the research, but also for the patients who participate in clinical trials.

What sort of skills are likely to be in demand?

Health-related skills will always be in demand! Even though some jobs will be disappearing because of automation, new jobs are being created. I believe that the shift goes more and more towards data, especially in healthcare. Skills around understanding specific health conditions and also understanding lifestyle data and combining these two for a proactive approach towards healthcare will be huge. Additionally, for non healthcare-people, companies are not disappearing. In fact, companies are likely getting bigger and at the same time becoming more decentralized, i.e. remote. However, understanding technology is very important. You don't have to be a coder, or a product guru in order to succeed, but you should have a good understanding of how technology works and how the product-development cycle looks like. Similarly, business knowledge will stay in demand: from HR, to sales and customer success, to marketing. These skills are and will be super important also in the future. Maybe not in the way we know it today, but they still will be relevant. Products and services need to be sold, customers need to be taken care of, and teams need to be managed. To stay relevant, you need to be open to constantly learn and grow. If you do that, there will be a bright future for you.

– Susanne Mitschke