



Image Credit: Bill O'Donnell

Lola's Origin Story: How a Boston Tech Startup Came to Be

B NOW READING by Ellen Chisa
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It's impossible to tell the story of Lola without telling the story of Blade.

In the summer of 2012, Paul English, Bill O'Donnell, and Paul Schwenk left Kayak and wanted to create a consumer tech hub in Boston. Rather than starting a new company, they decided to start a consumer tech incubator. The incubator made early investments, and hired a small team of developers and designers to help the companies. Paul, Bill, and Paul were on hand to advise and mentor all of these early teams. The companies launched out of the incubator included Drafted, a marketplace for job referrals.

But as anyone who makes things knows - it's hard to give up doing your own projects, too. Paul has never been one to shy away from an idea, and internal projects started to crop up by the fall of 2014. The first two were Luna, a survey tool, and Charlie, a personal finance application. Other ideas were on the table too - including an for remittance payments, inspired by Paul's work with Summits Education in Haiti.

It was at this point that my story started to intersect with Lola's. Blade decided to hire MBA interns to help out with the internal projects. The goal was originally hire two interns - one for Luna, and one for Charlie. That happened, but I also ended up joining to research something new: what does "an assistant for everyone" look like?

After making a spreadsheet and hiring all the existing types of assistants we had a good idea of what tasks were most necessary, and how the best service worked. The best experiences were unsurprisingly human, willing to go above and beyond, and learned about my preferences over time.

Around this time Blade's board members started to reach out to Paul and Bill. Youngme Moon suggested the Blade team was so strong that it might make sense to focus on one project. Joel Cutler saw the assistant idea and said "but what about your expertise in travel?"

The vision started to come together that would lead to Lola: how could we make it so everyone had the "executive assistant" experience while they were traveling?

We started researching if it would be feasible. We got data about how travel planning was happening - and half of that planning was still what we considered "offline." I started going to travel agent school to see how agents qualified and got to know their clients over time. We tried to see how quickly we'd need to do various types of travel plans to be profitable. We also wanted to learn technologically. Most of the engineering resources at Blade were still supporting portfolio companies and the internal projects that were further along, so we had to be scrappy. We used Google Apps scripts to try to scrape travel preferences from email to see how we could jump start user profiles.

While we researched and experimented with travel, Paul and Bill continued to refine the product vision. This was when "chat" became a core component of Lola. Chat made sense - travel planning was often about a human connection. Chat was quick, but able to be asynchronous. Users were spending more and more time in chat apps. Plus, chat was easy to test. We started planning travel for people in the office using my iMessage account, and it became clear we were onto something.

Lola became real later in the summer of 2015. Paul and Bill announced to the core Blade team that we'd all be working full-time on Lola - a chat-based way to plan travel taking advantage of sophisticated backend technology and a human travel consultant.

The team was excited. Everyone stayed, despite the major shift from many projects to one. I decided to leave HBS to keep working with the team. Paul and Bill made transition plans with the companies we'd invested in to find new office space. We started to hire great domain experts like Stacey Scott to build a personal travel consultant team, and Robert Birge to lead marketing. Since then, things have gone quickly. We've grown to a team of more than 40, raised an A round from Blade's initial investors, and launched Lola to the app store last May.

Lola team in featured image pictured left to right: Paul Schwenk, Jason Horman, Dennis Doughty, Paul English, Bill O'Donnell, Brian Kalma, Elisha Heaps, Petr Kaplunovich, Suzanne Amato, Ellen Chisa. Not pictured: Yofred Moik, Jeremy Debate

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