**Brief Bio:**

An award-winning founder, CEO, and product leader, James has spent over a decade collaborating with friends to turn ideas in their heads into products enjoyed by tens of millions of people.

Most recently, he was the founder and CEO of Hellosaurus (YC S20), an interactive EdTech platform for preschoolers that ranked as high as the #3 App For Kids on the Apple App Store before successfully exiting to Brilliant.org. Before Hellosaurus, James helped start and led all product management, ideation, and engineering of HQ Trivia, a network of live trivia game shows that he helped grow from prototypes into international phenomena. He began his career as an APM at Google. He holds an Economics and Computer Science degree from Harvard College, an MBA from the Stanford GSB, and was named Forbes 30 Under 30.

Superpowers include:

* 0 -> 1 product+company building, especially in consumer and prosumer
* Learning complex industries extremely quickly and translating learnings into product
* People management and leadership, both formal and informal

**Some HQ Trivia Lessons Learned**

1. The three product relationships we cultivated at HQ: digital user + host, digital user + digital user, co-located user + co-located user
2. Spend as much time with users as possible  - we would visit offices playing HQ Trivia all of the time
3. Network effects really help you on the way up and can really hurt you on the way down
4. Don’t set employee expectations too high or set goals that are impossible to achieve for morale
5. You have to find your “non-consensus but right” core feature if you want to break out from the masses of other consumer products.

**Some Hellosaurus Lessons Learned:**

1. Understand the difference between your user and the buyer
2. Do one thing really well
   1. Prioritization is massively important and where a product leader can be very value
3. Product philosophy document — set the vision and mission really early and make sure everyone is aligned
   1. Everyone has different ideas in their head and your job is to make sure that idea is shared.
4. Usability does matter in MVP but don’t over design
5. In the kids world, age range matters a lot. LTV is also really hard.
6. Need to figure out the right balance between entertainment and education. Would rather build a product that teaches 1/2 as well but people use 4x longer because people will end up learning more!
7. Everyone in the company should do at least one user interview per quarter – it is the best way to feel connected to the end user and stay motivated at work.

**Some thoughts on my management style:**

* Love to lead with levity, build connections with fun and humor
* Very direct, very open — I use a lot of candid feedback and expect the same in return. Really want to make sure every single person down the chain feels like they are able to give an idea and option
  + At the same time, have had a weakness here in not necessarily asserting my authority — making us to take too long to make the right decision
* Very Data-driven – experiment when you can. But also dont forget what your gut is telling you.
* Expect hard work: only failure is a failure of effort
* VERY collaborative style, love brainstorms and talking things through out loud.
* I believe that in person work is important for collaboration and also believe that meeting invites should be very deliberate and reviewed often so as to not waste anyone’s time.
* Always hire people who are better than you are - I want to feel like the dumbest person in the room when I am with everyone I hired
* Communicate clearly and transparently - dont play any games with what truly matters.
* Hire slow, fire fast.
* The best teams are filled with very skilled specialists with low ego and are willing to ask for help from the people on the team who have those skills

**On GSB:**

I generally believe business school is worth it for anyone who can afford the financial burden. Except for potentially the specific market timing sometimes required for founding a startup, the two years will not set anyone back on on the 6+ decades scale of anyone’s career.

You meet so many incredible people, get to try on so many hats, and learn for the sake of learning. All in a care-free, (mostly) stress-free environment.

Also the network is more valuable in the long run than anyone usually talks about.

**On deciding what to work on:**

When selecting a problem or industry on which to focus, founders should score problems (or industries) on two dimensions: **Personal Interest** and **Revenue Potential.**

**Personal Interest**

* How much would you enjoy doing user interviews and market research in the space?
* Do you have — or do you want to have — a personal connection to the space?
* Have you experienced and how well do you understand the problem statement/pain point?
* Can you see yourself committing to this problem/industry in the long term? In other words, fast forward 10 years: this is now what you are known for…how does that make you feel?
* Are you ready/excited to become an expert in this area?

**Revenue Potential**

* It is very important to note that this is NOT *current* revenue potential: for example, a problem can score high on “Revenue Potential” if the founder believes the market seems small today but will grow over time and/or the founder believes there are obvious market adjacencies in which to expand once successful.
* What is the growth rate of that market? Is it expanding or contracting?
* How much of that market can you realistically capture? How do you plan to do so/what is your competitive advantage? What are your barriers to entry?
* What is the plausibility of the business models you could pursue?

For a specific idea, you’ll also want to think about:

Why You? Why are you the right person to be solving this problem? This is sometimes called “founder-market fit”

Why Now? what has changed to either make this problem exist now in a way it has not or to make this problem solvable now in a way it has not?

**Some quotes I like:**

“The only type of failure is a failure of effort”

“All we can do is everything we can do”

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

― **Maya Angelou**

"The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second-best time is now"