

100 Days of Techstars

Dom Davis



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For my wife, who let me go and play for 3 months.

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Prologue

100 Days of Techstars

It seems fitting that I write this after only two hours sleep. Hopefully the writing style will match the slightly manic and incoherent style of the rest of this book. It's contents were, after all, usually written around midnight, after a 16 hour day, when I was exhausted.

You see, I was lucky enough to go to Techstars. Our company, Rainbird, was one of ten that went through the London 2014 Winter Techstars programme. Techstars is a thirteen week, mentor driven tech accelerator that takes early stage startups and attempts to cram two years growth, development and learning into three months. Think of it as a cross between startup boot camp, and The Masons for tech.

There's actually very little information out there on what it's like to be part of a Techstars programme. I mean what it's *really* like. Not the broad strokes of a write-up after the fact, or a weekly blog. I know what happens to a company when it goes through an accelerator. What happens to the *people*?

Inspired by a comment made by John Bradford, the Managing Director of Techstars London, I decided to record my experience on a near daily basis. I omitted Saturdays, partly because there usually wasn't a whole load to write about, but mainly so I wouldn't feel obliged to write when I was with my family. I also appear to have missed one Sunday.

What follows is a blow by blow account of being at Techstars in diary format, warts and all. The only constraints were that what was written should not negatively affect Rainbird, Techstars or anyone involved in the programme. It is, after all, a very public record.

Some entries are tame because nothing much new happened during the day. Some are innocuous because I really couldn't publish what I wanted to publish. And some posts are vague, because Techstars is a safe place. What goes on in Techstars stays in Techstars, and I need to respect that. Feel free to read between the lines.

This book is, by and large, unedited from its original form on the blog. I've made some minor typographical corrections, fixed some inaccuracies, and removed or edited some content that doesn't work well in this format. I've also added extra footnotes where further comment would be useful. Otherwise it's a near stream of consciousness account of what Techstars was like for me.

About The Author

Despite later events I am not *the* Dom Davis. He is, I believe, an American football player. It amuses me that during my more active periods online I have more Google juice than him. I am CTO and, by some definitions, co-founder, of a software startup and I am a Techstars Alumni. I believe I hold the distinction of being the first person to blog near daily during a Techstars programme, the result of which you'll find in this book. I describe myself as a *geek, pedant and sarcastic git*. I'm also a rabid mac fanboy.

Oh, and I'm British, and attended Techstars in London. I'm aware some of my turns of phrase may not translate so well for readers from other countries. Just read it in an English accent and smile and nod at the bits you don't understand.

Dramatis Personae

My Family

- **Zo** - My wife, who was pregnant and due a few weeks after Techstars finished
- **Willow** - Our daughter, who had just turned 3 when Techstars started

Rainbird

- **Ben Taylor** - CEO
- **James Duez** - Chairman
- **Chris Wilkinson** - Head of Professional Services, also my flatmate for the duration of our time in London
- **Barry Mears** - Head of Business Development
- **Nathan Roberts** - Senior Software Engineer

Techstars

- **Jon Bradford** - MD, Techstars London

Dates and Times

Each entry contains the date and time it was originally published. Quite often the date will be in the early hours of the following day so it sometimes seems there are two entries on some days and none on others.

My typical pattern was to write an entry and post it just before going to sleep. Since I woke up at 6am every week day (except where noted) you can actually track how much sleep I was getting during the week.

Entries for Friday and Sunday were typically written on the train, from home, or from the flat while watching TV. They were generally posted much earlier in the day.

Day 0: Next Stop London



Sunday, 9th November 2014

16:32

I've done enough research over the past few weeks to know there is a metric crapton of information on what Techstars is. Illegitimate child of YCombinator, huge international tech accelerator. Blah. Blah. Blah.

And yet there's very little information on what it actually **is** - as in what does it really mean to be going on a three month boot camp with some of the best startups in the world? There are a couple of very [interesting](#)¹ [blogs](#)² which help give an idea, but I'm really not sure what to expect. I guess we'll find out...

So yeah, I joined a startup and in, what... less than five months I've managed to hitch a ride to Techstars. I do know one thing: it's going to be mental!

Last week we mothballed the Norwich office, sent our kit down to our new office space and prepared to say goodbye to our families. For the next three to four months we're going to be living and working (and working, and working) London.

¹<http://blog.spatch.co/archive>

²<https://medium.com/@Jackovin/latest>

So what do we know at the moment? Well going to London isn't a huge issue - we're living and working in my old stomping ground. I can get the "essential"³ parts of my life into a large suitcase, a gym bag and a rucksack (and I could have done away with the gym bag if I really had to) - really doesn't seem enough. I know I've forgotten something, I just don't know what yet. Oh, and explaining to a three year old that she won't see me until next weekend isn't easy⁴... especially since there are going to be much longer periods where she doesn't see me.

Sad that I am to leave my family for so long I need to be pragmatic. I've done the Cromer-to-London weekend commute before and it's punishing. Chuck in weekend engineering works, long work hours and the mountain of work that I know is coming my way and I can see me burnt out before Christmas - I am, after all, rapidly approaching 40.

So, next stop London... Well, technically the next stop is Salhouse, I'm just not getting off there; and I'll be changing at Norwich - there's a reason why I describe myself as a pedant.

³Not entirely sure it's all essential. I've got gym kit, clubbing kit, about 100 glow sticks, a few kitchen gadgets, double the number of t-shirts I can wear in a week, and who knows what else in there. It's scary how small you can pack your life down to if you need to.

⁴"Daddy, it's nap time, not work time. We say 'goodnight' not 'goodbye'!"



Everything I need for three months... and some stuff I don't. Doesn't seem enough

Week 1

Day 1: Treasure Hunt



Monday, 10th November 2014

22:15

Arrive early. Watch as one of our team manages to bugger up the entry system (albeit not too badly). Get settled. Start introducing ourselves. Sit through a long (but interesting) introductory presentation. Get introduced to everyone. Instantly forget everyone's name.

Lunch.

Head out for a treasure hunt. Decide not to take umbrella because, hey, what's the worst that could happen? Get wet. Meet some really cool new people. Rescue team member who gets separated from their group⁵. Have a few beers. Meet more people. Have a curry. Meet more people. Head back to the office. Grab stuff, go back to the flat⁶. Check email. Check Twitter. Check chat. Blog. Die.

And in the background, relentlessly ticking down, is this thing.

⁵Yup, same team member that had the issue with the entry system...

⁶I'm in two minds as to call the flat 'home', or Techstars 'home'. I suspect it'll end up being the latter.



The Techstars Clock of Doom

Day 2: Daddy needs a new pair of shoes



Wednesday, 12th November 2014

00:20

I need a new pair of shoes, quite desperately. The whys and the wherefores are unimportant. I simply need to go to a shop, try on shoes, find a pair that actually fit and purchase them.

Given day 2 of Techstars is ostensibly a “day off” - that is no activities or meetings are planned - I figured I could pop out over lunch some time. I was wrong.

Cue one fifteen and a half hour day focusing on our “homework” (the *real* reason we had the day off from other activities), actually getting some work done, waiting for photographs to be taken⁷, having working lunches, having a working dinner⁸, and finally finishing our homework⁹.

Maybe “day off” was a poor choice of words.

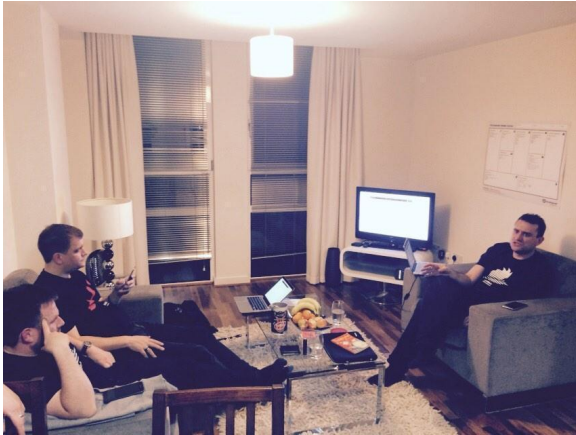
Tomorrow morning is rammed with meetings, but the afternoon is looking promising to steal some time and

⁷This was when the work actually got done as we were all at our desks waiting to be called for a couple of hours

⁸OK, so the intention was to have a working dinner. Space considerations and a need to take a break put paid to that though.

⁹For a given definition of “finish”. It was late, brains were fried and we may have been a bit less diligent with the last few bits.

sort the footwear problem. I could probably do with going to a supermarket too. And sleep. Sleep would be nice. So with that, I bid you goodnight¹⁰...



Burning the midnight oil

¹⁰It is quite literally 00:15 and I have a meeting at 08:30 so you'll forgive me if I don't refine the wording of this entry, polish the prose, and make it my normal eloquent drivel - I suspect quite a lot of the entries are going to be rawer due to the lack of time and lack of sleep.

Day 3: The first rule of CTO club...



Thursday, 13th November 2014

00:19

I think it's safe to say I didn't get enough sleep last night. I suspect this is going to be a common theme given it's 23:50 already and I'm still not quite ready to hit the sack. That said, I think we barely managed a 13 hour working day before bugging off to get some food. Chuck in the fact that I had to run to Oxford Street¹¹ during lunch and it was practically a half day.

Today was a bit different for me as I had CTO club. The first rule of CTO club is that you don't talk about CTO club. The second rule of CTO club is that if you don't get stuck into the chocolate croissants near the beginning of the meeting I'm going to have eaten them all¹².

The CTO meetings are likely to be invaluable to me as, while I bring a fair amount of experience to the table, most of that experience is as a developer. OK, so I've been a team lead, development head and even a Head of IT before, but all that's crammed into the very last portion of my career. Part of me still views myself as a

¹¹I now have shoes!

¹²Although to be fair there were only 2 or 3 of them and I did offer them about before stuffing my face.

naive 22 year old who's just starting out in a support team.

We also had our first Deep Dive with Jon Bradford¹³ and his team. It was nowhere near as brutal as I was expecting - in fact it was practically pleasant. Yes, there are issues that we need to address, some quite large, but then that's why we're here; to get help and guidance on some of these larger issues. There'd be no point in doing the programme if we had it all worked out.

We topped the day off with dinner and a team discussion over the outcome of both the Deep Dive, and last night's homework (which was very much an exercise to get us thinking about the kinds of issues that would be brought up in the Deep Dive). I also have some of my own ideas, but I'm reserving judgement until after the first week of mentor meetings.

I then utterly failed to get to the supermarket to buy the growing list of things I could really do with buying. The likelihood is that I will completely fail to get to the shops tomorrow today too as we've got a 6pm meeting, followed by a Techstars Alumni panel, followed by drinks... also, how the hell is it Thursday already?

¹³The MD of Techstars London



Psychologically there is a big difference between 100 days left and 99 days left

Day 4: Screw the diet



Thursday, 13th November 2014

23:57

Before we came to London there was a very real understanding that we were going to have to look after ourselves, insofar as making sure we ate reasonable well, exercised, and all that malarkey. The gym has been sadly absent this week, purely down to the lack of gym passes (which should be sorted tomorrow), but I have been making a point of doing some exercises in my room every morning and I use the stairs rather than the lifts.

On the food front it's been a mixed bag. Dinners have, on the whole, not been great. Breakfasts have been healthy, and lunches haven't been all that bad. Treats and snacks have been pretty much non-existent - I know, how pious am I?

Except I'm getting 6 hours sleep a night, with pretty much 17 hours a day dedicated to working and networking and the final hour left for me to do mundane things like shower and walk to and from work. Annoyingly I'd like to be able to spend **more** time working each day, it's just physically impossible.

You need to consider that I'm basically a highly evolved machine designed to turn sugar into code. It's what I

do. And today I hit the wall. So I did the only thing I knew: headed to the supermarket and bough £15 worth of sugary and chocolatey crap. That did the job.

Obviously a large bar of chocolate, half a box of Ferrero Rocher, a chocolate doughnut and half a large bag of sweets isn't a sustainable diet, but I do think it represented the bursting of the dam... actually, the chocolate croissant and hot chocolate I had this morning, followed by a fairly large tube of Smarties was the bursting of the dam, this was more like the flooding of the lowlands and the destruction of everything downstream, but I digress.

The choices seem to be scale back the hours, sleep more, eat properly, exercise and generally be sensible; or accept that the diet may need to involve more sugar if I'm going to be able to maintain the pace I've set. My personal preference? Given how hard it is to get into Techstars your options are either go large, or go home¹⁴, so screw the diet!

¹⁴Or, as it turned out, get large, then go home - I put on a stone during the programme. And to think I was kidding myself about just a couple of bits of chocolate a day just to keep the brain fuelled.



I should probably point out that the other 5 are all eating nothing but organic health foods and drinking pure spring water. It's just me eating the crap, and I'm not just saying that for the benefit of other peoples wives...

Day 5: Week 1 Summary



Friday, 14th November 2014

20:21

So you'll recall that I came to London with a suitcase, bag and rucksack. Look - there's even a photo to remind you.



Everything I need for three months... and some stuff I don't. Doesn't seem enough

I've returned to Norfolk for the weekend with just the bag and the rucksack (no photo, it's dark - use your imagination and remove the suitcase from the scene). I wouldn't have bought the bag, but I've quite literally

not had time to do any washing during the week¹⁵. I've not really had time to do anything other than work, talk about work and network.

It's a really bizarre feeling to be heading home. In some respects it feels like I've barely been away. It's not even been 5 minutes since we first stepped into the Techstars office and time is just running away from me. In other respects it feels like it's been 5 months since I left home and we've achieved an awesome amount of stuff. Time is becoming malleable, and my recollection of when events happened unreliable. We were warned this would happen¹⁶, I just thought it would take a few weeks to kick in.

Weirdly enough my view on a few things around the Rainbird, Techstars, and the cohort seem to also suffer from many diametrically opposed but simultaneously held theories¹⁷. You could describe them as quantum states waiting to collapse, although that's probably me just talking out of my arse due to extreme fatigue. Who knows.

So, what have we achieved? Well, we're taken the company to bits and we're starting to put it back together. We're likely to find a few washers left over when we're

¹⁵There's also the whole not liking tumble dried clothes thing, and don't worry, I'll not be dumping the washing on my wife.

¹⁶Hence this journal. It's more so I can remember exactly what happened than anything else.

¹⁷I hesitate to say beliefs because they're too transient and intangible. I've already completely flipped on one theory in the space of a day.

done (“So where does this bit go?”), but that’s a way away. At the moment we’ve got past the list of bits we should have and are now at the little pictograms of the guy telling us the tools we’ll need, how many people are needed to lift the company during building, and what to do if bits are needed¹⁸.

We’ve not killed each other, fallen out with each other, sniped at each other or had an argument¹⁹. This is a good thing and will become a bigger and bigger achievement as time goes on.

We’ve written some code. OK, Nathan has written some code and Ben and I have pissed about with a few simple changes, but hey, you know, teamwork and all that. We’ve even released Beta 0.2.0 which really just means that I **finally** remembered to increment the version number.

And we’ve met some really cool, and scarily intelligent people which is more than a bit daunting. We’re still getting to know each other, but I can already see that we’re forming bonds that will last well beyond this process. Oh, and since I know that this is read by the wives and girlfriends of *Team Rainbird* I feel morally obliged to state that we’ve managed to achieve the perfect mix of eating well, exercising properly and looking after ourselves.

¹⁸Which seems to involve building your stuff in the Ikea car park and having a phone on a really long extension cable that reaches into the store if you have problems. I’m guessing they have customer phones in the lobby that reach into the car park for exactly this purpose.

¹⁹Yet... I’ve been tetchy a few times but have worked hard not to show it.

We've also put aside time each day to tell each other how wonderful our families and loved ones are, and quietly reflect each night on how lucky we are while all the time counting the milliseconds until we are reunited²⁰.

²⁰And next week we mean to solve P vs NP (If it means nothing to you Google it, or ignore it and move on. Actually, that's probably best, I've started to ramble).

Day 7: Week 2 Prologue



Sunday, 16th November 2014

21:43

So I had a big long debate with myself over whether I should do weekend updates or not - and also how to deal with the day numberings. Techstars is a 13 week, or 90 day programme. The astute among you will notice that $13 \times 7 = 91$. *Demo Day* is on the last Friday so we shouldn't include the last weekend, and I'm pretty sure that would make it an 89 day programme²¹.

It gets worse though. Thanks to Christmas we also get a 2 week break with the programme being split into one 7 week and one 6 week session.

So, our *Clock of Doom* counted down from 103²² days which is 14 full weeks and one 5 day week. All of which begs the question: "*How the hell do I number these?*"

The solution I'm going to go for is to count weeks as 7 days long, and then ignore the two week break. This means that anyone doing any research on what it's like to be at Techstars London will be able to correlate entries

²¹That said I got Demo Day on the wrong day on my original post so there is no guarantee that any of my logic is correct.

²²Which actually makes a mockery of the title of this book, but I felt "*100 Days of Techstars*" sounded punchier. It's roughly correct for a given margin of error.

with the actual programme rather than time elapsed for me. Make sense? No? Tough, I'm just killing time on the train.

Which leads me to the reason why I decided I would do an update this weekend: I've got a 3 hour commute most weekends and it's going to get old fast. I know this because I'm only on the 3rd journey²³ for Techstars and it's already got old. I've also previously spent a few months doing the Cromer to London run at weekends when I first started seeing my wife. It wasn't fun then either.

As to my weekend, it was great to see my family again. When I went into my daughters room on Saturday morning²⁴ I was greeted by an emphatic "Daddy, I *knew* you'd come back!" followed by her launching herself at me for a hug. This, of course, makes the leaving again all the harder.

Oh, and I got some sleep, although not quite as much as I needed. I've noticed, looking back on last week, that the entries were getting more and more manic as my tired brain decided to filter less and less²⁵. I suspect this will be a recurring pattern with Fridays post's being the most flippant.

²³Out, home and now back out again. That's almost 60 hours on the train if I was to do the journey every weekend, and with the inevitable delays it's pretty much guaranteed to be over 60 hours.

²⁴She was asleep when I got home on Friday night.

²⁵Although a fair amount still hit the cutting room floor.