$ apify run -i '{ "version": 10 }'

The Apify story.

Ten years of making the web more programmable.

On the telling of stories

In all storytelling, there exists what we might call a “missing contract” — an unwritten, ever-evolving agreement between the story and its reader. This contract is never fully concluded, never completely defined. It shifts with each telling, each reading, each remembering.

When we set out to tell the story of a company, we enter into countless such agreements. There is the agreement between the events as they happened and the events as they were remembered. Between the teller and the listener. Between what was said in the moment and what feels true years later. Between the official record and the lived experience. Between this version of the story and all the versions that might have been told instead.

Each person who lived it carries their own agreement with those shared experiences, equally valid, yet inevitably different. The founders’ agreements differ from those of the early employees, which differ in turn from the casual reader’s. None is less true for being singular in its perspective.

What matters is not that we agree on every detail, but that we acknowledge the very existence of these multiple agreements. That we recognize each perspective as unique to the person holding it, shaped by their particular moment of viewing, their role in the unfolding, their distance from or proximity to the events themselves.

Some voices are missing from these pages, not by design, but because no single telling can capture every viewpoint, every memory, every truth. This book represents our best attempt to capture the essence of Apify’s remarkable decade, but we recognize it is but one telling among many possible tellings of this story.

We invite you to continue the conversation. The story of Apify is still being written, and every voice matters in shaping how that story is told and remembered.

INDEX

```
// Chapter 1: Inception
function problemSolving() {
    const frustration = identifyGap();
    return buildSolution(frustration);
}
```

Apify was conceived in a place where necessity bumped up against imagination.

The year is 2014. Apple unveils the bigger, sleeker iPhone 6, Tesla announces self-driving cars, and VR glasses come into view with Google releasing their Cardboard thingy alongside their much more expensive cousins from Samsung and Oculus Rift. Meanwhile under the hood, dynamic JavaScript is truly coming into its own, powering the interactive experiences that make us fall in love with the web all over again.

It's all very pretty.

But beneath that polish hides a problem. These same dynamic interfaces, the menus that load on demand, the content that updates without refreshing, and the interactive elements that make the web more accessible and intuitive for humans to navigate, are the very things that make the web inscrutable to deeper dives.

Human-first design has come at a cost: Computers can't easily access the deeper data hidden behind these web pages.

Here in Prague, two young developers have been thinking deeply about this problem, and are about to embark on a project that will unlock the web itself.

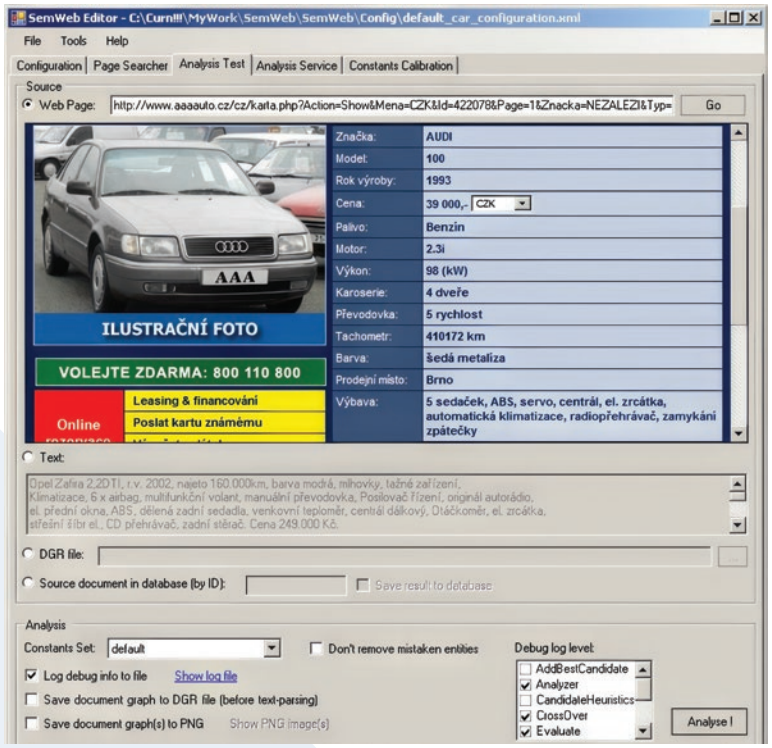
Before the beginning: Two students with a dream

There's another beginning to this story. One that stretches back many years before this to the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics of the Charles University in Prague, where two Information Technology students, Jan Čurn and Jakub Balada, first cross paths.

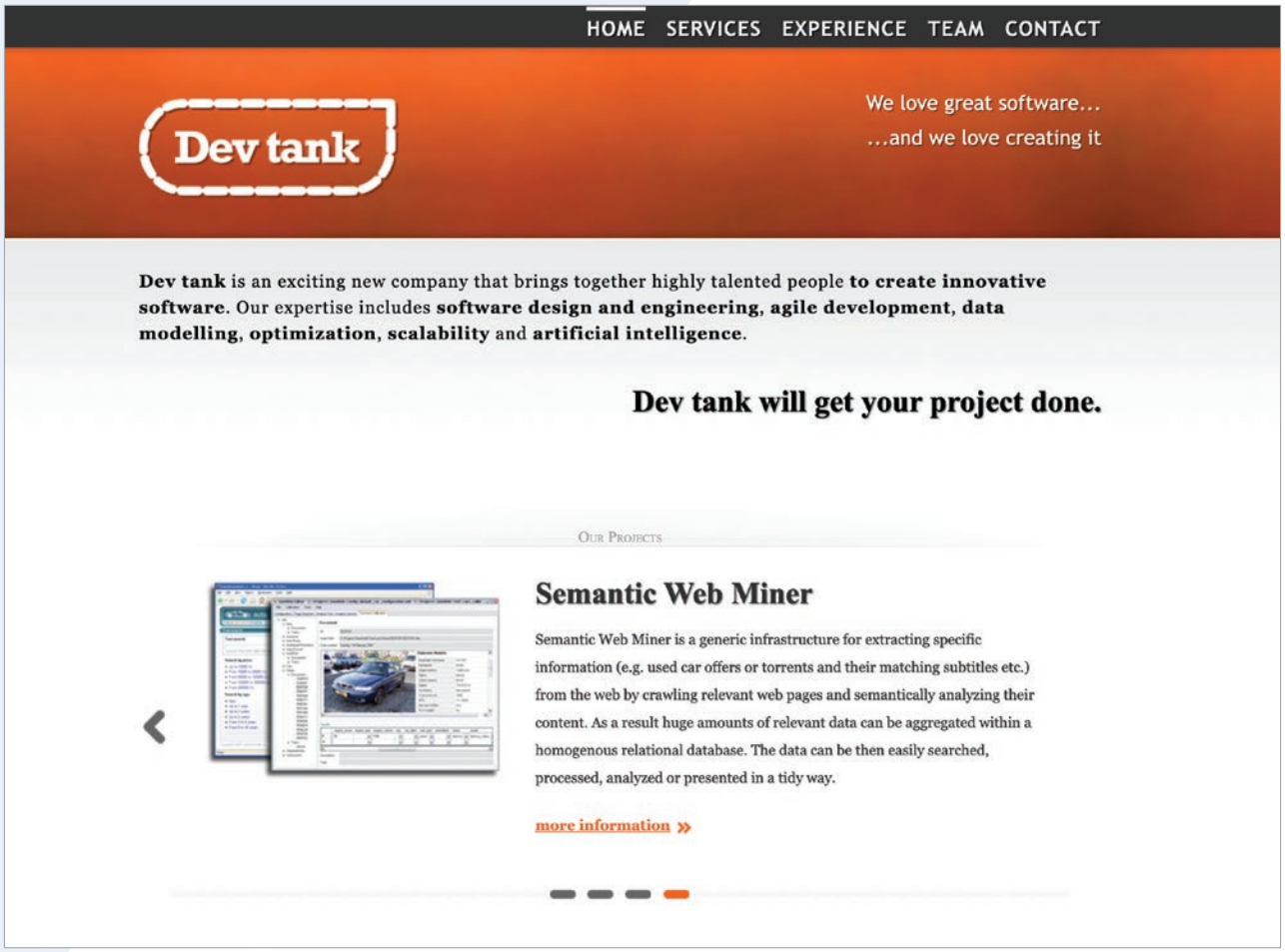
It is here that the seeds of what would eventually become Apify begin to sprout. Jan, working with other colleagues (though not yet with Jakub), on a school project, builds an app designed to extract data from used car websites and list the results from multiple portals in one place (aptly called najednommiste.cz). The project goes beyond a simple aggregator. Jan and his team have built what he calls a "proto AI system" – long before LLMs and the AI revolution. It's ambitious for its time: a semantic web analyzer that can theoretically parse information from any used car listing across dozens of different sites.

They launch it. Defend it academically. Even create a live website to display the offering. For a moment, it seems like they've cracked the code.

But the system is "fairly clunky," in Jan's words. It works on some websites and fails on others. The accuracy is poor. Most critically, people just aren't using it. Despite the technical achievement, they can't get any real traction. The stars are not yet aligned for this piece of technology, and the project is relegated to a drawer in the corner of someone's office.



SemWeb, the early semantic web analyzer for used car listings that foreshadowed the data extraction technology that would later become Apify.



The Dev tank website. What started as a consultancy would soon pivot to product development, setting the stage for Apify's future.

Fast forward a few years later. Jan and Jakub join forces to form a company called Dev tank, an entity that allows them to market their various and respective consulting talents under a unified name in the hopes of giving their endeavors more weight. "We felt that having a brand, a company name, would give us more credibility," Jan explains. "It was just a little weird that we were behaving like solo contractors working for these large corporations, so we decided to group ourselves under a company to be more organized and more memorable."

Dev tank becomes a training ground, a place to practice the technical expertise and client-handling skills that will later prove crucial for Apify's success. Life goes on. But as is often the case with these things, both founders are becoming restless.

"We had the same feeling, me and Jan, that we didn't want to operate like a consultancy. We wanted to try to build a product," Jakub recalls. "This was the main reason we started thinking about how we could start some other type of business, something more along the lines of a tech startup than a regular agency."

This growing dissatisfaction with selling their time rather than building something lasting will become the catalyst for their next chapter.

The puzzle that unlocked everything

"What we needed was something that could crawl websites with arbitrarily complex or irregular structure, could handle dynamic websites (understand JavaScript), and be simple for developers to use."

Back in the world of mundane things like paying bills and such, Jan Čurn and Jakub Balada are busy on a consulting project. Curiously, the client for this project had seen a mention of the dormant Semantic Web Analyzer project on their Dev tank site and requested something along similar lines; They want an app that will extract large amounts of data from various real estate websites regularly and reliably. Seems simple enough. But there's a hurdle. None of the tools available at that time is suitable for the job.

All the existing options are fundamentally flawed; software tools that look impressive in demos but break the moment a website adds a discount banner; or solutions that treat every website like a static HTML document, unable to process the dynamic JavaScript rendering used. These tools work reliably only for a dwindling number of websites.

Absurd! The pair thinks. Here they are, web developers who live and breathe JavaScript every day, who can write jQuery selectors to manipulate any element on any website. Why are they forced to use tools that can't handle the dynamic, JavaScript-driven web they actually work with?

It is at this point that they make the decision that sets them on the journey about to unfold in the pages of this book: they will simply have to write their own tool.

PhantomJS: The little ghost that helped unlock the dynamic web

PhantomJS became a key component in Jan and Jakub's emerging solution. While traditional scraping tools could only read static HTML like a text document, PhantomJS emerged as the first headless browser on the market. It could execute JavaScript, wait for dynamic content to load, and interact with websites exactly as a human user would. It meant they could write jQuery selectors to extract data from any website, no matter how complex its JavaScript interactions were.

An accidental application

By the summer of 2015, our protagonists are making headway. They have a working command-line crawler based on PhantomJS, some early traction, a list of possible domain names for what might become a cloud service, and a growing sense that they might be onto something. Then, in a fortuitous twist of fate, they get wind of Silicon Valley's latest experiment in startup evangelism: the newly instantiated Y Combinator Fellowship program.

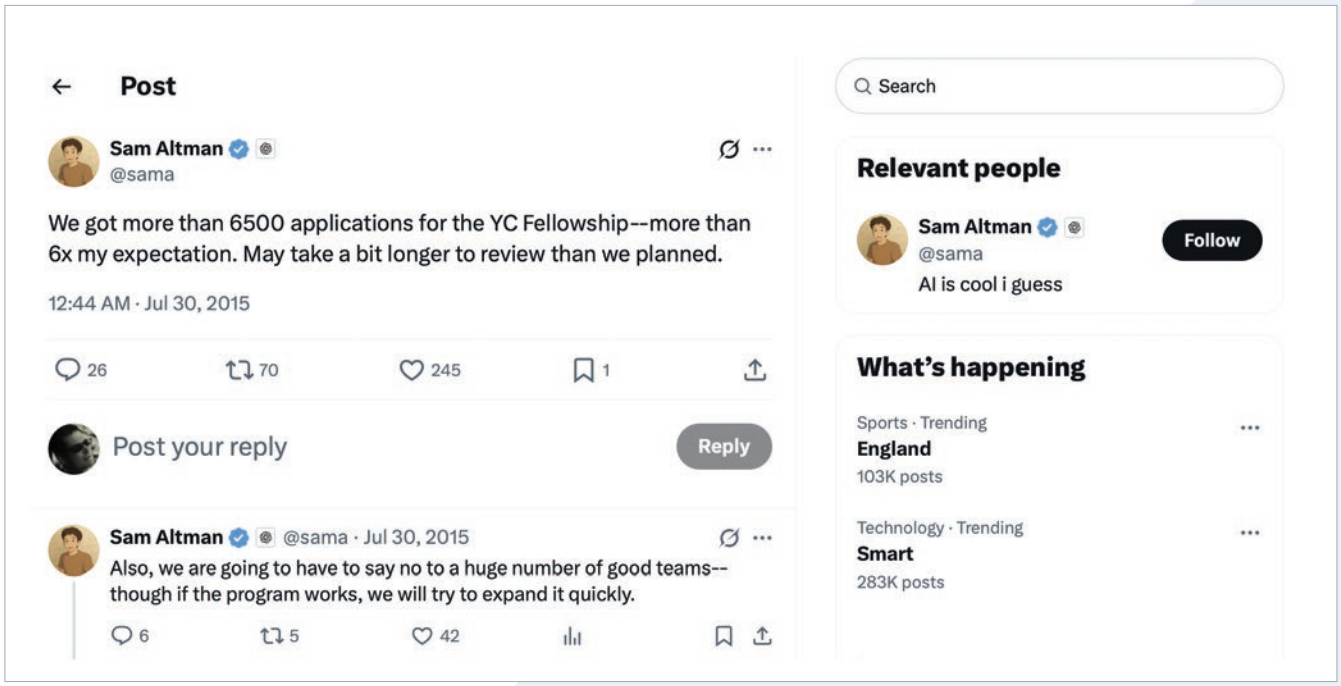
Sam Altman, taking over from Paul Graham, wants to experiment with scaling Y Combinator beyond its traditional scope. The Fellowship is one of several experiments being run by the accelerator (YC Research, which spawned OpenAI, being another).

The timing is perfect, albeit compressed, recalls Jakub, "They announced it, and it was like, okay, the deadline for applications is one week from now."

The duo set about preparing their submission, and in what will later become a legendary tale among their friends, Jan accidentally clicks 'submit' instead of 'save draft' on their application, sending it in a full three days before the deadline.

With that, the die is cast.

Says Jan of that fateful click, "I think it actually helped because if you get 6,000 applications on the last day, but only five in the middle of the week, you can more easily read the early ones but you might run out of time to evaluate the later ones properly."



6,500 applications. 30 final spots. A very small chance of success. Sam Altman's tweet at the time perfectly expresses just how competitive and special it is to get selected.

Reading their submission years later, you can see how the seeds of Apify's mission and strategy were already formed.

Even then their vision jumped off the page:

- *Apifier will be a cloud service for developers to turn any website into an API ... quick and simple.*
- *There are millions of websites whose content can only be consumed by humans but is unusable by apps. We see a huge opportunity there.*
- *None of [the competitors] is able to crawl websites with irregular structure, or work on responsive sites with JavaScript.*

The good news arrives a week later. They are among the 60 projects selected from 6,000 applicants. But as Jakub explains, there is a catch: only 30 out of 60 will go forward, so to maximise their chances they must fly to San Francisco to attend the interview in person.

10,000 kilometers for a 10-minute interview

With nothing to lose (except the cost of the flights) and everything to gain, Jan and Jakub head west, like so many pioneers before them, in search of their own treasure – validation from the world's most prestigious startup accelerator.

Prague to San Francisco for a 10-minute interview! "If you asked us that day how it went we couldn't tell you whether we did well or not," Jan writes of the interview. "The time flew by as quickly as people said it would. The interview was over before we had a chance to mention most of the points that we planned."

With the interview over, Jan and Jakub spend the evening in San Francisco, before hitting scenic Highway 1 toward Los Angeles the next morning. Large parts of the highway have no cell coverage, making it impossible to check for the follow-up email.

The uncertainty is torture. No signal. No email. No way to know if their 10,000-kilometer gamble has paid off.

Eventually, they get the news they are hoping for. They're in. And now the hard part begins.

The legendary hacker house

The pair move into a so-called Hacker House in Mountain View, run by two local heroes, Lily and David, a couple who have sheltered startup dreamers for years.

What follows is a kind of beautiful madness informed by YC's famous intensity. "For us, for two guys from Prague, it was something completely different," Jakub remembers. "They told us we should do nothing else but work on the product. No meetings, no conferences, no meetups, no anything. And forget about having a social life."

To drive the point home, YC gives them the ultimate productivity hack: "The next day we just got a huge pack of Soylent" Jakub continues, "which was a kind of bottled food that you can just drink and not need to eat anything else."

Days blur into nights, screens glow at all hours, and empty Soylent bottles stack up around their workspace.

Wake. Code. Exercise. Consume Soylent. Code. Sleep. Repeat.

"It's pretty amazing how much work can be done if you work 12–14 hours a day, 7 days a week."

“We basically worked like that day and night, seven days a week, from morning to late night.”

Soylent, YC’s ‘ultimate productivity hack’ that fueled the ‘beautiful madness’ of startup life in Mountain View.

Hello world: October 20, 2015

After what seems like an eternity of long hours and endless soylent-filled days, Apifier (the original name before Apify) is ready for the world.

On October 20, 2015, they release it into the wild with a post on Hacker News. They get 2,200 visitors, 101 upvotes, and most importantly, 120 people who actually sign up to try what they have built.

The post itself captures their philosophy perfectly.

"Today, we're bringing you what we built for ourselves. With Apifier, you can define your own crawler or web scraping tool in just a few minutes. There is no need to setup any servers, proxies, cron jobs, databases and it is easily programmable using simple JavaScript. We hope you'll like it!"

They sign off simply: Jan & Jakub

And with that, Apifier (later Apify) was born. What had started as a solution to their own frustrations had become a tool that anyone can use to extract data from the web without the traditional headaches.

The journey from frustrated developers to Silicon Valley Fellows had taken about a year, but those 120 early users were just the beginning.

Hacker News: Where startups get discovered

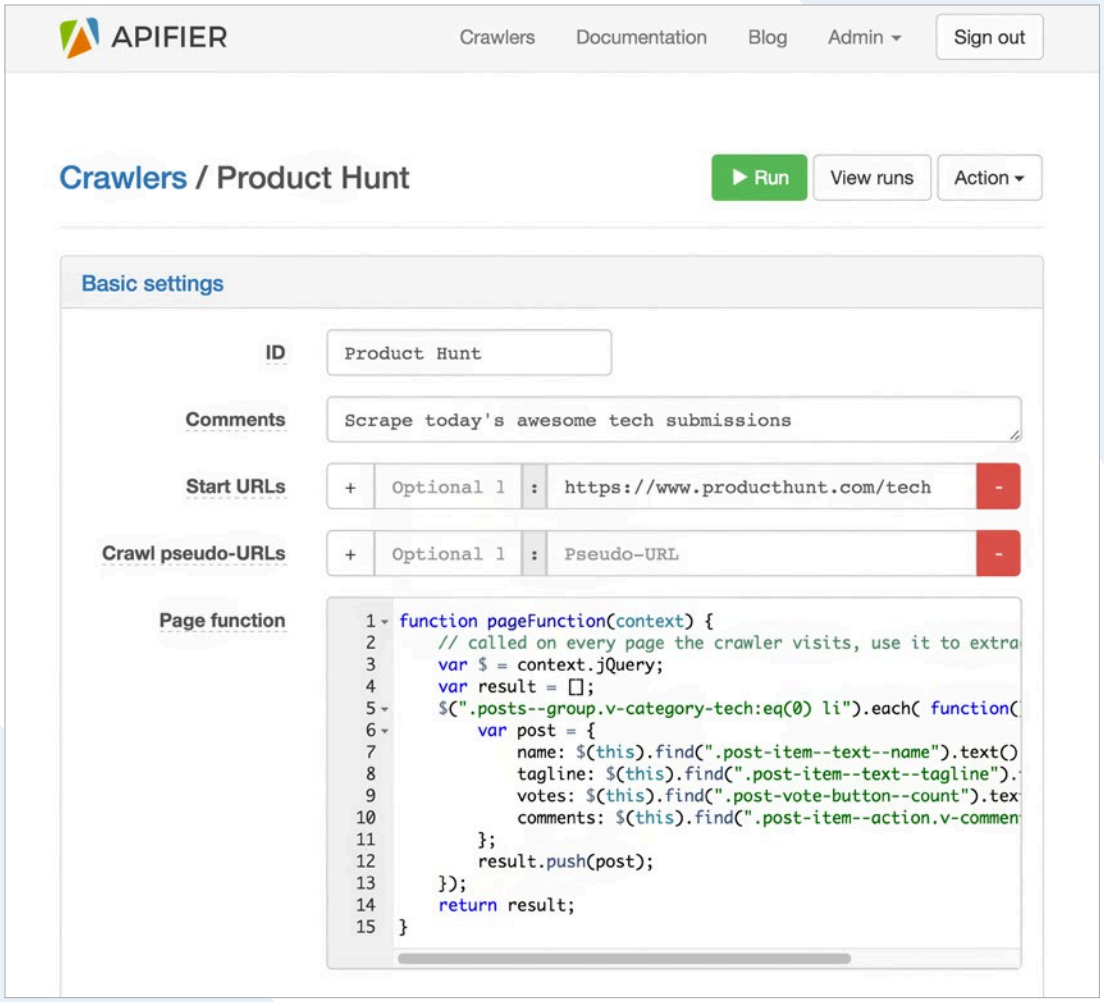
Hacker News is Y Combinator's online community and news aggregator. Think of it as the internet's startup watercooler, where developers, entrepreneurs, and tech nerds gather to argue about the latest innovations and discover what's actually worth paying attention to.

For new startups, posting on the site is basically the modern equivalent of standing on a soapbox in Silicon Valley and hoping people listen. Get it right, and thousands of potential users will check out what you've built. Get it wrong, and ... well, at least you tried. Either way, it's where you go when you're ready to find out if your idea actually makes sense to anyone besides you.

What's in a name? How Apifier became Apify

The vision for Apifier was clear from the beginning: to build a tool that would let anyone easily turn any website into an API. Hence the word Apify (as in 'to API-fy'). The only problem was that apify.com was already taken.
So the founders went hunting for alternatives and discovered that apifier.com was available. An 'Apifier', they reasoned, was simply someone who API-fies things. Close enough. They bought the domain and got back to building.
But 'Apify' never really left their minds. It was the name that captured exactly what they were trying to do, and they quietly harbored hopes that someday they'd find a way to claim it.

Spoiler alert; it all worked out in the end.



In just two months Jan and Jakub transformed a PhantomJS-based tool into a web application for anyone to use, giving birth to Apifier.

```
// Chapter 2: Finding believers
async function raiseCapital(investors) {
    const termSheets = await pitchTheVision(investors);
    return secureFundingRound(termSheets);
}
```

Sometimes the best funding stories aren't about the hunt, but about unexpected meetings.

With the YC Fellowship behind them and the demo-day applause now a distant echo, Jan and Jakub returned to Prague with undeniable proof that their idea had potential, as well as a sense of momentum that only YC could have given them. "Having been through all that YC threw at us, it would have been a pity not to continue," Jan reflects. "It gave us critical momentum. We were on it full time for two months. We were actually able to launch it and get some early traction. And I think without pushing so hard in the beginning, it wouldn't have happened."

It's here that our narrative diverges from that of a typical startup. Instead of immediately launching into fundraising mode, Jan and Jakub dove headlong into their work with a handful of early customers, letting those initial revenue streams help cover the bills as they focused on growing the company.

"We had some other sources of income," Jan explains matter-of-factly. "We had a few customers, so it was generating a little revenue, and we could just keep building without external funding."

By accident or by design, they were already building a real business with real revenue, while maintaining their independence.

Show me the money

The real money-moment came via a technology-focused startup competition called Nápad roku ('Idea of the Year') in early 2016. Jan and Jakub were in attendance to showcase what they had built, and perhaps win some recognition for their growing platform.

It was there that they met VC company INCOMMING ventures, and through them, another investor, Ondřej Fryc, who would become a long-term partner and advocate for Apify's vision.

"He trusted us from the beginning," Jan recalls. What made Fryc different from other potential investors was a combination of relevant experience and genuine understanding of what they were building. "He liked the fact that we had been in Y Combinator ... he knew what web scraping was because he was from an e-commerce background."

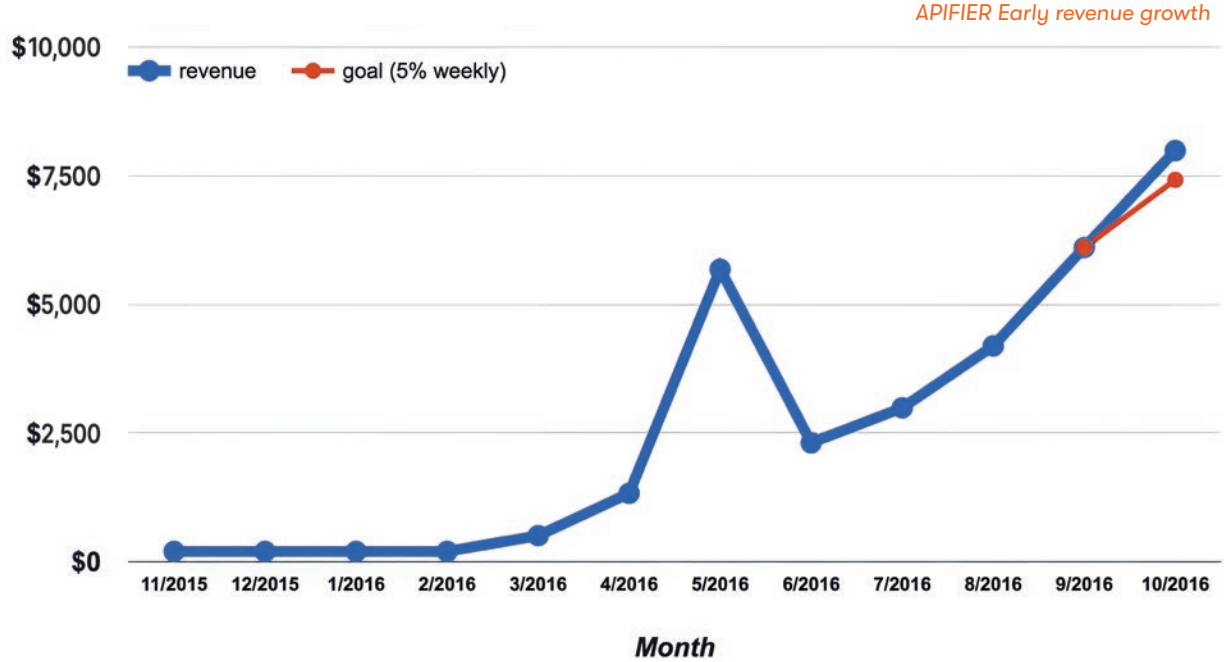
Fryc understood the technical challenges and business potential because he'd lived in the e-commerce world where data extraction was a daily necessity. When most investors would need a ten-minute primer on what web scraping was and why it mattered, Fryc immediately grasped both the problem and the opportunity.

INCOMMING ventures and Ondřej Fryc's Spread Capital (now called Reflex Capital) committed to the project, and Jan and Jakub were able to start building their team. The funding meant they could finally hire beyond themselves and start paying proper salaries.

Later INCOMMING ventures sold their shares to Reflex Capital, who became the main investor. This consolidation would make Fryc and Reflex Capital the primary institutional backers, setting the stage for a deeper, long-term partnership.

By 2018, Apify had nearly 200 recurring customers from around the world, including several Fortune 500 companies, with turnover growing at an average rate of 18% per month. When Reflex Capital doubled down with a bridge investment in June of that year, valuing the company at $5.5 million, it was further validation that the believers had been right all along.

APIFIER Early revenue growth



"We had some other sources of income," Jan explains matter-of-factly. "We had a few customers, so we were already generating revenue, and we could just keep building without external funding."


padroku 2016
fone
MSD
SAP

```
// Chapter 3: Building the dream
class ApifyPlatform {
    constructor() {
        architectActors();
        transformStore();
        buildCommunity();
    }
}
```

Make something people want.

The funding that emerged from their Nápad roku encounter served as both mirror and engine, reflecting back the potential others saw in their team and vision, while at the same time providing the fuel to chase something bigger. No one was getting rich just yet, but at least the dream could afford to hire some help.

Their first 'office' was a perfect cameo in a story that you couldn't make up if you tried; three seats at a six-seat table along with the titular members of an outfit called Three Queens, as they couldn't afford the full table. It was a picture directly out of central casting.

Musical chairs

The team grew, and with it, their need for more space. Finding and managing offices fell largely to Jakub while Jan focused on development. "Jan was programming the platform. I was more responsible for accounting and for the offices and basically all operations," Jakub explains, "and we moved maybe four times in the first three or four years."

The most important move came through pure serendipity. As Jakub recalls, "I was on my way from the office to the train station (I live in Pardubice, so I was commuting) via the Lucerna passage, when I met a friend of ours, Jirka Vicherek. We spoke briefly and I told him that we were looking for a new office."

What happened next was the kind of coincidence that startups dream about, but is perhaps typical for Apify. Jirka mentioned that he knew a company based right there in Lucerna that was moving out. The next day Jakub approached Lucerna management to ask them whether they had space. They did.

The transition itself happened with typical Apify resourcefulness. The team moved their furniture themselves, with a procession of developers lugging monitors and chairs through Prague's streets. "We went there like four times before we could carry everything," Ondra Urban, Apify's current COO, recalls with a laugh. The new office needed furnishing, and they found the perfect solution: "There was a startup, called Glogster, who had an office where our office is now. They had lots of old chairs, lots of old tables, and they said, 'yeah, guys, just take them; give us a thousand crowns for everything, and you can have the lot'."

So they equipped their new Lucerna office with an eclectic bunch of furniture for the price of a nice dinner.

Jakub adds, "Lucerna was a great place with atmosphere, with history. Did you know that it was actually built by Václav Havel's grandfather? So for us it had a lot of meaning to move into."

The progression from three rented chairs to their own rooms in a historically important building was significant, and was perhaps an omen of good luck on their journey.

A space odyssey: the journey to Lucerna

Humble beginnings (2015)

Impact Hub (2016)

Palác Adria (2017)

From a single shared table in Smichov to the collaborative buzz of Lucerna Palace, each space brought new challenges and discoveries for the growing team as they searched for the right environment to support their expanding ambitions.

Lucerna
(Štěpánská 2018)

Lucerna
(Vodičkova 2022)

The art of building while flying

The early days had their own rhythm, what Jakub Drobník, Apify's first hire, fondly calls "a 'duct tape' approach: rapid prototyping, fixing code based on user feedback." Perhaps exactly the kind of thing Y Combinator has instilled in the founders. "Things were always moving," he recalls with a laugh. "We were constantly helping customers stuck on the old code catch up while rolling out new features and rewriting core parts on the fly."

This incremental approach became core to Apify's technical DNA. As Marek Trunkát, now Apify's CTO, explains: "We did all the changes as evolutions ... step by step, along with our development, rather than stopping everything for six months." The alternative – complete rewrites – was a trap they'd seen kill other companies. "With the rewrite approach you're building the new system while still trying to improve the old system, so you never catch up," he clarifies.

"He calls this being part of the 'Boring Technology Club', referencing Dan McKinley's influential "Choose Boring Technology" essay. "We make technology choices carefully. All teams use the same very homogeneous stack. We do not add new technology often."

This philosophy traces back to a foundational decision they made early on: choosing JavaScript for the entire stack – frontend, backend, and crawling – to avoid the context switching that would come from mixing languages like JavaScript and Python. "That proved a good call," Jan reflects. "It's far too easy to start using something new, but it's incredibly slow to fully adopt it and reach a high level of maturity with a larger team. Fragmenting your stack is extremely expensive in the long run."

What makes Marek's perspective particularly compelling is his journey from the engineering trenches to the CTO chair. When he joined Apify, he came aboard as a full-stack engineer, who like everyone else, was expected to roll up his sleeves and muck in.

His evolution from hands-on coder to technical leader gives weight to his philosophy. When he speaks about technical decisions it's coming from someone who actually built the early versions of the platform, who debugged the original crawlers at 3AM and wrote the code that still runs in production today.

The walls of the old world

What was needed was a tool that could work with the web's natural workflow-based design, not against it.

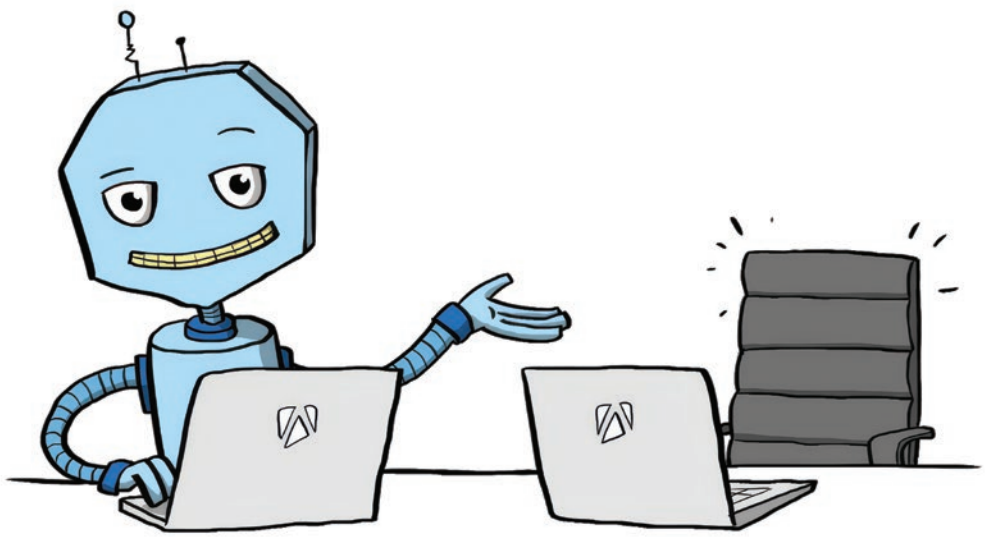
As Marek puts it "Instead of making the Crawler more and more generic, we decided to build a platform where you could build more products that worked together."

Boring technology approach aside, by 2017, Apify's early success was starting to reveal the limitations of what they'd built. What had seemed so revolutionary when they launched it, the simple web crawler that anyone could configure, was becoming the bottleneck that threatened to break them at scale.

Reflecting on the constraints of the original framework, Marek explains, "That architecture was simple in a way that you just visited a page and ran a single function. You were not able to do complex workflows."

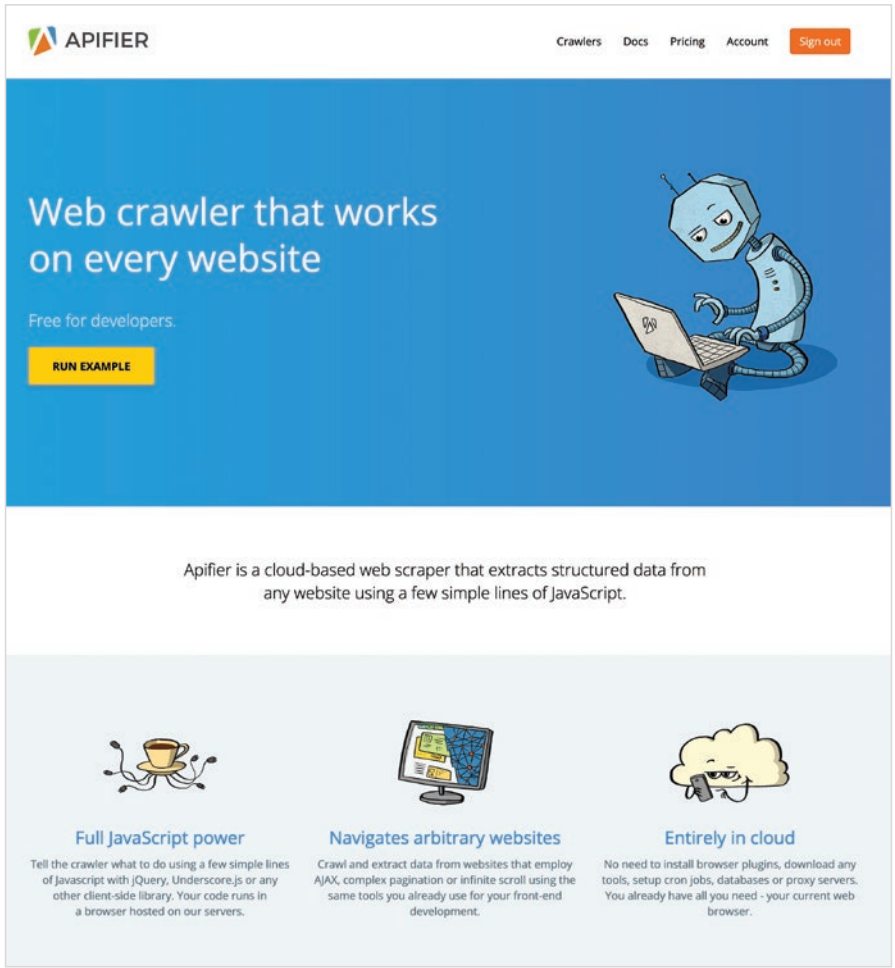
The 'old Crawler' operated in a highly linear fashion: it visited a single web page, ran a pre-defined function on that page, and then moved on to the next, without the ability to manage complex, multi-step sequences.

But the modern web demanded more. While the Crawler could extract data from each page it visited, it couldn't coordinate or chain together multiple steps that reflected real user journeys. For example, it couldn't handle a sequence like logging in, navigating through menus, waiting for dynamically loaded content, and combining results from multiple pages as one logical workflow. Also, the crawler was unable to facilitate more complex automation workflows, such as comparing crawling results between runs and sending emails with differences. People had to build these elsewhere or find very creative ways to tweak the crawler to handle them.



Apify's vintage blue bot mascot: multiple laptops, one server stack, infinite possibilities.

The Actor revolution



On October 9, 2017, the nascent company announced 'the largest upgrade of Apifier to date', introducing the Actor concept alongside a complete platform rebrand from Apifier to Apify. It represented no small reimagining of how the company itself, and indeed web automation, should work.

The transformation was massive, requiring a complete rethinking of Apify's technical foundation. As Jakub Drobnik, who lived through the transition, explains: "It was a bit like performing surgery on a live patient. We transitioned from PhantomJS scrapers to a flexible 'Actor' system capable of running any Docker container."

For the non-technical among us, this meant that where the old system could only run web scrapers; the new system could run ***anything!***

Docker containers: The magic boxes that opened up new possibilities

Think of a Docker container as a perfectly packed suitcase for software. It's a lightweight, standalone package that includes an application and all its necessary components, including code, runtime, system tools, libraries, and settings, so the application runs reliably and consistently in any environment.

For Apify, Docker containers were the breakthrough that let them go from running just a PhantomJS-based crawler to running literally any software. Suddenly, their platform wasn't just for scraping anymore; it could be the foundation for any kind of automation you could dream up.

"An Apify Actor is a serverless computing platform built for web automation and web scraping. A single isolated job is called an Actor (previously called 'acts'), and it consists of source code and various settings. You can think of an Actor as a cloud app or service, but we didn't like those names, so we picked a new, unique name."

It was a technical and product breakthrough that aligned perfectly with insights they'd been gathering from user observation (echoing YC's core tenet that startups must listen carefully to their users to discover meaningful product improvements).

"We discovered that a lot of people were scraping Instagram," Jan recalls. "So we thought, why don't we just build a tool for people to get data from Instagram so they don't need to build it themselves?" The logic was simple but powerful: "It's inefficient for everyone to rebuild a scraper for Instagram. We knew we could do better."

With Docker containers enabling this new flexibility, Jan describes what happened next with a perfect Czech analogy: "We started with one box and progressed to being a kind of Bauhaus [building warehouse store] where you had the tools to build many other boxes."

The overhaul brought immediate effects. Running each Actor in its own containerized environment gained a critical layer of reliability and isolation. No more risky chain reactions with one job failing and crashing the entire system, or a memory leak in someone's scraper eating another user's financial data extraction.

Moreover, every Actor followed the same input/output pattern, creating a universal language for automation. This meant Actors could be combined like LEGO blocks, with the output from a web scraper feeding directly into a data processor, which could then trigger a notification system, which could feed into some other component ... you get the picture. Complexity became composable.

Finally, Actors could be shared in a public library, transforming individual tools into community assets.

But the Actor architecture also fundamentally changed Apify's business model, transforming them from a product company into a platform company. No longer were they selling a single web scraping tool, they had become the infrastructure for the data ecosystem.

This shift created new economic opportunities: developers could build sophisticated automation tools once, and monetize them across multiple customers, essentially becoming automation entrepreneurs. Enterprise clients could access sophisticated solutions without enterprise development costs.

That scraper you read about a few paragraph ago, the email sender, the data processor, they all became community assets that anyone could use, modify, and build upon.

As Jan's Bauhaus analogy suggested, they had given the world the tools and building materials to construct whatever they could imagine.

The Actor architecture had achieved something rare in technology: it made complex systems simpler while making simple solutions more powerful. Apify was no longer just a web scraping tool, it had become infrastructure for the entire data economy.

```
// Chapter 4: The people who built the dream
function buildCulture(team) {
    const stories = generateStories(team);
    const traditions = createTraditions(stories);
    return maintainValues(team, stories, traditions);
}
```

Show up early, code late, celebrate wins, learn from failures, and somehow manage to keep the coffee machine from breaking down completely.

Employee Zero

Early employees were something more than employees. They were the second wave of believers following the investors into an unknown future, co-conspirators fighting for elbow room at the table and making a statement about what they thought was possible.

The first of such believers was Jakub Drobník, the talented developer we encountered in an earlier section, and who was, at the time, working at a big software house, while also studying. During one of his lessons, he met Jakub Balada, who was teaching while simultaneously running a fledgling startup. Drobník recalls, "He explained he had just come back from the YC Fellowship and that he had just started the company. They had no employees, no funding. But it was interesting to me, and I was kind of excited, so I started slowly working with them on a part time basis to see what would happen." And what happened was the kind of scrappy hustle that became a hallmark of Apify's early days.

The story goes like this: There was a party to celebrate the founders' return from Y Combinator. Drobník arrived at the celebration expecting to mingle with friends and hear stories from Silicon Valley. Instead, he found himself already being announced as part of the team.

"I came to the party" – the 'zero birthday party' as he referred to it – "and they immediately introduced me as the first employee."

For Drobník, standing in a room full of strangers who suddenly wanted to know about his role at this mysterious Y Combinator startup, the experience was both exciting and surreal.

Within weeks, the informal arrangement became official. Drobník left the corporate world and became Apify's first employee, joining Jan and Jakub at a shared desk in a co-working space called Impact Hub.

From three people at one table, they would build a team, a culture, and eventually a global platform.

Chief Debugging Officer

Some career paths are carefully planned. Others are beautifully chaotic. Ondra Urban's journey to becoming Apify's COO is definitely the latter. It's a story that perfectly captures how startups create opportunities for people to become versions of themselves they never imagined.

"I'm a lawyer, right? Or I used to be. And so I got into programming by chance, almost because I just didn't want to be a lawyer and I was looking for other things I could be doing."

On first meeting Ondra, the founders weren't initially impressed. A lawyer with one year of programming experience? Not exactly what they were looking for. But Prague's startup ecosystem is small, and they had a mutual highly-accomplished friend, Michal Bláha, who recommended giving Ondra an interview. They gave him a task. He completed it. They hired him.

Just as Ondra evolved with the company, the company, too, evolved with him. When he joined, there were about 10 people in the company. He started as an engineer, became a team lead, then team lead of multiple teams. A fairly typical startup career trajectory.

Over time Ondra found himself taking on more diverse roles within the company. "I started helping marketing with understanding how to reach developers and engineers," he mentions. Jan watched Ondra take on different projects and began to give him more responsibilities.

His remit grew. Developer tools. Developer relations. Legal. Then sales. Then professional services. Each time, it was the same logic: Ondra understood both the technical and business sides of what Apify was building.

Today, Ondra oversees Apify's entire Go-to-market organization, from marketing, sales, growth, professional services, developer relations, and legal. He describes his role as being the Chief Debugging Officer. "I debug the company as well as the code."

Ondra's story illustrates something crucial about Apify's culture: the company doesn't just hire for today's needs, it creates space for people to grow into tomorrow's opportunities. A lawyer becomes a programmer becomes a team lead becomes a COO not because it was planned, but because the company was flexible enough to evolve with its people.

The code archaeologist

There are debugging skills that can't be taught in computer science classes.

Lukáš Křivka didn't set out to become Apify's human code archaeologist. But when he joined in 2017, during what he calls "the punk years," he discovered an unusual superpower: the ability to debug people instead of just code.

"When I got some scraper to debug ... since everybody was writing it in their own way, I would know who wrote it," recalls Lukáš. "Because everyone had their own style that was so specific, when a scraper broke, I already knew how to work with it."

Each developer had their distinctive signature. One always used the same variable naming pattern. Another had a particular way of structuring error handling. A third left behind traces of their debugging process in commented-out 'console.log' statements.

"So that was kind of funny that I became this expert on debugging different people," says Lukáš with a laugh.

But the charm had a downside. New team members couldn't easily jump in to help with existing projects. Knowledge transfer happened through archaeology rather than documentation.

"And that's where I learned that we needed to work more as a team, not as a bunch of individuals," Lukáš reflects.

Lukáš embodies Apify's evolution: growing from individual brilliance to collaborative excellence.

Impact Hub: Where startups go to pretend they have real offices

Impact Hub is a coworking space in Prague's Smíchov district, where over 1,500 entrepreneurs, freelancers, and world-changing dreamers gather to make things happen. For early-stage companies like Apify at the time, it was the perfect middle ground between working from your kitchen table and pretending you can afford a real office. The perfect mix of collaboration and chaos that makes startups thrive.

Chief Boring Officer

Marek Trunkát's 'Boring Technology' approach to keeping Apify ticking along (discussed in the previous chapter) goes deeper than just the tech. It's also about who gets woken up at 3AM when something goes pear-shaped.

He explains, "Imagine we've got engineers on-call at night to make sure the system is running. If something breaks, we need the engineer on duty to immediately understand what they're looking at. If you've just introduced a new kind of database, for example ... well, now everyone has to learn the new system. And stay up to date with it. That's extremely expensive."

His thinking extends beyond databases and frameworks to who he hires and how he builds out his teams. Marek aims to create cross-functional teams, able to deliver their initiatives end-to-end at all fronts – from specification to release and adoption, from front-end to backend, and further.

And to staff these teams? You guessed it, cross-functional engineers, each with unique strengths, but still able to work across the entire stack.

This approach is as much about organization efficiency as it is about team integrity. When tribal knowledge lives in multiple heads instead of just one, the company doesn't grind to a halt every time someone takes a vacation or leaves.

That's why they never hire more than two new people into a five-person team at a time. "If you hire more, then you won't be able to maintain the culture within the team." It's the same principle as the 'Boring Technology Club' applied to humans: you can only absorb so much new complexity before things start breaking down.

The result is engineers who feel empowered to fix things when they see them broken. "I hope that even new people, when they discover something they're not happy with, they improve it," Marek says. When the technology is stable enough, creativity happens at the level that actually matters.

Keeper of the palace lore

"I fell into Apify and it absorbed me over time, pushing out other work. I didn't plan it, but it's worked out."

So says Dave Barton, Apify's current Head of Content, whose journey into his current role reads a bit like the way the platform itself developed; with incremental steps along the way, each one adding an increasingly important layer on top of what already existed.

A pre-existing friendship with Jan (they went rafting together ten years ago) turned into casual editing help when Jan reached out in April 2016: "I remember you said you were doing some copywriting work for PageFair," read Jan's email. "Are you still in the business? Last year I launched a new company called Apifier ... we're looking for a native speaker who can help us improve the quality of our blog posts, documentation, tutorials etc."

Dave met Jan and Jakub for lunch near their then office at Impact Hub, where, over lunch and a beer a partnership was cooked up.

After editing a handful of texts, Jan sent another email: "Awesome, thanks a million! BTW we're about to raise some money so we might need more help with copywriting in the near future."

What followed was years of gradual involvement. Dave regularly helped with editing, working on newsletters, copy, social media, email sequences, and blog posts, but always maintained he couldn't take on full-time work.

Around late 2018, he became less involved as Apify tried a series of marketing people. While Apify cycled through various marketing hires, Dave's consistency had become an anchor point. The company struggled to find someone who could master what few understand: how to do content marketing successfully for a technical company. Marketing heads came and went, but the institutional knowledge Dave had gradually accumulated, the company voice, decision history, cultural context, remained with him. Until a chance encounter with Jan in 2020 led him back.

Jan asked him to return at 50% commitment as Head of Content. From there, the absorption accelerated. "I didn't set out to build a marketing team, but I just kept doing the work, hiring when we needed people, and gradually found myself to be the foundation of something that I think worked really well," Dave reflects. Today, that foundation supports a team of 20 people.

Dave's superpower is remembering; but more than that it's knowing which memories mattered. He's kept transcripts, emails, Slack threads and many of the pivotal exchanges that signaled a turning point. After nearly a decade of chronicling the company's rise, he's become the person who knows where all the cultural treasure, and bodies, are buried.

He remembers conversations over domain names, competitors that faded away, and how old READMEs looked. He remembers the endless email threads with Jan before Slack, the debates about whether to capitalize 'Actors' or keep them lowercase, and the robot mascot that Jan sometimes wonders if they should have kept. He recalls the shift from calling them 'acts' to 'Actors,' the very first tone of voice guide he helped write, and which blog posts got completely rewritten three times before anyone was satisfied. And he remembers how the infamous Bloody Back ritual got started.

Dave's measured approach, along with his long tenure, have made him the ideal guardian of Apify's cultural and corporate memory. He knows not just what Apify does, but how it became what it is.

If you have questions about Apify's roots, culture, or pivotal moments, Dave is the person to seek out. His wisdom goes beyond brand playbooks and protocols. He knows the secrets of how Apify began, and he might just know where it's heading.

From politics to puzzles

Career transformations seem to be a recurring theme at Apify. Like the others who reinvented themselves within the company, Zuzka Pelechová's journey to become Head of Apify Store took her from political campaign war rooms to leading a developer ecosystem.

After nearly a decade as a regional manager for a major political party, she found herself looking for something different. That's when she discovered Czechitas. The three-month program led her to discover that she had an aptitude for the kind of continuous problem-solving that would define her future career. As she describes her work today: 'It's like a never-ending puzzle! And I still love solving them."

She was drawn to Apify by their work in the non-profit arena, like Hlídač shopů and Hlídač státu, she explains. While interviewing with several companies, a café meeting with Jakub Balada sealed the deal. The connection was immediate. She started work the following Monday.

This was 2019, and Apify had just 16 people. "I remember when we all fit into one room," Zuzka says. In those early days, there was no such thing as 'not my department'. She handled customer support calls, worked on marketing strategy, made product decisions, and devoted her first six months entirely to the Hlídač shopů project, which we talk more about later in this book.

As Apify evolved, so did Zuzka's role. Her path to leading Apify Store was an organic evolution that mirrored its growing importance to the business. When Apify Store transformed from a simple acquisition tool to Apify's primary revenue engine, it was in large part thanks to Zuzka's focus and expertise. Under her stewardship, the Store expanded from a couple of hundred Actors to over 6,500, creating the thriving developer ecosystem that it is today.

It's often said that if you want people to grow, the best thing is to get out of their way. Zuzka's story is further demonstration of the company's willingness to do just that, and is far from unique. Just like Ondra Urban, who transformed from lawyer to programmer to COO, or Lukáš Křivka, who evolved from individual contributor to team architect, she represents a pattern rather than an exception.

Taken together these stories are more than just personal success stories; they're proof of concept for a company culture that values curiosity, adaptability, and the courage to jump into the unknown.

Culture with a capital C

Culture wasn't something Apify set out to engineer deliberately. It emerged from the values that Jan and Jakub lived by, crystallized over time into five core principles: **openness, drive, responsibility, flexibility,** and working as a **team.**

Unlike most companies where values become meaningless posters on conference room walls, these became the operating system for how decisions got made. Simona Baxa, Apify's VP of People, puts it this way: "What makes Apify different is that we really live the core values."

Apify Culture shows up every day in the way people handle everything from hiring to daily operations. Rather than rigid processes and endless approvals, they've built what Simona calls a punk philosophy, echoing a phrase that seems to find its way into conversation a lot: "Don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness. It's about personal responsibility. It's about ownership over agenda. It's about just having the idea and when it makes sense, let's give it a try."

Ownership is an important by-product of this openness. So much so that it's built into the DNA of every team within Apify. It's why an engineer in Prague can decide to fix something they notice is broken without asking three managers for permission first. As Marek Trunkát puts it, "We expect teams to own their agenda end-to-end. They are responsible for the backlog, roadmap, everything. And they do discovery, release, adoption." It's not chaos, it's distributed responsibility that scales.

Of course living these values becomes exponentially harder as you grow. What Simona calls "being open" meant something completely different when there were ten people sitting in the same room versus 150 people across multiple teams and locations. It's all about communication and alignment, she says. Understanding the ***why*** as well as the ***what.***

Flexibility is one of those values that came to mean something completely different as they scaled. In a small team, flexibility meant changing plans on the fly. With 150 people, flexibility came to mean building systems that can change without descending into complete disorder.

But flexibility has another dimension. It's essential for the technical foundation of what Apify does. Because the websites they scrape are constantly changing, Actors are prone to breaking. This requires systems and code to be flexible enough to adapt quickly without causing downtime. Without this technical flexibility to respond to an ever-changing environment, Apify simply wouldn't be able to keep their platform working, and they'd all soon be out of a job.

Culture can be surprisingly fragile at scale. It gets transmitted person by person, through meetings and daily interactions, rather than through documentation or Google Slides presentations. The challenge going forward is preserving what makes Apify special while still being able to evolve and grow.

Company values are not a poster with slogans. We all create them by our behavior, our communication, our work. Culture is lived.

We practice what we call a '90/10 mindset'. We try to deliver 90% of the value with 10% of the effort. It's about avoiding over-engineering and relying on common sense to keep things simple and flexible.

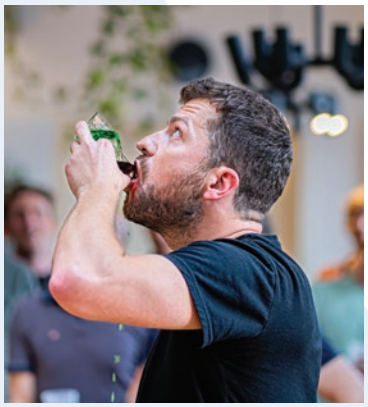
Traditions worth keeping

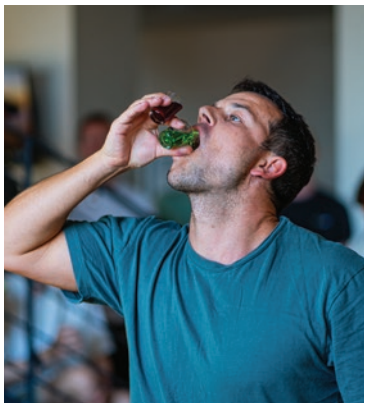
At Apify, a tradition that perhaps best captures their entire approach to work life happens once a month, in the lobby, to the tune of the Imperial March from Star Wars. The so-called 'all hands' meetings are both a business and cultural staple, where real business matters are discussed in a deceptively informal setting.

"It's in an informal spirit from the beginning," Simona explains. After the business updates and objectives & key result check-ins, "we follow up with some kind of informal gathering, like a barbecue or pizza party."

Corporate theater aside, the informal atmosphere serves a deeper purpose. When people are relaxed and genuinely engaged, they absorb information better, ask harder questions, and contribute more honestly to strategic discussions. New employees are welcomed to their first all-hands meetings with the so-called 'Bloody Back', a double shot of liquid support to help get things rolling.

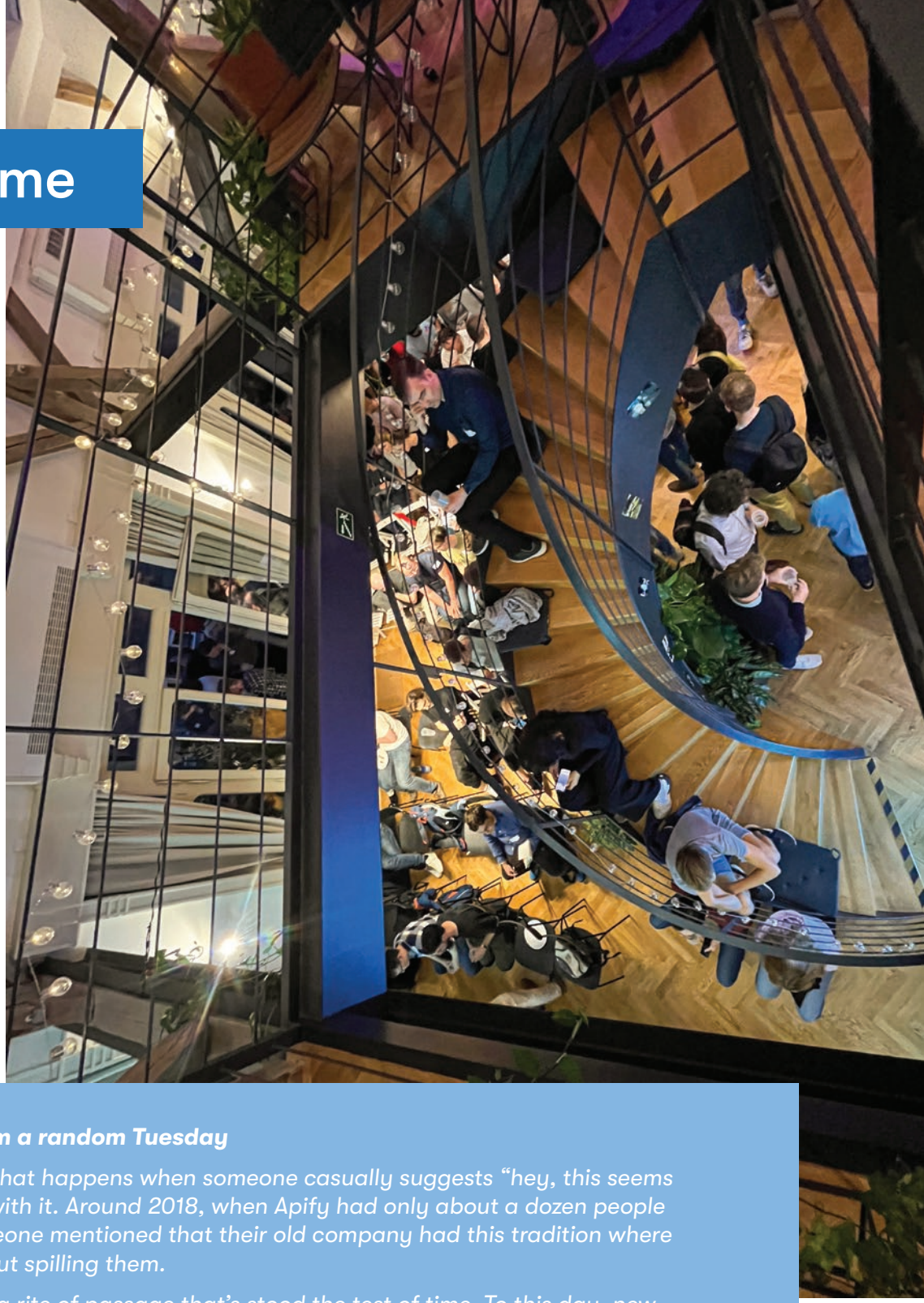
The lunch culture became another inadvertent tradition. For all those in daily attendance, lunch is on Apify. The free lunch strategy was designed to get people talking to each other. The office manager has even been known to announce lunch deliveries when they arrive, like the cook calling the cowboys to the chuck wagon in an old western movie.





How space and time shape culture



The coffee machine that somehow never completely broke down became a metaphor for the whole company, not quite perfect, sometimes temperamental, but always there when you needed it most. Sometimes these little physical touchstones matter more than anyone realizes.

The Lucerna Palace office, with its divided rooms and 'punk vibes', created natural spaces for teams to bond. But as they prepare to move to a larger, more traditional office space, they're grappling with how to maintain that intimacy at scale. "It's going to be different," says Simona. "And the challenge will be how to somehow transfer what we have in Lucerna to a new office."

'Culture is lived,' their documentation reminds them. In a world where companies often lose their soul as they scale, that simple truth might be Apify's most valuable invention yet.

The Bloody Back: A tradition born from a random Tuesday

The Bloody Back is the kind of tradition that happens when someone casually suggests "hey, this seems like a fun thing" and everyone just rolls with it. Around 2018, when Apify had only about a dozen people crammed into their Lucerna atelier, someone mentioned that their old company had this tradition where newcomers had to drink two shots without spilling them.

Somehow this random moment became a rite of passage that's stood the test of time. To this day, new Apifiers attending their first all-hands, must go through this ritual without spilling on themselves in front of the entire team.


SUCHÁČ
FEST


LAWSUIT

```
// Chapter 5: Recognition and competition
function mature() {
    earnRecognition();
    handleCrises();
    outpaceCompetition();
}
```

The moment when the world stops saying ‘good luck’ and starts saying ‘well done’.


„ LUCERNA
NIRVANA

Lucerna: When the company becomes the lantern

In Czech, the word lucerna means lantern, a beacon that guides travelers through darkness toward their destination. So when Apify found themselves based in Prague's iconic Lucerna Palace, perched high above the City of a Hundred Spires, the symbolism was impossible to ignore. The Company itself had become a lantern, revealing the often hidden corners of the web.

Illuminating the path from scrappy startup to global platform

There's a moment in every company's growth when external validation shifts from encouragement to acknowledgment. By 2021, the industry was saying of Apify, 'you've actually built something that matters'.

From that point on, a cascade of recognition painted a picture of a rocketship on its way to the moon.

Deloitte's Technology Fast 50 ranked Apify at #14 in 2021 thanks to a cumulative four-year growth rate of 1,429%, the kind of number that makes investors stop scrolling and start calling.

The Financial Times included Apify in the 'FT1000: Europe's Fastest-Growing Companies' list alongside Europe's most dynamic businesses.

Sifted, the influential European tech publication, featured Apify in their '100 fastest growing startups in Europe'.

Each recognition carried weight because it came from different angles; growth metrics, technology innovation, market impact, regional leadership.

When Apify reached the finals of the 'UiPath Automation Awards', it signaled further recognition of their place as legitimate players in the automation space.

The momentum continued.

In January 2025, Jan Čurn stood on stage at Prague's Kunsthalle art center accepting Ernst & Young's 'Prague Entrepreneur of the Year' award, it was a turning point that put Apify's entire journey in the spotlight. The ceremony marked the 25th jubilee year of the competition, and Jan was being honored alongside the country's most accomplished business leaders.

Standing there, holding the award, Jan's response captured the essence of what made Apify so special: "To succeed among such strong competition of amazing projects, especially as one of the few software companies in the competition, makes us very happy. I realize that we have it somewhat easier compared to the competition. If something happens to go wrong, we can pivot relatively quickly, when you make a mistake in manufacturing, it's much harder to fix."

The humility was classic Jan, but the numbers behind the recognition told a different story. Apify had grown 60% since early 2023, served customers from over 100 countries, and generated over 60% of its revenue from the United States.

UiPath Automation Awards Finalist

FT1000: Europe's Fastest-Growing Companies

Sifted – 100 Fastest Growing Startups in Europe

Deloitte Technology Fast 50
#14 ranking (1,429% growth, 2021)


50 Technology Fast 50 2021 CENTRAL EUROPE
Deloitte.
citi
LIVESPORT
ABRA
software for your business
StartupJobs
business with a purpose
Oliver Lompart
2021
J&T Ventures
inventi
Google Cloud

“This year’s nominees included exceptional personalities. The jury was particularly impressed by Jan Čurn’s entrepreneurial story due to its highly current focus, which is closely connected with artificial intelligence,” said Martina Kneiflova, Managing Partner of EY Czech Republic. “Moreover, Jan Čurn is also active internationally, which fulfills the international character of the competition.”


Oficiální vůz
BMW
EY
Podnikatel roku
2024
25 LET
lavní spoluorganizátor
mafra
mediální skupina
DNES
iDNES.cz
Podporovatelé
CZECHINVEST
Asociace společenské odpovědnosti
Záštita prezidenta České republiky

Competition

Growing up also meant acknowledging that they were no longer the scrappy underdog building something nobody understood. Suddenly there was competition, as well as copycats, and companies with deep ambitions and deeper pockets trying to solve the same problems. The web scraping space was heating up, and everyone wanted a piece of what Apify had already proven was possible.

"The early days were different," Jan reflects. "When Jakub and I started, web scraping was fragmented between UI-based tools that couldn't handle complexity, enterprise solutions that cost a fortune, and DIY approaches that required significant technical expertise. We had found this blue ocean where we could build something that made sense."

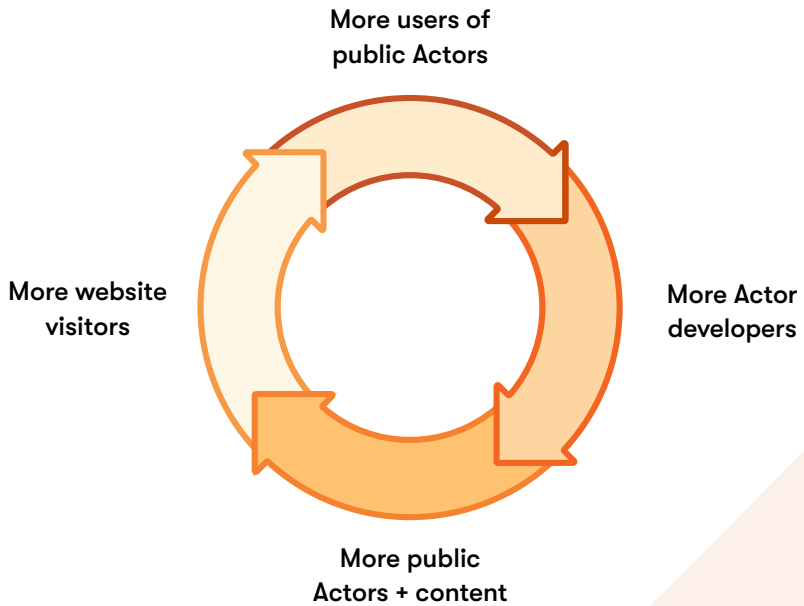
But success has a way of attracting attention. That same blue ocean was turning red. There was blood in the water, and the sharks were circling.

An increasingly competitive landscape forced them to articulate what made them different. As Jan puts it: "We realized that yes, we had good technology, but our real differentiator was something harder to replicate: the ecosystem. While our competitors focused on trying to build better scrapers, we were quietly building a marketplace where developers could build, share, and monetize automation tools."

Where the competition might be building one web scraper, Apify's community was building hundreds.

"It was the same philosophy that had guided our culture," Jan explains. "Give people the tools to build whatever they can imagine, and they'll create things you never thought possible."

This community-driven approach turned out to be both a competitive advantage and a path to scale. The more developers who built Actors, the more valuable the platform became for users. The more users who adopted Actors, the more incentive developers had to build them. Instead of having to solve every possible web scraping challenge themselves, they had created a system where the community solved challenges for each other.



Open source was the secret sauce

Apify's core was built on a simple belief that had guided Jan and Jakub from the very beginning: the best way to build something valuable is to make it useful for as many people as possible. It was, and perhaps had always been, embedded in the DNA of what they were creating.

"We always had a plan to build a two sided marketplace or a community," Jan explains. "And for that to happen we needed a community of developers to build on our platform; so we were always quite bullish on open source, and tried to open source wherever we could, because that's how you gain the trust of developers and build communities."

This vision went back even further than most people realized. "Even in the old days of the old Apifier, we already had a library of configurations for the first PhantomJS crawler. Something that could be updated by whoever wanted to, to be used by others."

Eventually what started as the Apify SDK became 'Crawlee', and the decision to spin it off as a separate project was strategic. "We thought that we would get more users with an open source library that everyone could use," Jan explains.

The results proved the philosophy right. "That was a really good move because it gave us some more trust and maybe credibility," Jakub reflects. "From the developer's point of view, we were more reliable for them, maintaining the open source library for web scraping."

The ultimate proof of the strategy came in the form of customer retention and expansion. Users who started with a single Actor often discovered dozens of others that solved adjacent problems. Developers who built one successful Actor were incentivized to build more. Enterprise customers found that the breadth of available solutions made Apify a one-stop shop for automation needs.

Crawlee: Apify's web scraping library

Crawlee is Apify's open-source coding toolkit for anyone who wants to crawl the web or automate a browser, and covers everything from making HTTP requests to simulating real user actions in modern browsers. What makes Crawlee special is that it takes care of all the tricky bits, like dodging anti-scraping protections, rotating proxies, and handling sites with infinite scroll or login walls, so you can focus on what data you want, not how to get it. It works seamlessly in both JavaScript and Python, and plays nicely with popular tools like Puppeteer and Playwright. You get robust code, reliable results, and support for running jobs in the cloud, right on the Apify platform.

Learning moments

There was a moment in time when Apify seemed to defy gravity itself. Like Icarus soaring towards the sun. But we know what happened in that story. Reality caught up. What looked invincible one day came crashing down the next.

Long-time Apifiers look back at this time and call it 'The Shift'. On paper, it sounds like just another bit of company jargon. But for the people living it, it was much more. It marked a deep turning point, when Apify had to change the way it thought about itself, what truly mattered, and where it fit in a world that was remaking itself day by day.

The Shift

In 2020 and 2021, Apify found itself in the right place at the right time. COVID had accelerated the global shift to digital operations and automation, creating urgent demand for exactly the kind of services the company provided. The result was an extraordinary period of growth. And there were the accolades, as we saw in the previous section. The company was flush with confidence and, perhaps more importantly, cash. They were hiring aggressively, expanding their teams, and even took the entire company on an extravagant team building trip to Croatia. It was expensive, elaborate, and felt entirely justified by their momentum.

By early 2022, the company was deep into what seemed like an inevitable next step: raising their Series A. They were targeting $10 million to fund expansion, including plans for a US office. The fundraising process had been progressing well; they'd narrowed down from about a hundred potential investors to twenty serious conversations, and were in final stages with three genuinely interested parties.

But the world had other plans.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine erupted. The e-commerce market, which had been driving much of Apify's growth, experienced a sharp downturn. The company lost 25% of their recurring revenue. Investors who had been excited about backing an Eastern European success story suddenly became nervous about Eastern European risk.

But external challenges were only part of the story. Internally, Apify was discovering the uncomfortable truth that their rapid growth had been masking some fundamental problems. They had been overspending, hiring too quickly, and operating as though they had unlimited money. This wasn't about any one team's failure so much as it was the company evolving beyond the roles and processes that had served them early on.

"We really didn't have the operational finance maturity to act on the warning signs," Oliver Lompart admits. It wasn't until Dušan Antoš joined as CFO in November 2021 that they finally had someone who could clearly see the trajectory they were on. The reality was not as rosy as it had seemed four paragraphs ago.

As the company had changed, its needs had changed. Some early roles no longer matched what the next stage required. By September 2022, the company faced the most difficult decision in its history. With about a year of runway left and expansion plans dead, they had to make cuts.

In what Ondra describes as "one of the most difficult weekends" in the company's history, the company laid off 15% of its staff. "We acted earlier than many peers, who later made deeper cuts." The move undoubtedly helped protect the company and the majority of jobs.

The ripples of that decision reverberated through the entire organization in ways that extended far beyond the numbers. When the decision was announced at an all-hands meeting there were understandably a lot of questions and anxiety.

The layoffs revealed deeper issues about how the company had been operating. In their rush to grow, they had hired too quickly, given out titles too freely, and built a culture that felt more like a family than a business. The company needed to regain its performance-driven posture.

The sales team, which had been one of the largest departments with almost ten people, was cut down to just two. It was the beginning of a dramatic shift from a service-oriented business model to something more scalable and self-service.

As Jan would later put it, this was the moment they realized they needed to "adjust course."

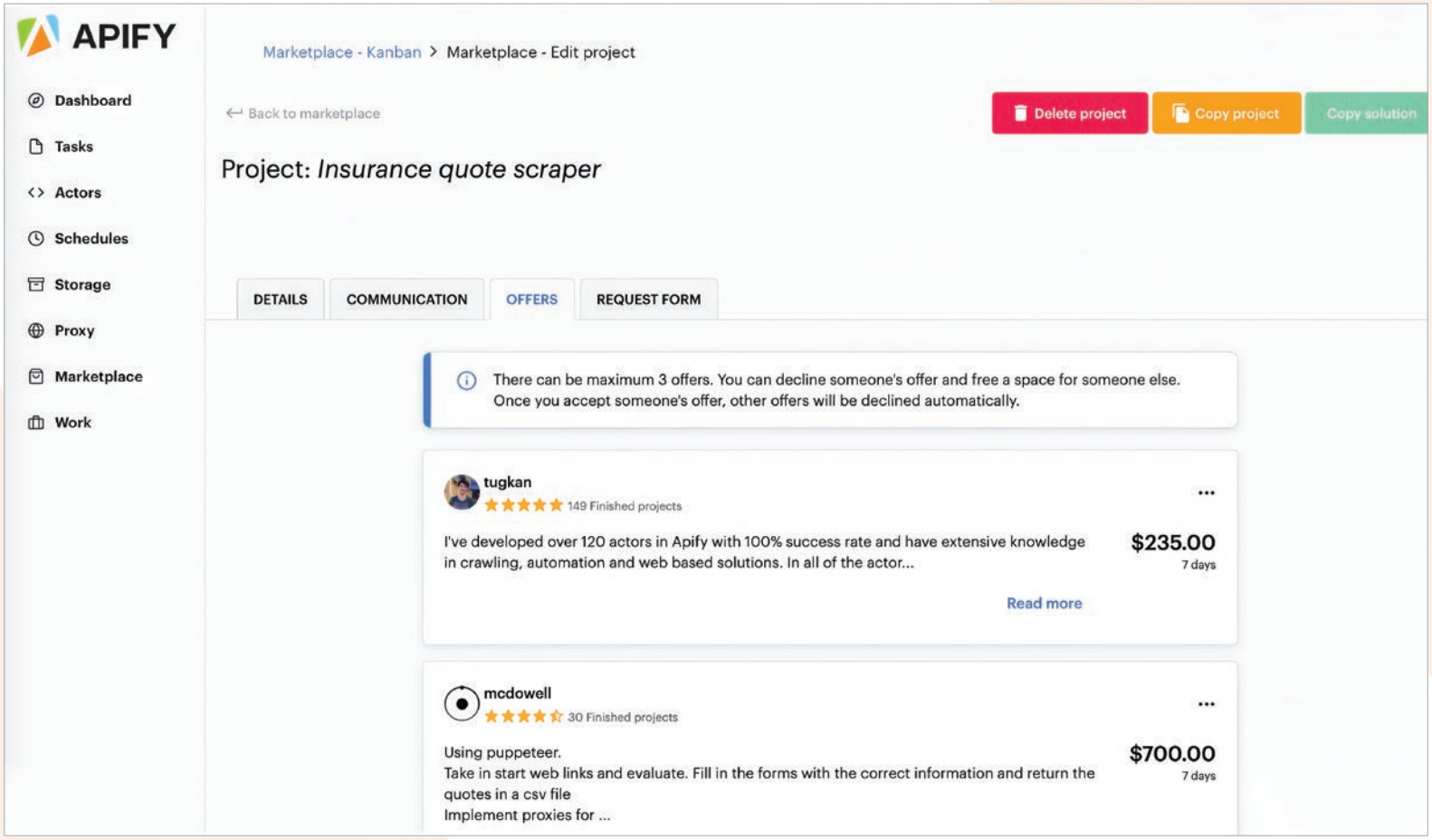
It's a telling choice of words, "adjust course" rather than "crisis mode" or "survival." This language reflects the kind of thoughtful leadership that had carried them through a decade of growth, and would ultimately carry them through their darkest period.

It's here that the story takes an unexpected turn. Within just a few months of what felt like a near-death experience, Apify began to grow again.

Apify Store, which had initially been seen as a side project, suddenly became the star of the show. This was thanks in large part to the creator ecosystem that began to grow organically, eventually becoming one of their most successful initiatives.

Looking back, 'The Shift' wasn't just about surviving a difficult market or learning to manage cash flow. It was about the growing pains of a company learning to operate at a scale where mistakes have bigger consequences, but also where the potential for impact is exponentially larger.

The company that emerged from 'The Shift' was leaner, more focused, and more resilient. Most importantly, they had proven to themselves that they could make the hard decisions when necessary, and that the company was bigger than any individual, including perhaps even the founders themselves.



Apify Freelancers (before Apify Marketplace) was one of the initiatives that didn't survive the infamous "shift" as part of the refocus.

```
// Chapter 6: Responsibility and Impact
function handleCrisis() {
    const opportunity = identifyNeed();
    return mobilizePlatform(opportunity);
}
```

With great web scraping power comes great responsibility.

Doing good

Among the many things that unite the Apify team, near the top of that list is "...a shared passion to use [their] tech skills, hands, and hearts to make the world (even if it's just a little bit) better," to quote Apify's doing good ambassador Kateřina Hroníková.

Dave Barton, Head of Content at Apify, agrees. He writes in a blog post: "Almost everyone in Apify has a story to tell about how they benefitted from the kindness and support of others. ... [so] we all believe in putting that positive energy back into the world..."

Perhaps no moment better demonstrated this philosophy than when the world faced its greatest crisis in generations.

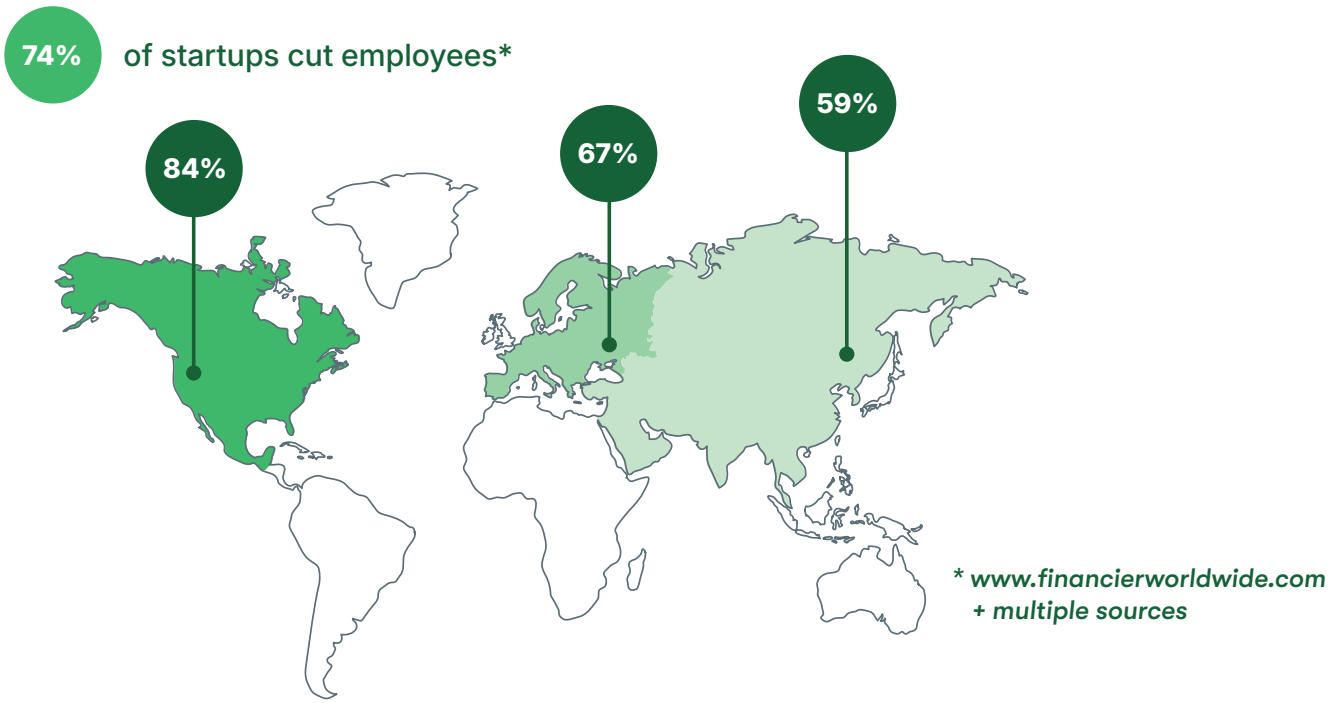
The day the world stood still

March 2020 brought the kind of crisis that tested the mettle of companies of all sizes, and was especially hard on startups. As COVID-19 raged across the globe, the startup world faced an existential test. These young companies watched their revenue decline, with some seeing drops of more than 80%.

Layoffs swept through the ecosystem with 74% of companies having to terminate employees. Funding, too, dried up, as investors pulled back, with early-stage rounds dropping 22% and many term sheets simply withdrawn.

"Apify turns websites into APIs, so we decided to do our part in the fight against COVID-19 by turning official COVID-19 stats into APIs that can be used by other apps."

Layoffs and terminations due to COVID-19



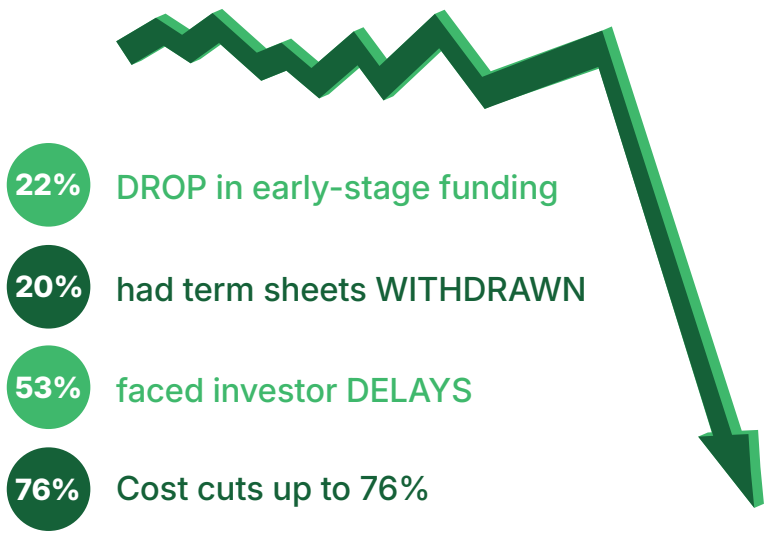
For most, this was survival mode. But Apify didn't follow that script. While the world hit pause, Apify hit "run." They leaned harder into what they were good at; turning chaos into data, and data into solutions that others could use. They mobilized their platform for good.

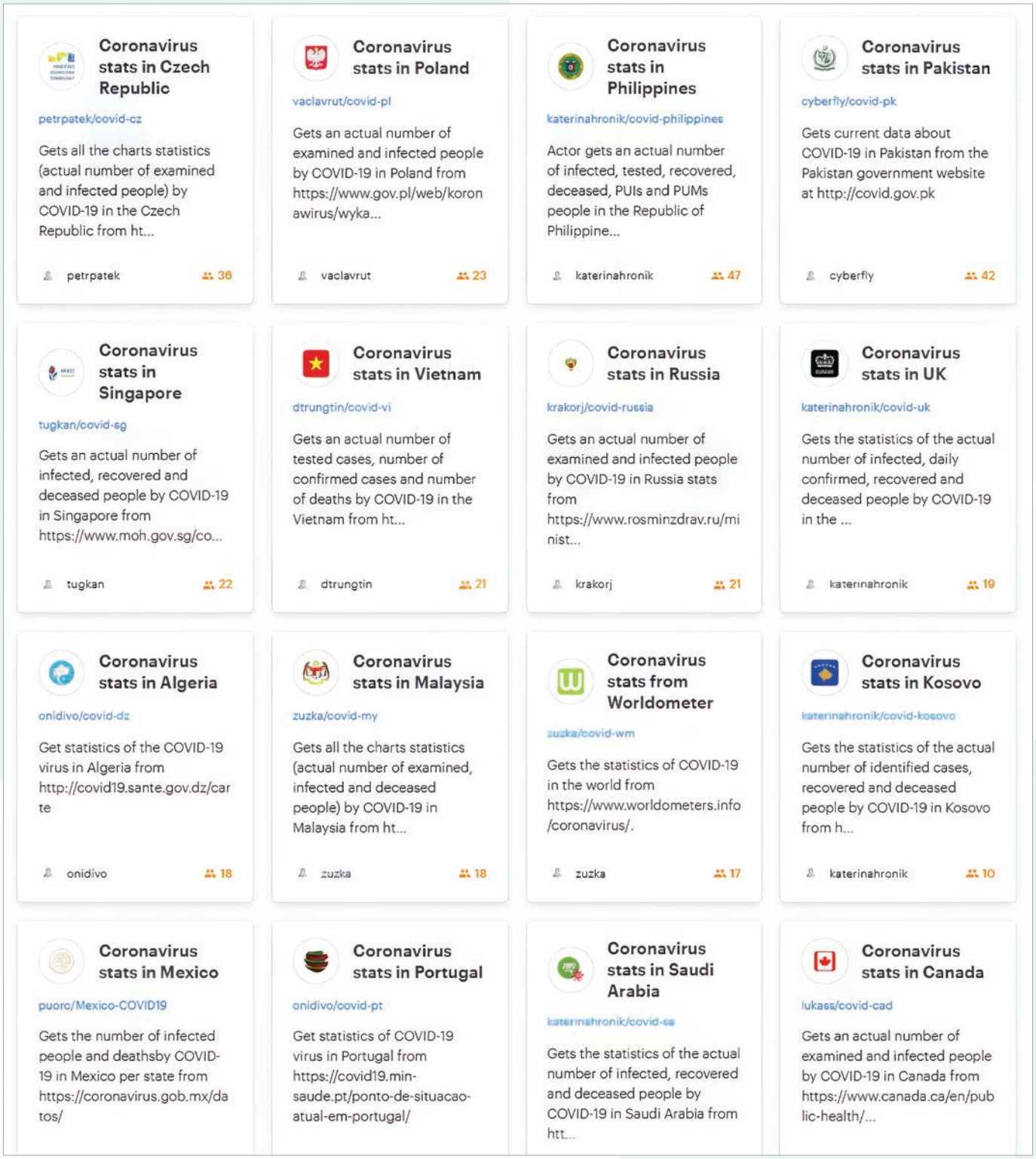
The idea emerged during lockdown in the Czech Republic, when someone asked the Apify team if they could scrape COVID-19 statistics from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. The job took ten minutes. Then realization of what this meant lasted longer: if we can do this for one city, we can do it for the world.

Within weeks, they had built and released free, open-source APIs for coronavirus data in dozens of countries. These APIs updated every five minutes, archived historical data, and were immediately available to researchers, developers, and journalists. No login, no paywall, no limits.

While many startups had pivoted out of necessity, downsized their ambitions, or simply struggled to survive, Apify used the crisis to demonstrate that they had grown into the kind of company that could handle responsibility on a global scale, turning crisis into opportunity and emerging stronger from the challenge.

Investment collapse





Open-source APIs for coronavirus data in dozens of countries.

Fighting in the shadows

Another significant way Apify is delivering on its commitment to making a positive impact is through a program called Spotlight, an AI-driven platform designed to assist law enforcement in identifying victims of sex trafficking. Spotlight leverages Apify's web scraping capabilities to scan online escort sites for clues that help investigators uncover trafficking operations and locate missing children.

"We were scraping escort sites in the US because there's a lot of young women, typically underage, being trafficked," Ondra explains. The data collected is processed, analyzed, and cross-referenced using AI and machine learning to find patterns and matches to reports of missing children. "We've helped to identify about 17,000 people this way."

Spotlight has been used in thousands of investigations, credited with reducing victim identification time by over 60%, and supporting over 700 law enforcement agencies globally.

It's work that stops conversations. As Marek Trunkát puts it: "I'd never expect anybody to crawl the internet to find missing children." Same technology, but instead of tracking prices or analyzing markets, it's reuniting families and saving lives.

The Cairo connection

Meanwhile, a similar mission was playing out on a different continent.

In Egypt, in the years following the 2011 Egyptian revolution, child abduction had been on the rise due to adoption, begging, sex trade, organ trade, and ransom.

The Missing Children initiative (Atfal Mafkoda) was launched in 2016 by engineer Rami el-Gebali, beginning with a Facebook page that now has over 2 million followers, working to identify missing and trafficked children and reunite them with their families. The program asked people to take pictures of children begging on the streets and send them to the page. As a result, Atfal Mafkoda collected tens of thousands of such photos, and a match-making process between begging children and misplaced children began.

The project's technical lead Youssef A. Abukwaik realized that they needed to turn the Facebook page into a searchable database for AI analysis, but scraping facebook turned out to be more difficult than they had imagined. "Facebook blocked me after just 30 requests," he recalls. "I tried downloading the Facebook page, but it wasn't easily parsable."

Then they discovered Apify. "Apify allowed me to fully scrape our own Facebook page without the limitations I had experienced with alternative solutions. I was able to drill down up to 5,000 posts without blocks. No other open-source solution or alternative I tried compared to that."

With Apify powering the data collection, what had seemed insurmountable became simple.

The price of truth

Closer to home, Apify took on unscrupulous retailers who were artificially inflating prices before sales events to make discounts look bigger than they actually were.

Using industrial-grade web scraping combined with AI price extraction, Apify and their partners monitored over 42,000 products from 740 e-retailers across 17 EU member states. The system was elegantly simple: track prices during Black Friday and 30 days before the sales, then automatically detect when 'discounted' prices actually exceeded the lowest price in the previous month.

Turns out a startling 43% of monitored stores offered discounts that breached the EU directive.

The project had started in the Czech Republic, where Apify began tracking price manipulations around Black Friday. Ironically, by the time the EU asked them to scale it continent-wide, Czech retailers had already started playing by the rules.

Which equals success in anyone's books.

Trees and terabytes

When the World Resources Institute needed to collect policy documents from over 108 government websites across Latin America to identify forest restoration incentives, the task seemed impossible. California-based Omdena stepped in to help, but first they needed hundreds of thousands of scattered PDFs.

Apify's solution: download 740 000 files in less than 14 hours. To put that into perspective, downloading just 1 000 documents to a local machine would have taken two weeks with a standard internet connection.

"Without Apify we couldn't have done this," says Leo Sanchez, Head of Tech Partnerships at Omdena. The result was a 2.4TB dataset that enabled NLP analysis to promote knowledge sharing between stakeholders and identify where policies were creating barriers to forest restoration across an entire continent.

Beyond the headlines

The big projects tell part of the story, but the deeper commitment shows up in dozens of smaller ways.

There's the long-running partnership with Czechitas, a Prague-based organization helping women and young people develop digital skills. Apify has been teaching web scraping workshops, mentoring students, and sharing data for projects since the company's early days. A number of Czechitas graduates have joined the Apify team over the years.

There's PyCon Namibia, where two Apifiers traveled to Windhoek in 2025 to sponsor the tenth anniversary conference, running workshops and mentoring over 150 participants from across Africa.

And there are the monthly volunteer days. Every Apifier gets one day per month for social impact work, whether that's organized company initiatives, in-house hackathons for NGOs, or causes close to their hearts.

The approach is both systematic and personal, each project reflecting the same philosophy that built the company: give people the tools to build whatever they can imagine, and they'll create things you never thought possible.

Czechitas: Where 'I can't code' becomes 'I totally can'

Czechitas is a non-profit organization that opens the world of IT to women and girls across the Czech Republic. Founded in 2014 (the same year the Apify story begins) Czechitas is a coding school where women and girls of all ages come together to learn programming, data, and digital skills, even if they've never written a line of code before.

Other Apifiers who have come via Czechitas are Kateřina Hroníková, Martina Gelnerová, Pavlína Vencovská, and Míša Fialová.

Legal and ethical considerations in the business of web scraping

For a company built on gathering publicly available data, the legal boundaries have not always been clear. As Jan admits, "there were moments when we thought, 'what are we doing here'? Are we going to get sued? How do we know where the limits are?"

Over the years, the legal brains at Apify watched the legal landscape shift dramatically. Companies used all sorts of tactics to thwart the scrapers, like leaning into the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, or trying to sue scrapers for breach of terms of use of the website.

Moreover, the technology used for blocking scrapers has become increasingly more complex. This, in turn, has forced scraping technology to become increasingly sophisticated. It's a tricky game of cat and mouse.

But the legal opinions have been increasingly clear about where the line is drawn. The consensus is that you cannot hold people accountable for breaching the terms of a website that they have never read, much less agreed to. In general, extracting public-facing data is okay; anything else needs to be evaluated carefully.

Legal compliance is only one side of the equation; the other is ethics. This is where Apify has had to develop their own compass in largely uncharted territory.

Ondra Urban frames it with a simple analogy: "It's like when you're selling knives, you're not a murderer. I see web scraping as a tool."

Apify's approach is based on what they call an 'open web' philosophy: "The web is an open platform, where you are free to consume the web content the way you want, not the way the publishers are forcing you to do," says Jan. If a public website publishes content that is open to the world, you should be allowed to consume it through an automated system, including processing the data.

This philosophy comes with self-imposed boundaries. "Big projects always go through an internal legal and ethics review. We don't just do anything for anyone. We make sure that scrapers that we are building match our own ethical criteria."

It's something that's practiced daily by the teams building the tools. As Lukáš Křivka explains, certain requests are immediately rejected: "We clearly draw the line at things like fake data insertions or publishing fake five star reviews for some product, for example." Perhaps unsurprisingly, Křivka notes that they've received several requests for such fake review insertions, but these fall into what he describes as 'things that are clearly wrong.'

Apify's commitment to ethical boundaries extends beyond individual project decisions to broader geopolitical considerations. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Apify took a hard look at their entire customer base. The review wasn't mandated from the top down, rather it emerged from concerned employees asking difficult questions. Jan responded by convening an open ethics committee meeting where the entire company could participate in deciding how to respond. The result was a clear stance: Apify terminated agreements with Russian customers and other ethically questionable clients, including certain Chinese government operations. The company also donated significant amounts to support Ukraine over the years. It's an example of how Apify's ethical framework operates in practice; they're willing to walk away from revenue when business relationships conflict with their values.

But ethical decision-making at Apify isn't just about clear-cut rejections; it's more often about making nuanced judgment calls.

"You have to look at the use-case," Lukáš explains, describing how teams evaluate projects. The company's work consistently serves legitimate, beneficial purposes, from helping businesses understand market trends to supporting law enforcement in fighting crime. This purpose-driven approach recognizes that ethical web scraping serves the public good. When Apify scrapes reviews to detect fraudulent patterns that harm consumers, or works to combat human trafficking, the social benefit is indisputable. Rather than avoiding complex situations, Apify has built robust frameworks to ensure their work consistently serves ethical ends. The result is a business model that aligns technical capability with social responsibility. It's a perspective that recognizes that intention matters as much as action. While the technology can certainly handle such tasks," notes Lukáš, "the ethical framework is clear."

As you can imagine, managing a storefront with 6,000+ Actors and 100 new ones published daily creates unique challenges. As Zuzka explains: "We are a marketplace for tools. We are not responsible per se for each Actor, and that's a distinction we want to maintain."

This hands-off approach certainly doesn't mean anything goes. When problems arise, the response is swift and decisive. Most are based on logo infringement, or instances where there might be confusion about who actually owns a service. "In that case," Zuzka clarifies, "we ask the developers to rectify the situation and everything works correctly again."

The Apify Store team has also encountered more creative boundary-testing, as in the example above of reviews being posted by fake accounts; but when confronted, developers typically respond with something like, 'oh, sorry, we had an external contractor who did it'. "They like testing the limits," says Zuzka, "They're hackers, after all."

This distinction between "can we?" and "should we?" permeates Apify's approach to the business. It's simply about respect for website owners and user privacy.

Sometimes these ethical boundaries create technical limits that have nothing to do with capability. Take LinkedIn, for example. Getting data from LinkedIn

requires logging in at some level. But once you're logged in you explicitly agree to behave according to certain terms of service. Harvesting data is typically not one of them. So this is not really a technical question, it's an ethical one.

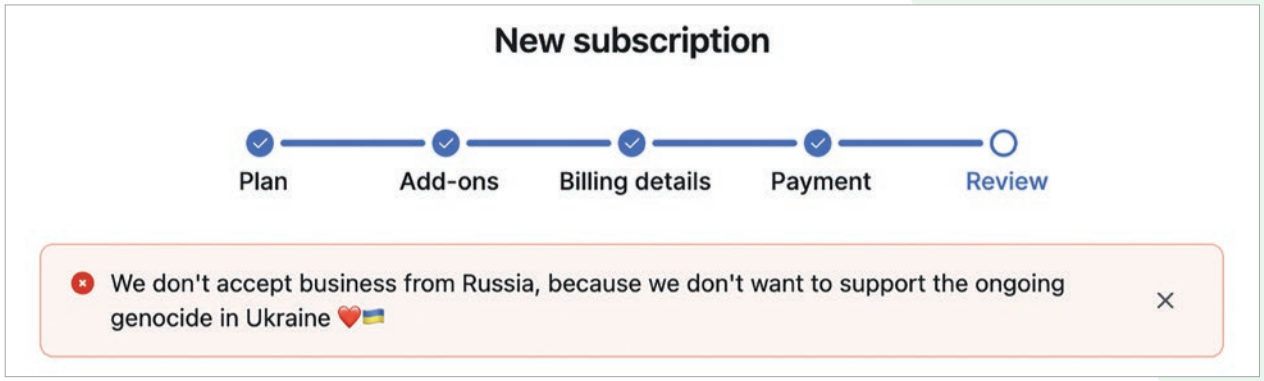
The ethics of all this come into clear focus when you examine the extremes of how scraping can be used.

At one end of the scale, there are companies that engage in large-scale scraping of personal data and then selling these detailed dossiers to malign actors. Ondra strongly believes this kind of profiling 'should not be possible' and regards it as fundamentally unethical.

At the other end there's the work Apify does with Spotlight, a program to fight child trafficking, and others, using the very same technology.

This not-so-nuanced distinction between harmful exploitation and responsible use of scraping technology reflects Apify's core philosophy and ethical compass, setting it apart from less scrupulous actors who prioritize profit over privacy and human rights.

Same technology. Worlds apart in ethical impact.



Apify's ethical stance in action: The company integrated its geopolitical boundaries directly into its subscription process, displaying this message to potential customers during sign-up.

Spotlight is a program dedicated to using technology to help find victims of sex trafficking.

Built by the Thorn foundation set up by Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore, Spotlight leverages web crawling and data extraction to scour the internet for traces of missing children, turning what could be an overwhelming digital haystack into organized, actionable information.

Under the hood, Apify's automation helps collect and store data from multiple high-change websites and monitors them for layout changes or errors, keeping the information current and reliable so people on the front lines can focus on rescue rather than wrangling information.

```
// Chapter 7: New horizons
function expandHorizons() {
    moveToLucerna();
    scaleTeam();
    planNextMove();
}
```

Success creates problems you never imagined, starting with where to put everyone.

Growing, growing, gone

As Apify continued to grow, the Lucerna space began to reveal its limitations. People were getting stuck in the elevator so often that everyone seemed to have their own story. Some ingenious member of staff even created a dedicated Notion page to document the incidents, complete with photos. Simona has her own memorable elevator moment: during her final interview lunch with Jan, Ondra, and Oliver, they got trapped together for twenty minutes. "It was actually a great bonding experience," she laughs, "though not exactly how you'd plan to end a hiring process." The elevator became so notorious that many team members began taking the stairs to the 7th floor rather than risk another entrapment.

On top of this, there weren't enough toilets for the number of people. Plus, meeting rooms were constantly at a premium. As Ondra explains, "It's hard to have a meeting in a regular workspace because there are other people working, and you end up disturbing them."

The concatenation of office quirks was fast becoming counterproductive to the very culture the office was meant to support. The character that made Lucerna special, the punk vibe we've come to hear about so often in this story, the architectural eccentricities, the ability to trigger ten fire alarms at a party without anyone caring, was also what made it unsuitable for a company approaching 200 people. As Ondra put it, "We loved Lucerna. The vibe of it. But the problem with Lucerna is that it doesn't scale."

It became clear that Apify would once again have to find a new place where it could stretch its wings.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The philosophy of place

Ondra describes Apify's approach to office culture: "It's really important to us that people come into the office. We've built our culture around being together. Our official policy is as flexible as possible: you can work from anywhere, whether that's Bali, the U.S., or wherever you prefer. There are no fixed working hours and we don't track holidays at all. Still, we encourage people to meet face-to-face because we believe it is good for the company and helps build a strong culture. That's why we motivate people to come to the office by offering perks like free lunches, snacks, and everything they might want. In the end, we think that spending time together in person benefits everyone."

Simona adds another layer to this philosophy: the office as 'gravitational center' for the team. This concept becomes even more crucial when you consider that Apify was built as an international company from the beginning. "Among our first ten employees were non-Czech speakers. English was our working language from the beginning," she explains. So the role of the physical office as a cultural anchor becomes important.

In the time that they occupied the space, the Lucerna office certainly *was* the cultural heartbeat where rituals flourished, as we have seen with the Star Wars all-hands meetings and the office manager shouting 'lunchtime' when food deliveries arrived.

She concludes, "People choose to be here because it's where the best work happens when we're together, not because they have to be."

Thus the search for the new office has been as much about finding a larger physical space as it was about finding the right kind of space that would support Apify's culture as it continues to scale.

The Lucerna space spanned roughly 800 square meters across a patchwork of converted apartments. The new office, with its spacious, modern layout, marks a big step forward, and is designed to foster openness while still providing spaces to gather, focus, and connect.

"It's a completely different challenge," Simona notes. "How do you maintain that Apify spirit in what could feel like a more corporate environment?"

The answer will no doubt come from the same place that it has always come from; that spirit of turning obstacles into opportunities, of finding humanity in the midst of scaling up.

Image © 100YARDS Prague

```
// Chapter 8: Then, now, next
const evolution = {
    past: foundersJourney,
    present: industryTransformation,
    future: visionAhead
}
```

The best way to scale isn't
to stop being a founder;
It's to become a better one.

Then

We remember Jan and Jakub's first blog post, mentioned at the beginning of this book, announcing their arrival with the confidence of people who had figured it out.

Simple. Clean. Naive.

Ten years later in Apify's headquarters above Prague's central district, that optimistic, wide-eyed perspective on the world remains. If anything has changed, perhaps it is an understanding of what they were actually building.

The arms race ahead

Fast-forward to 2025, and web scraping has become a utility, a business infrastructure. But the landscape has fundamentally shifted. Where websites were once indifferent to scraping, the relationship has become explicitly adversarial, with sites deploying increasingly sophisticated defenses.

"Websites don't want to be scraped," says Jan. "And every defensive measure websites deploy forces scrapers to become more sophisticated." He views the complexity as opportunity. While others struggle with the sophistication required, Apify has learned to turn complexity into competitive advantage.

The question is no longer 'What is web scraping?' but 'How can we automate everything?'

Now

Within this more complex landscape, looking back, we see that the transformation has been as much philosophical as it has been technical. When Apify introduced the Actor concept in October 2017, they reimagined the way automation should work. As Jakub puts it, "Everyone wanted the data, but not everyone wanted to write the scripts to get the data."

The technical transformation

But if automation was growing up, then what was happening to the web itself? As Jan puts it: "I think the business model of the web changed as well." For the first twenty years of the commercial web, there was an implicit social contract. Publishers created content and made it freely available. Search engines indexed that content. In return, they sent traffic back that publishers could monetize. The math used to work, he continues: "10 years ago, the exchange was fair. Index me twice, send me one visitor."

Then artificial intelligence (AI) broke the contract.

Jan explains how AI disrupted the web's economics: "When the AI firms trained their large language models on the data from the web, they got it for free. They just scraped the whole web for anything and everything they could find, and they didn't pay for any of it."

The result was a complete inversion of the web's economics. AI systems trained on publishers' content now answer users' questions directly, eliminating the need to visit the original sources.

According to Cloudflare's estimates as of June 2025, Google crawls websites about 14 times for every referred visitor, maintaining a roughly balanced exchange between search platforms and publishers. But for AI companies, the numbers are vastly different: OpenAI's bots crawl a site 1,700 times for every visitor referred, and Anthropic's crawl-to-referral ratio is even more dramatic at 73,000:1.

Jan doesn't see this as a problem, rather as a move towards something more equitable, where content producers and owners are compensated duly for their efforts. He mentions Cloudflare's Pay-per-Crawl model that offers publishers a way to require AI crawlers to pay a small, per-request fee each time they access website content. Rather than letting bots harvest content freely, every crawl becomes a transparent microtransaction, empowering creators to share in the value they help generate.

Thus the future web isn't about circumventing paywalls or scraping around restrictions. It's about fair exchange: content creators get compensated, data users get access, the web stays open but operates on principles of mutual benefit.

AI. The layer that changes everything

Meanwhile, perhaps somewhat ironically, AI is driving demand for Apify's web scraping services in a way that reflects the critical role scraping has played in AI's own rise. As Jakub Drobník explains, "Demand from our customers is increasing; they rely on scraping to provide the most up-to-date and relevant information to feed into large language model (LLM) contexts. While LLMs have vast knowledge, their baseline data can be outdated, so sectors like customer support need the latest documentation or knowledge bases directly scraped and integrated." He points to their client, and leading customer service provider, Intercom. Intercom's customer service chatbot, Fin, was limited in that it initially only had access to knowledge hosted on their own site. To expand Fin's knowledge beyond Intercom articles, Intercom needed to pull in public content from customer websites. Apify technology enabled Intercom to scrape their customers' knowledge bases allowing Fin to respond with precise, current context derived from the freshest documentation and data sources.

Moreover, AI is not only a driver of demand but also a catalyst enhancing Apify's own scraping capabilities. Lukáš Křivka, one of Apify's most vocal proponents of LLMs notes, "We automate processes where scraped data is fed into LLMs to produce summaries and enriched insights such as sentiment analysis and data categorization, thus adding AI-powered layers of value on top of raw scraped data."

However, the reality of AI automation in web scraping is more nuanced than the hype suggests. "AI tools like Copilot enhance coding efficiency but require human oversight," Křivka notes. "Full AI automation of complex, large-scale scraping? I think it will be more like 10 or 20 years," he predicts, which seems like a refreshingly realistic timeline in an industry dominated by "next year" promises.

Founder mode: A different way to lead

In September 2024, Y Combinator co-founder Paul Graham published an essay that gave a name to something many successful founders had discovered independently: "Founder Mode."

He observed that founders have superpowers other C-suite types don't. There are things founders do that the rest of us cannot do, and not doing them simply feels wrong to founders.

These include:

- *Staying directly connected to multiple levels of the company*
- *Remaining deeply involved in details that others might delegate*
- *Retaining a unique ability to see across all aspects of the business simultaneously*


APIFY
Enabling AI agents to discover and pay for arbitrary services
Jan Curn, Founder & CEO

The human transformation

Not so long ago in the grand scheme of things, Jan Čurn and Jakub Balada were two frustrated developers wrestling with the simple problem of getting data from websites. Today, they oversee a platform that processes billions of web pages every month.

"I think the 2015 version of ourselves would be surprised at how far we were able to get," Jan reflects. At the same time, in a moment of vulnerable honesty about the gap between expectations and reality in startup building he admits, "I probably wouldn't have expected it would take as long as it has."

Along the way Jan has evolved from the shy coder who hated presentations into a CEO who has discovered his own authentic way to lead. Oliver Lompart, Apify's Head of Marketing, who has worked closely with Jan for years, still remembers Jan's nervousness delivering presentations back in the day. As CEO he was the person everyone wanted to hear from, but at heart, perhaps he was still the quiet developer who preferred code to conferences.

Since then, he has lost this shyness, now appearing regularly in Czech media and speaking at conferences. But learning to be comfortable as the face of the company was just one part of a much larger leadership evolution.

In the early days, Jan's approach to leadership style was very hands-on. Oliver again vividly captures the founder's early approach to management: "He used to be involved in absolutely everything. There wouldn't be an article or an email or copy change that would go live without Jan's blessing."

Where some might call this micromanagement, we know there's a better phrase for it: 'Founder mode'. Jan's instinct told him that every detail mattered, that letting go of control meant losing the essence of what they were building. At the time, it probably felt like the only way to ensure quality and maintain the company's vision.

Dave Barton offers a different perspective on this intensive involvement. One where trust is earned through demonstrated personal responsibility. Rather than seeing it as problematic, Dave has learned to work with Jan's style strategically, learning to anticipate concerns and address them before they arise. "I've always appreciated Jan's approach, because it matches what I learned in Associated Newspapers, where the editors scrutinized every inch of every page," he says. "Moreover, he usually has great insight on the task at hand."

The founder who personally organized meetups and wrote presentation content wasn't being overly controlling, he was simply modeling the standard of care he expected from others. He was scaling founder mode rather than abandoning it.

Like all successful founders, Jan has managed to find his own way through all of this, the key being that rather than not delegating, he's chosen to stay involved in ways that matter, building relationships with people who internalize his commitment to personal responsibility and attention to detail.

Dave's assessment of Jan's evolution over the decade is telling: "Jan's confidence has grown over the years, but to me he's still the same guy I went rafting with 10 years ago. He's an honest, earnest, and dedicated CEO who has learned what he needed to learn in order to steer his company in the right direction. It hasn't been a story of a startup that went from zero to millions in a few years, but rather a slow rise with real challenges and threats. Jan has captained us through all of this and I trust in his vision."

Oliver echoes this sentiment, "A lot of CEOs are not this hands-on as Jan is. And I think the team really appreciates it; that he hasn't lost touch with the company ...and I think that buys him a lot of credibility."

The approach reinforces the company culture Jan and Jakub set out to create from the beginning. As Jan himself puts it, "From day one we wanted to build a company we would like to work for."

Now, with the core business on good footing, Jan and Jakub have earned the breathing room to look beyond quarterly OKRs and consider how their work might drive positive change: advancing long-term sustainability, supporting their local community via education, and fulfilling a deeper sense of corporate responsibility.

Next

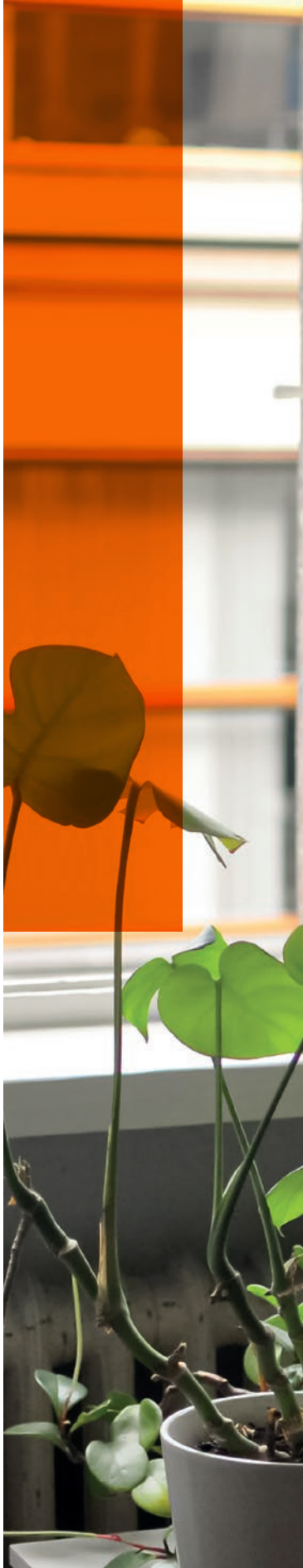
Apify's strategic scope has expanded far beyond web scraping. The company's ambitions are now much broader: to become the world's largest and most integrated platform for web automation software — and the most effortless way for developers to ship and make money on their software.

Strategic evolution

Ondra Urban expands: "What we really want to build is a software marketplace where people could be buying software from developers all around the world." But this vision comes with important challenges. "How do you build trust between big, established organizations and developers from countries that may have less exposure or reputation in the tech world? How do you make sure that some developer can actually deliver a great product that a company can use?"

Some issues announce themselves clearly. Regulatory frameworks that are already being drafted. Technical arms races that are already escalating. Competitive threats that are already raising funding rounds and hiring engineers.

Others lurk just beyond the visible horizon. Like some breakthrough that makes today's approach obsolete. Or an adjacent industry that suddenly becomes a direct competitor. Or an exotic customer need that's so out there that current solutions become irrelevant overnight.




BRESSER

Actorization

"Everything's possible now," Jakub Balada observes, reflecting on the accelerating pace of technological change. Every technology giant is investing in automation. Every startup is claiming AI superiority. Every industry is being transformed by software."

Apify's infrastructure advantage becomes more valuable, not less, as AI makes basic scraping more accessible. Their 'boring technology' approach created sustainable competitive advantages while competitors chased trends.

The challenge of the **'next'** is diversification. For example, a lot of Apify's recent growth is driven by the extraction of data from social media platforms. But these networks are placing more content behind logins, which as we have discussed, creates problems of all shapes and sizes. It's almost as though we are back where we started, with data locked behind inscrutable interfaces.

The answer, as it was a decade ago, is to create new and innovative solutions for unlocking that data. Apify calls this "Actorization," wrapping pieces of software as Actors and publishing them on the platform to rapidly bring new use cases to the fore.

Again, just as we saw with the Actor revolution, what's **'next'** is as much conceptual as it is technical. As Jakub Balada explains it, "I believe the interesting switch could be from web scraping to web automation. There will be more use cases where you are not just gathering data from the web, but you are automating some operation on a web."

The **'next'** revolution is moving us from scraping toward full-blown automation; from data gathering to full-on interactive task execution.

Marek anticipates that within five years, UI design may even converge for both human and machine interaction, with web scraping evolving as machines become better at using human interfaces

And again, Apify is uniquely positioned to take advantage. Whether you call it web scraping or automation, the next decade will belong to those who control the infrastructure of data access and processing. About who owns the pipes through which information flows between systems.

The truth about the next decade is that there's enough on the horizon to be both excited and concerned about. But not enough to be certain about anything.

```
// Chapter 9: To infinity and beyond
function dreamBig() {
    const crazyPlan = shootForTheStars();
    return buildTheFuture(crazyPlan);
}
```

The future is programmable.
The question is: what will you program?

Enough dreams for the next decade

The future, as always, is both clearer and murkier than we expect.

What's clear: the web will become more complex, AI will become more central, and the demand for automated data access will only grow. What's murky: exactly how these forces will interact, and what new challenges they'll create.

When asked to imagine Apify in 2034, the founders paint a picture that's both ambitious and grounded. A platform that has become essential infrastructure for the global digital economy and AI infrastructure. A marketplace where millions of developers build and deploy automation tools. A company that measures success not just in revenue but in the problems it solves and the human potential it unlocks.

"What impact do you want Apify to have had on the world by then?" It's a powerful question, and one that feels like the perfect way to close this book.

The question lingers in the air. When the answer comes, it's thoughtful and layered. At one level, it echoes the company's mission: to make the digital world more programmable, more accessible, and more fair; to prove that it's possible to build globally significant technology while staying true to core values and community.

But there's also a second answer, one that's less about the company and more about what's possible for people.

"Scaling what we have built to many more people … so that we have, let's say, one million creators, you know, making money on software on Apify," says Jan. "I think that would be awesome because we could have more of a positive impact on the world."

That's **one million creators.** Not users. Not customers. Actual creators, building actual value, earning actual income, solving problems we've not yet even thought of.

And the barrier to that place? Jan again, "Building good products is complicated. Most people just don't have the skills yet. And doing it at that scale, teaching people how to build software products at that scale, is tricky."

Apify's place in tomorrow's world

What does success look like in 2055? The honest answer is that we don't know. Jan is refreshingly frank: "I think all predictions are irrelevant because it's going to be so crazy."

All we can do is extrapolate from the patterns that have emerged in this book.

2030s: IPO

Apify will be a publicly traded company on the NYSE or Nasdaq, Jan says, only half jokingly. But then he gets serious about what won't change: "I can imagine that the marketplace model could still be relevant, even 10 years from now, because in the end, people or AIs will still need software tools that run somewhere in the cloud. And people or AIs will still be creating them."

Fair enough; after all, marketplaces have always been a fundamental part of how people connect and exchange value. Throughout history, we've continually traded one thing for another. That impulse is not going away any time soon. Even as technology evolves, the need for places where creators can share, monetize, and improve their tools will remain.

2040s: The interface convergence

The distinction between human and machine interfaces will disappear entirely. Marek observes: "machines are now able to use human interfaces, click buttons, fill-in forms, so we're getting to the point where we can build the same interfaces for people and machines."

In this version of the future, entirely new interfaces will emerge, designed from the ground up to serve both human intuition and machine efficiency. These hybrid interfaces will look different, feel different, and behave differently from today's web, because they will be made for a world in which humans and AI collaborate seamlessly.

2050s: Beyond keyboards and code

Jakub Drobník's vision feels inevitable: "I think the future of automation is one where we won't need to write code or even touch a keyboard. Whatever we say, or even just think, about what we want done will simply be automated and executed."

Success in this vision of the future will depend on our ability to articulate problems and envision solutions. Clear thinking and precise communication become more important than the ability to code.

A final invitation to dreamers

Alan Kay (of Xerox PARC) is famously credited as saying, “The best way to predict the future is to invent it.”

The second best way, as we have discovered in this story, is to help others invent theirs.

The infrastructure that Apify has built over the past decade, the Actor ecosystem, the global developer community, the platforms and tools that make web automation accessible, all of this is just the beginning of something even bigger.

The real work, the world-changing work, happens when brilliant minds around the world take these tools and build things we never imagined.

So here’s our invitation:

Whether you’re a developer with a crazy idea, a researcher pushing the boundaries of what’s possible, an entrepreneur building the next breakthrough company, or simply someone who believes the web should serve all of humanity, we invite you to dream the future along with us.

Ten years ago, we set out to make the web’s data accessible. Ten years from now, Apify will be the world’s largest platform for web automation, where developers everywhere can ship their software effortlessly and earn from their talent.

The future is clear. The question is: who will build it with us?


„ LUCERNA.”

Ten years ago, we solved the problem of getting data from websites. Ten years from now, Apify will be the world's largest marketplace of tools for automation and AI, where developers can easily ship and make money on their software.

The question isn't whether this future will arrive. It's who will build it.

The Apify Story, 2025.

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