

Founder of legal platform wins Innovate UK award

Danae Shell has won an Innovate UK award for her successful start up, Valla.

Valla is an AI-enabled legal platform which Danae hopes will make legal services affordable for millions of workers who cannot afford legal fees. The legal advice will help workers to raise a complaint, settle with employers or go to employment tribunal without huge costs.

The company was set up in 2022, now employed seven people and 15 specialist legal coaches. Sales have risen tenfold and now Danae Shell has received the award which is worth £75,000 for further product development. But it was a different story in 2022 when the firm was in danger of collapse.



Danae Shell

Danae said: “On New Year’s Eve 2023, I had no exec team, no revenue and very little time to take action. What I did have was belief. Belief from my team, investors and advisors, and also my own personal belief that this was worth all my energy.

“We had seen the impact we were already making with customers, we could see the huge opportunity in the market and we just needed to find a way to grab it.

“So, we adapted. Our product team became an artificial intelligence R&D department overnight, testing every new GenAI

feature as it emerged. We rebuilt our service delivery processes as we learned what the tech could and couldn't do, and started seeing dramatic improvements in the product.

"For women to know that it's not just the more junior roles that you can get to, but you can get to those executive levels, and then you can lead your own company in exciting new ways, I hope that's really inspiring.

"I would love to sit here and tell you that I think it's easier for women these days, but I don't think it is. I think in some ways, we've actually regressed. If you look at the actual funding environment for female founders, the numbers in terms of how much capital is invested in them is actually lower than it was a decade ago. So there's still a lot of work to be done here.

"I've been in tech my whole career. I started as a software engineer and ended up in senior positions. What happened was a lot of people started coming to me with problems at work, and what really shocked me was I didn't really know what to do about it. And I thought, goodness, why? Valla was born there."

Emily Nott, Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Innovate UK, said: "Innovate UK's Women in Innovation Awards spotlight the UK's most groundbreaking women entrepreneurs. This year's winners have shown incredible leadership and creativity. We're thrilled to support them in scaling their businesses and inspiring the next wave of women innovators. Their success stories will undoubtedly pave the way for more women to enter and thrive in the world of innovation."

This year's Women in Innovation Awards drew 1,452 applications from women business leaders across the UK, 52% up on last year. This record-breaking engagement highlights the high demand for innovation support and potential to drive economic growth from women leading businesses. In total, £3.75 million in government funding is being awarded, with each recipient

receiving 50% more than previous years.



For 27-year-old Lewis Lawrence, who worked in the energy sector, Valla's help proved to be game-changing.

"I was mistreated at work from the moment that I handed in my notice; my boss at the time told me it was going to be the worst month of my time there and set out on making my remaining time at the company unbearable. I had seen him be physically abusive to other people on work trips. It definitely did take a strain on my mental health, I had sleepless nights thinking about what might happen next because he knew where I lived. So, when he terminated my notice period and then pretended I had refused to work my notice, I had to seek justice.

"I couldn't afford to get a solicitor. I did contact a couple of solicitors and they were either too expensive or said it wouldn't be worth it because my winnings would just go on

solicitor's fees.

"Then someone mentioned Valla to me and everything started to become manageable. I used their timeline to help me put my story in perspective and my Valla coach went above and beyond, helping me to prepare legal documents including witness statements.

"I was so nervous going into the court, but despite having no legal experience, I presented my case with confidence and professionalism – I just know they weren't expecting it – and it resulted in a significant payout for unfair dismissal."

