

Perspectives of An AI Entrepreneur

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep333>

Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your entrepreneur, wannabe host, Robert J. Marks. I'm an entrepreneur wannabe because today we're going to talk to a real entrepreneur in artificial intelligence, and I'm excited about that.

We continue to experience the impact of AI technology in the world. The future of the use of AI belongs in the hands of entrepreneurs, not academic or business nerds like myself. We're fortunate to have as our guest, an AI entrepreneur, David Copps. Personally, I've always wanted to be an entrepreneur, but every venture I explored eventually fizzled. I have three patents and all were stillborn because we didn't have the entrepreneurial wherewithal to get them going. God didn't gift me to be an entrepreneur. God gifted me to be an academic nerd, which is what I am. But I'm always fascinated to talk to successful entrepreneurs. David Copps, our guest today is such a person and it's going to be fun to talk to him.

Dave is a renowned entrepreneur, technologist, and thought leader with over two decades of experience pioneering advancements in artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. He's the founder and CEO of a company called Worlds. Dave is at the forefront of AI-driven innovation, we're going to talk to him about that. And right now he's creating new solutions that merge real-world data and digital environments. Before he was the CEO and founder of Worlds, Dave founded Brainspace Corporation. The company is a global leader in machine learning and advanced analytics. I met Dave when he visited Baylor University during Baylor's AI Week. He gave a great talk and we'll link that talk on the podcast notes.

David, welcome. It's good to have you.

David Copps:

Thanks so much. Glad to be here, Robert. Yeah, I was really thrilled to meet you when I came down to Baylor, and I think it was a real highlight for me to kind of share the stage with you and just thanks for having us.

Robert J. Marks:

Oh, it was fun. By the way, you didn't respond the way that I instructed you to. I was going to say, David, welcome. It's good to have you. And you were supposed to say, "Bob, it's good to be had" but-

David Copps:

I didn't know you meant that. I thought you were joking.

Robert J. Marks:

Actually, I was. But that's kind of interesting. Look, before we talk about AI and your business, I wanted to talk about something which I didn't talk about in my introduction of you, and I wanted to talk about your brain. We're going to be picking your brain. So I want to talk about that brain that I'm going to be picking. I'm very interested in neuroscience that is revealing more and more evidence that the mind is more than the brain alone. You've underwent a corpus callosotomy operation, I think. Did I pronounce that right? Callosotomy?

David Copps:

That's right.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. It's brain surgery where the right and left hemispheres of the brain are severed apart. They go down and they separate the right and left brain hemispheres. And the reason they do it, I understand, is because of seizures. You have a signal on one side of your brain that is communicated to the other side of your brain, which causes the seizure. And by doing the corpus callosotomy, the brain separation, you disrupt that communication path and it takes away the seizures.

A good friend of mine and senior fellow at the Bradley Center is Dr. Michael Egnor. He's a neurosurgeon and he occasionally hosts the Mind Matters podcast. Mike is a neurosurgeon and often performs corpus callosotomies. Dr. Egnor wrote a chapter in a book I just co-edited called *Minding the Brain* that addresses whether the mind is more than the brain. Are we more than computers made out of meat? After a corpus callosotomy your brain hemispheres are separated and you have kind of in effect two brains. Yet you don't emerge from the operation though as two people, you're still you with a single mind. That suggests that what defines you is more than the brain.

So Dave, you've underwent a corpus callosotomy brain surgery and said it really influenced your outlook, and I'm sure you don't come through that operation the same person that you went in with. Can you share more about how that event shaped your approach to life and work? And when did you have it? How many years ago was that?

David Copps:

This was a long time ago. It was 1987, so it was really just right when I was going into college. And the longer story was I had my first seizure, my first grand mal seizure my fourth birthday party. So I was at my house and I fell on the ground, everyone thought I was being a joker and was laughing. My dad was this ophthalmologist and eye surgeon, he knew what was happening. And over the years, he kept me very connected with the medical community on the latest techniques and things that were happening. And then I think when I started college I started having a lot more seizures. We elected for brain surgery. I like tell people it was elective brain surgery.

There was an incredible maverick surgeon in Dallas named Dr. Bruce Mickey, and we actually flew all over the country looking for a surgeon and found him right here in Texas and Dallas. Dr. Mickey was fantastic. But everybody has something you can look back on and reflect on your life where things really changed for you, and this is a big one for me. Actually, it's interesting. I guess I did pass away for 18 seconds after the surgery, and I didn't know this until afterwards. I didn't have any of the flying off the table and people say, "Come back, Dave, come back." Didn't have any of that.

Robert J. Marks:

So you were clinically dead for a little while?

David Copps:

Well, I flat lined for about 18... And the crazy thing was I heard the flat line. So that's something I'll never forget.

Robert J. Marks:

You heard the flat line?

David Copps:

I heard the flat line. Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow.

David Copps:

A crazy, crazy, crazy thing. But I think the experience absolutely changed who I am. Some of the moments I'll never forget were coming home and looking at myself in the mirror for the first time after surgery. I don't know if you've ever done that, just stared in your own eyes for a while. But it's a strange, interesting experience just to kind see yourself alive. And I don't think that's something people think about. But I realized a lot of things after that.

Well, one in my closet I have my brain scan, my MRI hanging up there. It's the first thing I see every morning when I wake up and go in my closet just to remind me that I got a second chance and I'm here. So I feel like I was put on this earth to do something. I think some of the breakthrough thinking for me was that it's just not about me. I'm here for other people, who I am as a possibility, and I kind of went through this for a while. Why am I here? You start to question a lot of things after you go through an experience like that. And I was convinced that there's something bigger for me, that there's a reason I'm here and I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to figure it out.

Robert J. Marks:

Have you figured it out yet?

David Copps:

Well, kind of. I did realize it's not about me. And I think that's something, I hope people get, that when you go through life it's not about you, it's about who you are for other people. And so I did come up with this thing. I decided I was going to recreate myself as a possibility. If I could emerge as a possibility from this, who am I as a possibility for other people? It's kind of the question I asked myself. And I came up with who I am as the possibility of greatness in every person I meet. So when I meet people I want to inspire greatness. I don't look at them for who they are today, I look at them who they could be if I stood for their greatness. And that's been something I've been practicing literally every day since the surgery. Not since the surgery, but maybe a couple months after when I was going through this inquiry. So that's who I am. I've decided that I'm here on life to help surface greatness in other people.

Robert J. Marks:

That's fascinating. So this was something that you didn't experience before, but afterwards, because I've heard that people that have undergone this procedure do emerge with changes in their life. You can't undergo an operation like that and not be changed.

David Copps:

That's right. And I think what made it real, really real for me was so my brother had passed away. He graduated cum laude from Stanford, and he actually was in a car wreck and he passed away about a year before my surgery. And so I was very sensitive to going into the surgery because you're sitting there in the pre-op and they make you sign all these papers and oh, this chance of death, that chance of death. I added it up it was like 400% chance of death. And so...

Robert J. Marks:

As they say, you beat the odds, didn't you?

David Copps:

Yeah. Well, I told the doctor that and he just laughed and said, "Lawyers." But I did, because of the experience with my brother, I wrote letters to all my best friends and said, "Hey, if I don't make it, I want you to know these things." Boy, that's an experience. You start realizing that every day counts. Who you are for other people really matters. And so I think that kind of helped me see what was next for me. And I burned the letters afterwards, by the way, so no one got them.

Robert J. Marks:

You burned them?

David Copps:

Yeah, I didn't think it was appropriate. I made it. I had a conversation with them, but I didn't give them the letters. The letters were for if I didn't make it.

Robert J. Marks:

I see. And you probably gave that to a third party to mail for you.

David Copps:

I did. Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Oh my goodness. That's amazing. Now, you said that you flat lined for quite a bit of time and you didn't have what I've heard called a near death experience where people have out of body experiences or they go to the front porch of heaven or the front porch of hell. But nevertheless, you said you heard the flat line. So even though you were flat lined, you were still cognizant. But when you flat lined, does that mean both your body and your brain or just one?

David Copps:

I don't know. I was talking to a doctor afterwards, and he didn't think that would be possible. So I don't know. All I know is what I remember. And what I remember is hearing that and then darkness, and then that's all I remember. And then I woke up. So I always think I should make up a great story about it. I flew over the bed and decided I had more to do and flew back in my body.

No. But anyway. But yeah, like you said though, you can't emerge from that experience as the same person. You have to pay attention. And part of me, I think you hear a lot all the time how people grew up in adversarial conditions and it's affected who they are. And this is really just another version of that, a more extreme version of that. But I don't wish death on everybody, but I do wish they could have that experience to understand how important everyone else is. Like who you are is really expressed by all the people around you.

Robert J. Marks:

Fascinating. There's a great book by a guy named Greyson, and it's called After. Greyson was a medical psychiatrist that dedicated his life to studying near death experiences. And first time I heard about near death experiences, I said, "Oh, come on, that's just a bunch of baloney." But there's so many anecdotes and there's more anecdotes today than ever before because we have the medical wherewithal to bring people back from these flat line experiences. Greyson spent his life doing that and accumulate a lot of evidence. He started the first journal associated with near death experiences, the first conference associated with it, and it's still an ongoing investigation. And his bottom line at the end of his book, after spending his career doing this, was that he had no idea why these things happen, why these near death experience things happen. It's just fascinating.

Okay. Well, let's talk about something else. You and I have something in common. You play guitar, right?

David Copps:

I do.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Did you play guitar before the operation?

David Copps:

Oh yeah. Yes, I did. I've been playing since I was eight years old or so. I love it. It's changed over time. Of course, when you're in high school, it's all about being a rock and roll star. And I think now for me, it's a way to relax and to find peace and just a great way to be. I like to be alone with my guitar. It's just kind of fun.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, me too. Tell me, did you put together a band?

David Copps:

Yeah. We've had this ongoing band for 20 years, just a bunch of guys that have been playing together for a long time. We call ourselves the Brothers of Other Mothers, Brothers of Other Mothers. And we don't ever practice. We just kind get together and jam. And if somebody wants us to play a party, we'll go play a party without practicing.

Robert J. Marks:

Really?

David Copps:

It's just more fun. It's very improvisational.

Robert J. Marks:

What kind of music do you do when you get together?

David Copps:

That's mostly rock and classic rock. I kind of like the new alternative stuff that's coming out and the new R&B that's coming out, like the Allen Stone and Teddy Swims and the Lawrence and things like that. But we don't play any of those things.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. So tell me, okay, I was reading about your musical things that you were doing, and it mentioned you had a band called The Fish Boys.

David Copps:

Oh, wow. That was college. Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

That was college. Okay.

David Copps:

Yeah. That was my band in college, we called it The Fish Boys. I think our first CD was called Get Hooked or Just For the Halibut.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. That's right, that's right. Well, I read that and I had a good cover that you could do. You could do Hooked on a Feeling. What do you think?

David Copps:

Yeah. I'm surprised we didn't do that.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, yeah. I'm sure you did. Okay. So yeah, that's fun. I think a lot of people wanted to be rock... People don't want to be rock stars anymore. The kids don't want to be rock stars. You know what they want to be? They want to be influencers.

David Copps:

Yeah. YouTubers.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. They want to come out on YouTube and influence people to do this and that, et cetera, et cetera. So it's really changed. Yeah, I wanted to be a rock star one time in my life, but yeah, it just didn't work out. So I went with the other one.

David Copps:

Turned out okay though, Robert.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah. So you're still playing, this is an ongoing thing, is that right?

David Copps:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, for sure. I was actually up in my jam room last night. We built a house about five years ago, and I told my wife, I only need two rooms. You can build the rest of the house, but I need a jam room and I need a big garage.

Robert J. Marks:

Really?

David Copps:

I have my jam room upstairs. It's got five amps and about, I don't know, 15 guitars on the walls and electronic drum set and just a PA system. My goal was my friends could come over without bringing amps, just bring your guitar and plug in you know...

Robert J. Marks:

Do you do the recording and the mixing and all the stuff you have to do to finalize it? No, not really?

David Copps:

Not really. No. We just play.

Robert J. Marks:

So do you have any allusions of grandeur by putting your music on something like Spotify or something?

David Copps:

I used to. Now, I'm into the enjoyment of it. I love it. It's therapy for me. I just love playing guitar and love playing in a band. It's really a part of who I am.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Okay. Well, let's talk about your education. You have an interesting background in terms of your education to be an entrepreneur. I read that at the University of North Texas you studied anthropology and corporate culture, I believe it is. I can see corporate culture being something important for a background for an entrepreneur. But anthropology, that's that's kind of disjoint from entrepreneurship. How did these studies influence your entrepreneurial journey, if you will?

David Copps:

Yeah. It's funny. I was a business major at UNT and I was kind of bored with it. I dropped in on a class, I literally just kind of dropped in. I saw this thing called... Or industrial anthropology corporate culture. And so I dropped in on the class and I was fascinated by it. The teacher was Ann Jordan, she leads the anthropology department now. But I just love the idea that people are what make companies. It's not the technology. It's not the product. It's really the people. And I ended up going to every class, even though I wasn't signed up for it. And she at one point kind of called me out and said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm Dave Copps." She goes, "I don't see you on my roster." And I said, "I'm not on it. I just kind of liked your class." And we became really good friends, after that I ended up changing my major to industrial anthropology and minor in business.

But it's been a fantastic experience for me. I think especially in startups now, I actually do talks on startup culture. So I kind of have a talk that I'll give it startup events and things like that. But it's really, to me, it's one of the most important things about building a small company. People look at me and they think, "Oh, you're a technologist, technology company." And I say, "I'm really not. I'm kind of a people person, and what we create is technology." But I love the people side of business. I love seeing what people who are similarly inclined and motivated can accomplish together regardless of what other barriers other people might see. I just love that. And it's become a real important part of my starting businesses.

Robert J. Marks:

I've always wondered about this. Let's talk about this. There's all of these apps that are headhunter apps. You have somebody for your company, you have an opening, you go to this headhunter app and they give you a bunch of people. And I would think that just hiring these people based on their resume might be a big mistake that you got to know these people and know how they're going to fit into what happens. So I'm not sure what these apps do that just bring in -people.

David Copps:

They don't. We use recruiters, but, probably the best way to find people for us is through our networks. Because when you walk into our company, you feel it. I had a funny experience, you'll like this. We hired a controller and this guy came in and his first day we had our standup meeting where we all stand in a circle and we do things and we talk. And someone had a birthday, so we sing the Viking birthday song, which is kind of this happy birthday, happy birthday, people dying, children crying, happy birthday. And he looked around with this look of horror in his eyes-

Robert J. Marks:

Wait, wait, wait, go back. What is this birthday song?

David Copps:

Oh, we call it the Viking birthday song.

Robert J. Marks:

The Viking birthday song.

David Copps:

It's kind of a joke, but whenever there's a birthday we sing happy birthday the regular way. But right afterwards, we all go, happy birthday, happy birthday, people dying, children crying, happy birthday and then we go, yay. He was horrified by this, and he quit. He quit. But that's culture. That's culture in action. He was not made for this company. And the great thing was he quit and that day I hired Kristin Frost, my now CFO. I've had her for two companies now, and I would never have found her if he wouldn't have left because of the viking birthday song.

So I think culture's important. Someone can come in no matter where you get them from, recruiter, whatever, but the first thing that happens here is you experience culture. Like who we are together. And my wife told me once, I came home one night, she said, "I have to tell you this. I walked into your office today because we were going to sign some papers and I just looked around and I felt this buzz. There's people over here working on something. People over here working on something. And everyone's

happy." And she goes, "That's your culture." And I said, "Yeah, that's it." It's something you feel when you walk in the door. It's not what something's written on the wall or in a booklet somewhere. It's what you feel when you walk in the door. So, big on culture.

Robert J. Marks:

Wow. Isn't that interesting? So you're really concentrating on the people aspects, and I'm sure you're interested in their talents and how they can contribute too. But that alone is not enough. I work with a lot of jerks, and it's hard to work with jerks.

David Copps:

Yeah. It is.

Robert J. Marks:

I've worked with some people that are really, really nice. I work at Baylor University and to work at Baylor University, as a faculty member, you need to be a Christian. And one of the reasons that we have such a great culture is this Christian attitude and the sort of idea that you need to minister and care about other people. I mean, that's fundamental to the Christian message. And because of that, we have an incredible culture. I've enjoyed working at Baylor because of that. So that's really, really interesting.

So a word I ran across in looking at you was, you're going to have to help me on the pronunciation, ubuntu.

David Copps:

Ubuntu, yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

Ubuntu. Ubuntu. And you've mentioned in relationship to your company. Ubuntu, that sounds African. I'm not sure what it is. But can you elaborate on what that means and how you apply it to your work? Ubuntu.

David Copps:

For any geeks out there listening to this, they'll think, "Oh, that's Linux, right?" There's a version of Linux called Ubuntu. But yeah, I ran into the word, it's actually Swahili, so you're right. It's a Swahili word that loosely translated means I am who I am because of who we are together. And I just was affected by it. I took that. I said, oh my gosh, that's the culture I want to create. So now we kind of tell people, when you join Worlds or if you join Brainspace, the thing that... And people remember this, I get texts and emails from people years later saying, "Oh, I thought about ubuntu today because of this, because of that."

But we tell people that when you come into this company, we have an anti-diva policy. I don't want any divas. I'd rather, pay two or three people that aren't divas than one person is a diva, because divas are disrupted. They think they're better than everybody else.

Robert J. Marks:

Is that the definition of diva, by the way? Somebody that thinks they're better than-

David Copps:

Well, for me it is. For me it is, yeah. But yeah, we want people to come in and I tell them, the first thing I want you to do is to look at everyone around you and ask yourself, who can I be for them? Who can I be for them such that they would be successful? And by the way, everybody's going to think the same thing for you. If you have a whole company just trying that lifts each other up, good things happen. There's a concept we call co-elevation. Co-elevation is never rise alone. Take somebody with you. If you're doing something great, go grab somebody, bring them with you.

And there's things like that in our culture. We want people to understand that we don't want you to be as good as you say you are. We want you to be 10X that, and we're going to create an environment where that's possible. You're going to have a lot of people that want to support you in your greatness, but you're also going to be in a place where we don't even recognize failure. We don't even recognize that, that's a human thing. Because all there is here is iteration. Recast failure is iteration. It's not about something worked or not. It's about what happened and what are you going to get to do next. And that unleashes people.

And one of my favorite emails I ever got was from a guy that worked at my last company, and after we sold it, about six months later I get this email and he says, "Hey, I'm at another place now and it wasn't until I started working there, I realized what culture is, because we had it and this place doesn't." But he said, "Thanks for being batshit crazy and letting me fly." I almost got teary-eyed because that's what you want, right?

Robert J. Marks:

Wow. Yeah. I think probably some of the hardest places to work are some of the lower level jobs that I don't see this camaraderie, this community sort of spirit. At McDonald's, everybody comes in and the boss thinks they're their boss, and there isn't this relationship that is developed between them and the employees. So yeah. That's really interesting.

So David, we've been talking about you and kind of a personal background. I do want to get into starting a company because I know that you have some definitive thoughts on starting a company, and you've started a few. I think we're going to wait until our next podcast in order to get into that, because that's really a fascinating area for me as an entrepreneur wannabe that was never successful, and we can talk about that next. Okay?

David Copps:

That'd be great. Looking forward to it.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, so we've been talking to entrepreneur, David Copps, who has over two decades of experience pioneering in artificial intelligence, and we're going to get an artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. He's the founder and CEO of a company called Worlds, and we're going to talk about Worlds too. So until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore More at [Mindmatters.ai](https://mindmatters.ai). That's [Mindmatters.ai](https://mindmatters.ai).

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