

# Horizon Scanning with Alpha Hub

Rob Smith, Head of Emerging Technologies, discusses Flutter's search for the future of retail

Last week Alpha Hub, Flutter's global innovation community, announced its latest innovation call, [Paddy's Start-up Showcase](#).

With a deadline for submissions of 20<sup>th</sup> May, the campaign calls for emerging tech start-ups all over the world to submit their ideas to help Paddy Power shape the future of retail betting.

We spoke to Rob Smith, Flutter's Head of Emerging Technologies and Alpha Hub founder to learn more about the programme and its role in creating safe, entertaining experiences for our customers now and in the future.

## How did Alpha Hub get started?

**RS:** Back in 2018 the Emerging Tech team at Flutter was doing some research around digital identity. We saw there were lots of exciting companies doing different things and we said, well, rather than picking one that we think is going to be the answer, why don't we keep an eye on all these different companies and see where they go?

We then expanded the scope a little, working with our safer gambling teams to ask if there were particular areas where having an external view or ideas might help to support our safer gambling strategy.

We worked with the team to define four or five different buckets and then invited external companies to pitch their solutions. The project was a real success. But it was just the starting point. Today, Alpha Hub is a community of start-ups, academics and corporate partners and together we look at technologies and ideas that have the potential to make a positive contribution to sports betting and gaming.

## But that's not the sole purpose of the emerging technologies team. Is that right?

That's right. The point of the Emerging Tech team is to think about how different technologies might evolve over the coming years and assess the opportunities or the risks they might create. We work with everyone across the business - the technology teams, safer gambling teams, product, marketing – to embed those insights into their strategies. Engaging with start-ups and the Alpha Hub community is just one of the pillars of what we do when we're thinking about and responding to where technology could take us.

## How does the idea for something like Paddy's Start-up Showcase come about?

We'll work with a particular part of the business, Paddy Power retail this time around, and help them to define the things that they're interested in or the challenges that they would like to try to solve. We'll work with them and try to find the relevant partners externally that can help.

This is how we arrived at the Paddy's Start-up Showcase Innovation Call. Over the years, we've done lots of work and research on what the shop and retail experience of the future might look like. This innovation call is an extension of that and allows us to try a slightly different route. We're searching for companies that can help us experiment with different ideas, run pilots, and start to move things forward, so that we can bring the next generation retail experience to life for our customers.

**What kind of companies do you expect to hear from?**

We know these aren't necessarily fully formed ideas that we're going to roll out in our 600+ Paddy Power shops overnight. As much as anything, this exercise is about building relationships with companies and seeing how they evolve over the next few years, drawing on the support of the entire Flutter network. It's about helping companies adapt, build and input into our strategy and our thinking about where retail is going in the future.

That is what makes this innovation call so interesting. We're not just expecting to hear from specialists in the online betting and gaming sector. You don't need to be a betting software provider. We see this as a chance to speak to people who are also at the cutting edge outside our industry.

They could be in leading edge retail infrastructure, maybe in restaurants, fast food outlets, fashion. They could be at the very forefront of data analytics in a live environment. They could be working on experiences that we're not even thinking about for shops today.

Virtual reality, for example, or extended reality. What would that mean? We saw one company that's looking into fully immersive sound to augment the customer experience. Imagine walking into a shop on race day to a full 3D sonic experience of the racetrack. How would that change your entertainment experience? It's fascinating!

**And this is why you added the wildcard category? To invite those ideas that don't quite fit neatly into a bucket?**

Exactly. We want to know if there's anyone out there doing interesting things that might apply to retail but that we're just not even thinking about.

That might just be the seed of an idea but it could lead to something wildly different and which totally transforms how we think about shops.

What we're looking to build, and what Alpha Hub is about, are long term relationships that give companies the chance to draw on our resources over the course of their journey.

**So, Alpha Hub is not your standard incubator either. Is that right?**

That's right. Alpha Hub isn't an investment company. That's not how we're looking to help. We're very much looking at how companies grow and how we can plug them into our wider network. Today we're looking at Paddy Power retail, but it could also be putting companies in touch with Adjarabet, or maybe our online team at Betfair or FanDuel.

Flutter has a wider network as well. Across the group we work with around 12,000 suppliers and partners, all of them interested in the different types of technology we could be offering people. So, we're approaching this with our entire eco-system in mind. In effect, we're a launchpad into the wider Flutter Group.

**Do we have any examples of companies we've worked with in the past?**

Mindway AI is a very interesting example. The company uses neuroscience and artificial intelligence to create solutions for the identification of at-risk and problem gambling. During the 2018 innovation call with our safer gambling teams, we hosted a number of live pitching sessions and workshops in Cluj where we heard some really fascinating ideas. Mindway went on to become the winning start-up and today partners with Flutter in many of our divisions for consultancy work and pilots, making a big contribution to our safer gambling strategy.

If your start-up can provide the next big thing in retail technology, visit [alphahub.tech/paddys-startup-showcase/](https://alphahub.tech/paddys-startup-showcase/)

To learn more about Alpha Hub and to get in touch, visit [alphahub.tech](https://alphahub.tech).