



# WILLIAM HICKS

*Industry: Air Quality Tech / Clean Tech Startup*

## CURRENT ROLE

- Co-founder & Chief Scientific Officer (CSO), Air Aware Labs

## EDUCATION & CAREER PATH

- **MSc in Air Pollution Management and Control**, University of Birmingham (part-time) (2016–2018)
- **PhD in Air Pollution Measurement & Modelling**, Imperial College London (2018–2022)
- **Postdoctoral Researcher in Indoor Air Quality**, Imperial College London (2022–2023)
- **Entrepreneur in Residence**, Zinc VC Incubator (2023–2024, 6 months)
- **Co-founder & CSO**, Air Aware Labs (2024–present)

## HOW HIS PATH DIFFERED FROM EXPECTATIONS

- I expected to remain in academia or move into consultancy, and entrepreneurship wasn't even on my radar during my PhD. Initially, I considered starting a small consultancy, but co-founding a tech startup was a much bigger leap.
- The biggest shift has been navigating uncertainty—financial pressure, investor rejections, and the challenge of building something from scratch. However, working in a startup brings a different kind of risk than academia, where funding for fellowships and research can also be unpredictable. Finding a great co-founder and team has helped manage these challenges and made the experience far more rewarding.

## CAREER INSIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

- My role as a founder and CSO is incredibly fulfilling. The fast-paced, ever-changing nature of startup life keeps me engaged, as I balance fundraising, B2B sales, management, and strategy. What excites me most is bridging the gap between science and real-world impact—translating complex air quality data into actionable insights that can improve public health at scale.
- Having the freedom to shape a company while remaining rooted in science is particularly rewarding. Unlike academia, where progress can be slow, startups operate at an intense speed—every month brings new challenges and opportunities.

## FUTURE PLANS

I fully intend to stay at Air Aware Labs. We're at an exciting stage, launching AirTrack, a mobile app that helps users reduce their exposure to air pollution. The company sits at the intersection of environmental science, health, and technology, with huge potential for scale and impact. Having a strong team and mission-driven work makes this an exciting long-term commitment. Of course, financial sustainability is key, but I'm optimistic about our trajectory.

## ADVICE FOR EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS (ECRS)

- ☒ Your skills—data analysis, critical thinking, domain expertise—are valuable far beyond academia. Don't be afraid to explore unconventional paths.
- ☒ Network widely. Connect with people in industry, policy, and startups. Your expertise is needed in places you might not have considered.
- ☒ If you're interested in startups, work at one first. The culture and pace are vastly different from academia. Organizations like the Imperial Enterprise Lab are great entry points.
- ☒ Most importantly, enjoy the journey. Step outside your comfort zone—you might find something even more fulfilling than you expected.