Dean Malmgren and Mike Stringer are data guys—at least, that’s how they were perceived. It’s not hard to see why—they completed their PhDs in the lab of Professor Luís Amaral, where they conducted data science research, and then, in 2009, started a company called Datascope Analytics, where they hired data scientists to solve data problems for clients.

There was only one issue.

“There’s no such thing as a data problem,” Stringer says. “Looking only at the data from the outset throws away a huge part of how you solve a problem. The data is actually just one resource for design thinking.”

Turns out they were designers all along, but now it’s official. After eight years of success, Datascope was acquired by design firm IDEO in October 2017. Though the two companies had partnered on projects for years, the acquisition brings together design and data to tackle the next frontier: augmented intelligence.

**GETTING THEIR “MBA ON THE STREETS”**

Malmgren and Stringer hadn’t predicted this path when they were finishing their PhDs. The two knew they had a specific set of skills that was in demand: they knew how to work with data, and they knew how to communicate their results.

“Working in the Amaral lab, the idea of communicating science was not secondary,” Stringer says. “We practiced it all the time. We always kept the audience in mind while doing our research.”

As they finished their degrees, the two would walk around campus and talk about starting a data science business—how they would structure it, how they would get started. Eventually they turned to Mike Marasco, director of the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, for help. He set them up in an incubator and offered advice. Soon, the first clients came rolling in.

From there, they opened their first official office in Chicago, where they earned their “MBA on the streets,” as Malmgren puts it. As founders of a bootstrapped startup, Malmgren and Stringer were all in, but when they hired their first employee, the pressure was on.
“There’s no such thing as a data problem. Looking only at the data from the outset throws away a huge part of how you solve a problem. The data is actually just one resource for design thinking.”

MIKE STRINGER