

Episode 83 - Adam Shlomi

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SPEAKERS

Moira McCullough, Adam Shlomi

 Moira McCullough 00:00

Welcome to the College Scoops podcast. I'm your host, Moira McCullough. And today we are talking with Adam Shlomi about how he started his business SoFlo tutors while attending Georgetown University,

 Adam Shlomi 00:11

I think people should think less and do more. So rather than think about the project that you want to make and sort of plan out how it's gonna look, it's really nice and easy to plan before you do a big thing. But the sooner that you get to doing the sooner that you're actually going to make progress on what you're working towards. And you're also gonna have a much clearer vision and you're going to be adjusting and making progress.

 Moira McCullough 00:35

This is the College Scoops podcast and I'm your host, Moira McCullough, we focus on everything college related from the admissions process to where to eat, stay and explore on and round campuses. Our guests include founders, educators, authors and experts in the college space. Join us as these experts share their knowledge, experiences and lessons learned to help you have stress free and formative and tasty college journeys. Whether it's your first or last child going to college, or you're just interested in going to a college town

for a game or meal we've got you covered. If you haven't already, please subscribe to the College Scoops podcast to get the inside scoop, send everything college related, and leave us a review. Thanks to all of our sponsors, partners and the entire College Scoops Ambassador team for helping us bring valuable content to our community. If you would like to support College Scoops as a sponsor, please head over to [patreon@patreon.com/collegescoops](https://patreon.com/collegescoops) and sign up as a sustaining listener, insider or Deluxe sponsor. We have exclusive benefits for our members free ebooks and even a College Scoops care package. Adam Shlomi is the founder of SoFlo Tutoring. He went to Georgetown University and scored 1570 out of 1600 on the SAT. And now SoFlo helps thousands of students. SoFlo offers online SAT and ACT prep to students around the world. They have 100 tutors on their team. When Adam founded SoFlo a little more than two years ago, he was bed ridden recovering from ankle surgery with doctors saying he may never walk again. Welcome to the College Scoops podcast Adam. Thank you so much for joining us today.

A Adam Shlomi 02:16
Thank you guys for having me.

M Moira McCullough 02:18
Well, we love talking to entrepreneurs. You're a Georgetown grad. You're a student who is an entrepreneur who started his business in school, and now is working to really help high school students and college students get the best test score that they possibly can to help them in all different aspects. So that is why we invited you on our College Scoops podcast today.

A Adam Shlomi 02:43
Awesome. So I'm Adam Shlomi, the Founder of SoFlo LSAT tutoring, I went to Georgetown University scored a 1570 on the SAT. And now SoFlo has about 100 tutors on the team. But when I started, so for about two and a half years ago, I had broken my ankle with doctors saying I may not walk again. I was home from Georgetown taking the semester off without a lot going on. And I started doing online SAT tutoring, I was a kid who grew up with a computer in my room. I always loved the internet. And by sort of hustling hard and getting good reviews and doing good work, we've been able to scale up to about 100 leaders on the team. But I think one of the exciting things about SoFlo is and that we've really seen with COVID in the last year, is the internet as a democratizing force for education where we've been able to make SAT prep a lot more affordable and accessible

for families who couldn't afford a high end SAT tutor before, or who couldn't make it work into their scheduler who lived internationally. And we've been able to give access to top quality test prep to a lot more people than otherwise would have been.

M Moira McCullough 03:45

Well, I think that's so important now. When did you graduate?

 03:50

I graduated in 2020. So I did not walk the graduation stage.

M Moira McCullough 03:56

Which is so hard, but you have just graduated and you know how much college costs. So everything going into the preparation of college, attending college is really expensive. So having the opportunity to help students who don't have the ability to spend thousands and thousands of dollars so far has been able to do that. But can we go backwards? Were you always good at taking tests? Like how does that come so naturally? Were you always good at taking tests?

A Adam Shlomi 04:19

I really liked testing at school because I was really bad at homework. And I was really bad at writing like with good handwriting. Even now, my handwriting is so bad that I was featured in The Wall Street Journal under an article I'd be a student if only I could read my handwriting. And so I wasn't good at staying organized. I wasn't good at doing my homework. I wasn't good at coming to class prepared and having everything neat. But if someone gave me a test and they said you have to do really well on this thing for three hours, I could crush them. And so I always liked testing because I felt like it. It gave me a chance to show where I was shining.

M Moira McCullough 04:51

Okay, so you and I would have been the best partners. I would have done the homework for you and you would have taken the test. I was not a good test taker but I was great at my homework, so that is something that came natural to you.

A

Adam Shlomi 05:03

So I started at 15. And my mom was taking me to all these different test prep college companies, she really always wanted me to go to a great school. That was a big ambition that she had for me. And when I was 15, there was a company college experts, where I was supposed to go there for tutoring. And then they hired me when I was 15. I was one of the youngest people in the room, but they saw me speak with a parent about a scholarship exam at a local high school. And she was like, I saw the way you spoke with that mom over there, I was really impressed with that you should come work here. And so I started tutoring kids. I remember the first time I ever tutored, I tutored, someone was 18, I was 15, I was so nervous. And I taught them how to use this calculator. Because I felt that was like someone's like, I'm not gonna teach you math teachers have been trying that for years, but maybe I can get you good at your cat. And so I built up a lot of experience and skill being in a room of a test prep company, seeing how that company runs. So then when I had my broken foot, I knew kind of how that industry would work and how that business model ran. And I thought that I could do it better than I had been done by my previous employer.

M

Moira McCullough 05:59

Well, the fact of the matter that you had the presence and the ability to walk in as a 15 year old and overcome that initial probably shock that the 18 year old had of like, This kid is gonna teach me what it means that you had the presence and the ability in the business sense to kind of focus on a skill set and help people in a way that's impactful. And that's demonstrated, you know, on a test. So you started then tutoring when you were young and 15 did you continue when you were at college,

A

Adam Shlomi 06:27

My freshman year, I got a job at a company Colledgevine that's kind of transitioned and gone through some struggles. But they really did SoFlo before what SoFlo is today. I never really got a student from them. But I saw like how an online SAT tutoring company would run. And then I always thought I would get back into it. Like I remember my sophomore year, I printed out the SAT test thinking, I'll do this on the side while I'm still in school. But time is such a scarce resource for a college student. It could be better spent like seeing John Kerry speak. And then it always seemed like a better use of time than being an SAT tutor in college. And then I think if I had a company that made it easier. So I probably would have gone for that route, rather than like my on campus part time job. But I always wanted to do it. And I never really had the time. So then when I broke my foot, I finally did have the time to commit to a project.

M**Moira McCullough 07:09**

So how did that come about that you're sitting there, you're recovering, and as you said, dealing psychologically with a whole nother emotional aspect of like, I'm physically injured, and I may not be able to walk again. And then not falling down that path of being depressed and ultra negative to the point where you can't think about anything, let alone starting your own company and launching a business.

A**Adam Shlomi 07:31**

I really think it was like I had been going very, very fast in college, right? Like there's a lot going on, both academically socially. And then once I broke my foot, I still committed to doing a lot of things I was going to classes and I was I started reading a lot of books because I couldn't do as much. And then I came home. And I couldn't really like I could get books delivered to my door at Georgetown, I couldn't do that at home. So I was reading less. There is no online class options available, which is crazy to think about two years ago. Georgetown refused to have an online class. They wouldn't let me take any classes at another school are transferred. So I really had nothing to do. And this was an immense shock going from just waking up at Georgetown I felt like a professional, my inbox would be flooded before I even woke up to having zero activity. And that was really hard for me and just to go from, from so fast, so slow, that I started working on projects and I was really interested in entrepreneurship. I've been taking entrepreneurship classes. I wanted to start a company. And so I thought this would be a good experience, I thought I'm just going to do projects as learning opportunities. This way, the next time I build a website, I'll know how to do that. The next time I hire people, I have more experience hiring. I never expected it to go far. I just thought I'm gonna go do the best that I can for something. I'll teach myself from the internet when I don't know how to do something and this project based learning seemed to make a lot of sense to me.

M**Moira McCullough 08:44**

So your premise is that the business model has always been online? And I think you made a good point even in your introduction, when you said at 15 you went in and somebody mentioned the presence that you had and your ability to talk with parents. You can be a real good test taker, but that can't translate into your ability to teach it. We always say if you can teach the subject, you really know it really well. And that doesn't always come with somebody who can ace the SAT.

A**Adam Shlomi 08:47**

We were in person for like a very short time, maybe one or two months, okay. And the idea was that we couldn't find smart people in South Florida. To find someone who crushed the SAT in South Florida didn't really exist because they've all moved. They've all gone to the West Coast or the Northeast, or they're not here. And so, we were just able to have a much, much better pool of people when we went to the Northeast. Like as an example, the first tutor that we hired is a great guy, very smart. But he was someone who came to Florida because he had to go to a rehab clinic and he stayed. And he crushed it. But like after sorting through 500 applications, this was sort of the only guy who had a really high SAT score that we felt had the right demeanor for a kid. But even then, like that's not someone who I think if I told a parent that would go super well. And so we had to just move to online for the for the quality of talent. Yeah, even now in our hiring process. The first thing we do is get on the phone with someone and sort of talk to them. We don't talk about the test. We just talked about who you are, what music do you like, and say that they are someone who we think could get a 15 year old 16 year old excited. That they want the job and that they're, that they're normal, that they're well adjusted. And then the second thing after that is we start giving them practice tests and see how they can explain things. But the very first thing we test is social demeanor, and how someone speaks on the phone, and we ignore all the questions about how smart they are.

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Moira McCullough 10:22

Well, you said you've worked with a couple different companies and is that kind of what you took out? Like, what really resonated, what worked well and what didn't work well? And because you were young, you were just in their shoes a couple years ago, you could relate to them.

A

Adam Shlomi 10:36

Yeah, I think hiring was really broken. I had a lot, a lot of thoughts about hiring. And so the chance like mega hiring process was really exciting. Like one thing is like, I hated cover letters. I thought cover letters were a joke. And so now we have no cover letters itself. And then I think another thing is, companies don't do a lot to get the applicant excited. So part of that phone closure, saying like, hey, this is a cool job, like, here's what the job is in trying to pitch that job to someone. And then having a lot of quick touch points. I think the worst thing that happened to someone is they go through a job, and then they don't get contacted again. And so trying to make sure that every applicant gets at least some notice on where they are in the application process.

 Moira McCullough 11:10

That's huge. When you talk about the fact that you receive an application, you go through that process, you have a first call, and just keeping them in the loop as to where they stand in that application process. There's one thing about, again, starting a business and then trying to market it in this kind of cluttered market, don't you think? In some ways how do you guys do that?

 11:34

We started recruiting at sort of top schools. I think because I went to Georgetown, I knew like here's what the Georgetown market is like. Here's sort of who you're competing with. In person, like you're either competing for on campus jobs at pay whatever DC minimum wages that year, or you're competing with a few test prep companies who will shuttle kids back and forth. And then you're competing with banks who want someone for a junior internship. You're probably going to lose to the bank, because that's a career, the in person test prep companies, they sort of have their funnels built out already. And they're happy with them. But we can definitely beat the on campus work or the work study jobs because we can pay a lot more. And so the idea was how do people go and find their work study jobs, maybe they find them on Billboard's and posted boards. Maybe they find them to the Career Center. But whatever way you would go, if you were looking for a work study job, I want to be one of the options.

 Moira McCullough 12:22

So is handshake one of those platforms?

 12:26

Handshake has not actually worked for us because I think a lot of people go to handshake for careers. Some schools also use it for on campus jobs. But a lot of people go to Handshake for a career. Like when I was going to Handshake, I wasn't going to be the staff attendant at the gym, I was going to work at McKinsey, that's the frame of mind that I approach Handshake with. And I think that's made it hard for us to recruit on Handshake.

 Moira McCullough 12:47

The students that you recruit are current students?

A Adam Shlomi 12:53

Generally, it's a mix. So it's like grads and undergrads. I think undergrads honestly performed the best in the interview process, because they're the most excited for the job. And they know the test really well, because they've taken it themselves pretty recently. But I think it's important to have a mix where there's some kids who need someone who's a bit older, that's guiding them. But I would say 50%, undergrad, 25%, recent grads, 25% grad?

M Moira McCullough 13:15

And do you do any type of subject matter tests?

A Adam Shlomi 13:17

Our prime focus is sort of SAT prep and then we do college counseling. And if someone asks us, hey my son has a math exam, Mario is pretty good at teaching him SAT math. I'm sure he could teach him algebra, we'll let that happen. We don't refuse to do it. But we're not actively seeking out algebra tutoring as our main business,

M Moira McCullough 13:35

So what was the hardest thing about starting this? I mean, you had a lot of experience going into it. You had a lot of ideas, but running a business and being an entrepreneur. And then as you said, hiring and then running the business and then marketing it. What was a challenge that you have, because we have brought on many entrepreneurs, student entrepreneurs, and we'd like share your success stories, share the lessons learned? What advice do you have for some students who are looking to start their own business?

A Adam Shlomi 14:03

So the hardest to get is always customers like to get someone who's willing to pay you for the thing that you want to do. I think I knew that was going to be the biggest challenge. I knew that's why most startups failed. And so when I started SoFlo, my only focus was, how can I get more people interested? How can I get more people on the phone? How can I get paying customers and every other problem will eventually solve itself? I think until this day, how can you get more customers, that's going to be the thing that stops most people from growing, normally demand issues rather than supply. So that's still the problem that I deal

with today. It's been the problem for two years now. And then in terms of my advice, I think people should think less and do more. So rather than think about the project that you want to make and sort of plan out how it's gonna look, it's really nice and easy to plan before you do a big thing. But the sooner that you get to doing the sooner that you're actually going to make progress on what you're working towards. And you're also gonna have a much clearer vision and you're going to be adjusting and making progress. I think a really good first step for everyone to do is to make a website if you have an idea. Squarespace has this model or website that makes it real that I that I really agree with. Go put your idean on the internet. You'll start messing around with the messaging. You'll have a clearer idea of what you want. People will take you more seriously and then from there, you can go elsewhere. But like starting with the website, is a very good, strong place to start.

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Moira McCullough 15:12

That's a great idea and great advice. I know that being an entrepreneur myself and trying to launch a business, you could get into that thinking mode where all of a sudden you come up with this idea, and you started too late. Your approach and your goal was also to be accessible. So offering tutoring at prices that you guys offer means that so many more people can afford to come to SoFlo.

A

Adam Shlomi 15:36

So our standard price is \$60 an hour, no contract. I think that's a very fair and reasonable way to do business where if you are like us, you'll use us. If you don't like us no hard feelings. You're not buying a package upfront. But there's still a lot of people who think \$60 an hour rate, even with inflation is expensive. And so we also have a scholarship program. And right now we're running three free classes with Achieve Miami and then a few more with Yes Prep and sort of other charities that we partnered with. I think even more than just from me, but from all of the people at SoFlo that work here now, there's a real big idea of sort of giving back and making education accessible. And I think that's nice to sort of see a culture where other people are very happy to step up, if asked to do something for charity, and really excited to work.

M

Moira McCullough 16:17

Absolutely. And I think your generation is very keyed into that. And they want to give back. And it's trying to find something that's meaningful and in alignment with their own goals and values.



Adam Shlomi 16:28

100% actually one of the first small problems I ran into when we were trying to recruit more tutors, and we started running Facebook ads for them. And I showed it to my business professor, I said, Hey, I can't believe like, nobody wants this job. It's a great job. And one of the things he said is like, if I was young person, right now, I probably want to be told, like I can control my schedule, I can make good money, and then I could do something that's meaningful. And so we made our scholarship program a much bigger part of our recruiting process. And that really made a difference. People are very excited to find out they're going to work for a company that does good, in addition to a company that can give them money and give them a job.



Moira McCullough 17:00

Absolutely. So Georgetown, were they helpful? You mentioned you had you had always thought about entrepreneur and taking some entrepreneur classes, did they have an entrepreneurship program,



Adam Shlomi 17:10

The leadership program at Georgetown, it's led by a guy Jeffrey (Professor) Read. And in terms of like, helping me start my business, like there wasn't a ton of support there. It wasn't like someone was going to teach me how to do accounting. But I took a class called Foundations of Entrepreneurship where they brought in really successful people and they just spoke. And so you'd see sort of the the different ways to be successful that there's not one way and there's a lot of different patterns. But then there's also rhymes between how the different people carry themselves. And you kind of see yourself in them. And you say, like, what parts of me do I have, which parts of me are not and these guys and these girls, and you get a much better idea of sort of whether you should or should not be an entrepreneur, and I know that class for me, every time I left that class, I felt very, very excited about building a company.



Moira McCullough 17:51

Was there anyone that you said, Oh my gosh, I'd love to work for them.



17:55

Luke Schoenfelder. So he's the founder of Latch, he's a young guy. Latch is a big

successful access company. They make a really nice lock for a door that can sync up with your phone and sync up with FedEx. And if you've ever lived in like in New York City, and you have to get a package, this makes a lot more sense. But this was a guy who I was just like, wow, he is smart, moving with a lot of confidence, and also making a big impact pretty quickly.

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Moira McCullough 18:19

That's not easy to do, as we know. So in terms of Georgetown, bringing in different professionals and supporting in that way, do they have a program for alumni that you can reach back and tap into at various times to help you as you reach your next growth stage?

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Adam Shlomi 18:37

I still speak with Professor Reed now I give him an update on some of the other people at the entrepreneurship program. There's like scattered Georgetown Alumni Association and there's a Georgetown Alumni Association of Miami. There's one that's like just for Hoyas and tech that's like very San Francisco base. But I like to keep my head down a lot. Like I really want to focus on the projects that I'm working on and SoFlo and then outside of that, I kind of want to live my life to the fullest. But I haven't really looked out for like community entrepreneurship networking programs as much. I feel like time spent networking this time that I should be spend working. That's like my personal philosophy. Maybe I'll realize that's wrong in a few years.

M

Moira McCullough 19:11

No, no, I think you're the one person running everything. It's kind of like you pick and choose. So just out of curiosity, what was the reason that you chose Georgetown? Was it something for all students who are out there now kind of fine tuning these juniors coming up to senior year? What was it that stood out about Georgetown?

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Adam Shlomi 19:28

I don't have to go into politics and public service. I thought public service was sort of the way to make the biggest impact for the most people. I'd worked with every Washington shelters office, I really thought sort of, I would I would be a civil servant, or maybe a politician. And then I went to Georgetown, I met all these politicians. I met all these civil servants and they're all very smart, and they're all very hard working. And they were getting very little done. And the ability to make change and move the needle in

government, it was broken. And that's a huge problem. But it wasn't a problem that I as an individual is going to be able to fix. So I started seeing the startup people who were smart and hungry, and they were really making a big change. And I thought, Wow, well, I could probably do something similar to that in the private market. So for example, if I was interested in education reform, and wanting to education policy, which a lot of people do, probably wouldn't really be able to change any one person's education so much, unless I got really lucky. But so far, we've been able to help 1000s of kids get one on one education, and sort of make a difference in their life and teach them math that they might not have learned, or teach them grammar rules and sort of give them more foundations and basics, because we have this sort of this private market option. So I thought of startups as a way to do a lot more good and to make a bigger change than if I was going to go into the public sector.

M Moira McCullough 20:38

And what was the driving force when you were in high school of why you chose Georgetown?

A Adam Shlomi 20:42

One is the speakers were really good. The speakers at Georgetown were just world class, like, really interesting, exciting, people would come all the time. And you get to really hear about how they think and who they are. And, you know, since I graduated, I don't get that. So I really treasured that when I was there. And the second thing was Georgetown felt very professional. And it felt like if I was going to go to a liberal arts college, I would probably need to go to grad school. And I'd have to learn how to do something afterwards. But if I went to Georgetown for four years, I would walk away, being pretty capable and able to handle myself in a professional setting. And I think that's proven true.

M Moira McCullough 21:15

So advice to any of the students that are incoming freshmen at Georgetown would be get involved in as much as you can, and go to as many events as you can.

A Adam Shlomi 21:24

Attend any speaking event that you can go to go to, because you will just learn a lot more than you will in your classes.

M Moira McCullough 21:29

So what do you wish you knew before attending college?

A Adam Shlomi 21:32

I recently had a trip to Alaska with one of my college friends and we were sort of thinking about this question. I think the biggest thing is I wish I knew was how to manage my calendar and my inbox more because I know my first year was really overwhelming to wake up with 25 emails. And this was coming from a high school student who never really had an inbox that he checked. I wish I had learned a little bit sooner and a little bit faster, how to be productive and organized myself, because I really had to learn on the fly when I got to college.

M Moira McCullough 21:57

That's really important, I think. And I think we all I love these answers, because everyone has a different answer. And if you took all those answers combined, we would crush it like if any kid is out there. I'm going to take the segments of everyone answering these questions, and I'm going to tell my youngest, like go to school and listen to these lessons learned. That's the best advice you could possibly have. We are all about food at college, Scripps. So are there any favorite places on and around Georgetown?

A Adam Shlomi 22:24

So there's a restaurant called The Tombs that, it's like a campus bar. It's very nice. It's not it's not overrated. Like there's a lot of places that are like, generically, the college that kind of stuff, actually really good food, nice bar cheap drinks, it was closed for COVID. Like it was I could not eat there. When I went back to campus in January, I hope it's open. Now I'm not sure of the status. But it's an institution, it's been there for a while, the dining hall sucks, unfortunately,

M Moira McCullough 22:51

There's so much around now. But then to that point, it's expensive. So then students have to get a job.

A Adam Shlomi 22:59

Yeah, it's also not as close as we think it is. There was a company that did an off campus meal plan, and they failed at Georgetown. And one of the reasons that they learned was that students don't walk by the off campus restaurants at Georgetown every day. Well, they do at UVA. And so you really need to be able to walk by the place that you eat, you can't go out of your way for food when you're a college student. So George, then you really end up eating the dining hall off because you need to eat and there's not a lot of options on campus.

M Moira McCullough 23:24

That's interesting. No, and you're right, because as we've said, consistently throughout time is precious. So it's not as if you have the time to walk 15-20 minutes to go grab something and then come flying back because that eats and everything else. Did you have a favorite job?

A Adam Shlomi 23:39

I worked at the student center and I was like, sort of like hosting events. And I would like move chairs and stuff. And it was nice, because like it was a very low stress job. And then when I wasn't working, I'd sort of be on my computer doing homework, I'd see people wander in and out of the student center. I liked my coworkers. It was a good on campus part time job.

M Moira McCullough 23:58

I like it because you see everyone, you get to meet so many people or you're like, Okay, I've heard about that person. So it's a great way. If you're not that outgoing, too, and you want to get yourself out there and meet people. That's one way to do it. Yeah, the Campus Center or the library or the Rec Center. Those are other. Adam, thank you so much for joining us today. I greatly appreciate it.

A Adam Shlomi 24:17

Awesome. Thank you very much for having me.

M Moira McCullough 24:20

Thank you, Adam for joining us today to share your story as an entrepreneur. starting a

business while in college is not easy, but you had a mission soflo tutors provides accessible and affordable test preparation services to thousands of students. Starting a company may seem like a daunting task, but with the advice you provided to us today one can ease their way into the entrepreneurial world. Remember to think less and do more when starting a business. If you have a business venture that you are eager to pursue put your best foot forward and begin your journey today. You can find all of our notes and links to the helpful resources mentioned throughout our conversation on our website at [college scripps.com](https://collegescripps.com) slash podcast. You can learn more about Adam and SoFlo tutors at soflotutors.com. Please take a couple minutes to rate review and subscribe to College Scoops. Thank you for listening to our College Scoops podcast. Our entire college scripts team strives to make the college journey a little bit easier, less stressful, fun and tasty by sharing all the inside scoops we have curated along the way. We would love to hear from you about topics to cover and your ideas and everything college related. Reach out to us at collegescoops.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.