

Episode 18: Career Switch Pathways: Entrepreneurship with Hikari Senju

[00:00:00] **Elyse:** Well Hikari, thank you so much for joining me on the show. I'm really excited to talk to you about entrepreneurship today and find out more about your career.

Hikari: Thanks for having me, Elyse.

Elyse: So you graduated from Harvard and then you began a career... it sounds like you went pretty immediately into entrepreneurship and began your career in ed tech with Quickhelp. Can you give us kind of an overview of the beginning part of your career?

Hikari: Sure. Yeah. So I am a serial entrepreneur, so I started a bunch of companies in college. My first company actually was with my roommate at that time, which was a like a friend meetup app. And then I started another company senior year of college which was an on-demand tutoring business. And basically the idea here was let's create liquidity in the market regarding undergraduates seeking last minute tutoring with grad students on campus or nearby looking to make extra money.

And so I built this app that was essentially this marketplace. And it grew very quickly. Within the first couple of months, we had 30,000 active tutoring sessions on a monthly basis.

[00:01:00] And eventually the company was acquired by another ed tech company called Yup.com where I became the head of growth.

Elyse: So what made you decide that you wanted to start your own company immediately? Did you ever consider, like getting a job out of college?

Hikari: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I'd always wanted to be an entrepreneur. My grandfather was an executive at IBM. My father was an artist. And so this kind of like technology entrepreneurship kind of had been, like running your own business in technology, having impact, being at the cutting edge of technology had always been kind of in my upbringing.

But there is a possibility absolutely where I might've taken a job out of college to learn more about working at a big organization and what that takes as well. So I think it just happened that the sequences I took just resulted in these really great opportunities to focus on entrepreneurship.

Elyse: So what eventually led you to sell Quickhelp [00:02:00] to Yup? Why did you decide to sell at that point?

Hikari: I think we had an alignment of vision. So I had met the founder of Yup through running Quickhelp. And the mission of increasing access for education, in some ways democratizing education, the idea here that anybody should have access to high quality education, was a mission that we had was in alignment. At the same time, he was a lot further along in terms of running his tutoring business.

They were the leader in this space. And so when this opportunity arose to learn, learn from a great founder, learn from a business that's further along and then also to work with similar mission oriented people in terms of making education more accessible and democratizing education.

And so, you know, one plus one was greater than two.

Elyse: Got it. So you ended up deciding to sell Quickhelp. And then what happened after that? Did you work at Yup for a while after that?

Hikari: Yeah, so I worked at Yup for about a year and a half running their growth. Building and onboarding, running massive advertising campaigns to onboard parents, running advertising [00:03:00] campaigns to target like teenagers who are looking for help with tutoring.

And it was really actually there running growth and especially running these large marketing budgets for Google and Facebook, I saw the inefficiencies when it came to creating content and testing content on these performance platforms. The paradigm was still very much based on this kind of old television model, where you would invest, you know, 30 million, \$2 into maybe buying the media slot and then \$30 million to clean that content.

Whereas with these programmatic display platforms, it's really more about AB testing and kind of hyper personalizing the content. And so that just required a completely different approach to creative.

Elyse: I kind of want to dive into this aspect of, you started your own company, and then once you sold your company, you were working at Yup. What was it like for you to then kind of transition into a role, even though you were head of growth and you had clearly a high level executive position, what was it like for you making that transition and how did you feel kind of transitioning from running your own thing to working somewhere [00:04:00] else?

Hikari: Yeah, really, really great question. It's definitely totally different from being a business owner, to being an employee. You're no longer reporting to investors or to a board potentially, but you're really important to one person, who's your boss, and you have certain expectations, very clear expectations from your boss regarding hitting growth projections and deliverables.

At the same time though, being creative in terms of being proactive and coming up with ideas and taking ownership of projects and also getting buy-in within an organization, developing relationships with other people within like the management or within the company to get support for your ideas versus being a founder, which is more about hiring great people and communicating a vision to investors and creating great products.

And so there was definitely like a massive change in those two positions. I think it was so critical that I had this experience being an employee at a company. Because when I first started Quickhelp, this company out of college, I didn't necessarily know what it meant to build a company.

I knew what it meant to build apps [00:05:00] and build projects and pitch it to investors and things along those lines. But to really build a team, to build objectives that teams can achieve to measure the right things and to manage people, to help them. And achieve these metrics and also to have measurable objectives too, in choosing what objectives to focus hiring around and focus building around. That I all learned while working at Yup.

So it was a really critical part of my education, being an employee in a company. You kind of started with this question, right? Which is. I'd always wanted to be an entrepreneur, but the fact that there was also really great learnings to be had being an employee, working at a great organization, knowing what it's like to have a great culture, knowing what it's like to have a results driven culture and creating great community of mission-oriented people.

Sometimes it's difficult to get that experience just always by being an entrepreneur. So for me, working at Yup was this critical experience I had to have in order to build Omnekey.

Elyse: Yeah. I think that's really fascinating. A lot [00:06:00] of the people who I've had on the show so far who I've interviewed for the show have gone, from a job that they had to becoming an entrepreneur. You don't often see it the other way around, someone who has started a company and going to work for another company. And I think that one of the biggest issues that people face is that they really find, I guess, this concept of working for someone else kind of grating, or they kind of chafe against it.

And I wonder how it felt for you. I mean, you know, obviously you learned a lot and it was critical experience and, I think that there's a lot of value in everything that you've done, but how did it feel? And why did you then decide to start Omnekey other than, there was an obvious problem that needed to be solved?

Hikari: I was very, very lucky. Naguib is a really, was a really great boss. and he really gave me the space to be myself and to pursue my interests within the company and to work on these initiatives and [00:07:00] projects. And he gave me a lot of like space to be myself.

And so I was very lucky to have him as a boss. Also the rest of the team as well. One of the reasons why I love ed tech, I loved working in it is because it is kind of a self selective group of very like pro-social people.

Like ed tech tends to self select people who are passionate about education and passionate about empowerment and all these things. And so the culture of the company also was really phenomenal. And so I was very lucky to be able to work at an organization like that, where I never really felt grating to my superior.

Genuinely, the only reason why I started Omnekey was because I'm an entrepreneur at heart that I always wanted to start my own company. I've started multiple companies in the past. And just this massive itch to run a company and start a company and to be an entrepreneur.

But that said you're absolutely correct. There is a sea change between being an employee, being a manager and being an entrepreneur. These are very different experiences that one has in this world we live in.

Curious to [00:08:00] get your thoughts there as well, also on like how do you sense of the challenges that one of the concerns people have when making switches between those kinds of positions?

Elyse: Yeah, absolutely. It's a great question. I think this is a really interesting topic and I know it's taking us off on a little bit of a tangent, but not really, because the goal of this conversation is really to dive into this whole aspect of being an entrepreneur.

Like I said, I've talked to so many people on the show who have made a switch into entrepreneurship. I mean, I talked to somebody who became an artist. I talked to somebody who has started their own branding agency. I've talked to people who have done so many different things. Life coaches, meditation agencies, like literally everything under the sun and I think that, there's a couple of different things that lead people to make this jump. And generally what I've seen in terms of themes is that people who want to become entrepreneurs tend to start with, start it as a side hustle. Or will often start it in [00:09:00] such a way that they kind of feel like they still have some of that stability and that they still have, it's not like a huge jump off a cliff.

And I am really curious for you, one of the questions I was going to ask you was, you had already done it. You had already done it. And so you were, yes. You were working at Yup and you had this job, but when you decided to go start Omnekey, Did that feel like a risk for you? I have to imagine you kind of practiced that skill.

Hikari: I mean, first off going to this point about side projects. I mean, Steve Wozniak made the apple one whilst still working at a Target. Like it was actually only after they created the product that Steve jobs convinced Steve Wozniak to quit his job at Atari.

Similar story with Pierre Omidyar, you know, built eBay while being an engineer at general magic, which was this other startup. These big companies like apple, eBay, a lot of them did start off as side projects, as side hustles by the founders who are working full-time and someplace else, because it is a big risk.

And I think I was very lucky that because I had [00:10:00] previously been an entrepreneur before starting Omnekey I'd already been in that network of other entrepreneurs, of other investors. Of advisors. Literally the day after I left Yup, I received a pre-seed funding from village global, which is this accelerator for startups.

And again, if I hadn't gotten the support from Dwayne, who I met while working at Omnekey, my previous company, and also Eric Kornberg who I meant Through his on-deck program, who are both partners at Village and like all the intros they help make in terms of other entrepreneurs and other investors and other operators, it would have been a very, very hard time for me to get Omnekey off the ground. Like introductions to our first customers, other people who have built similar products or people who could introduce us to people who have built some of the products.

Again, I was very lucky to have that immediately jumping into this kind of support network that was village global. And I think that network existed because I'd been an entrepreneur in the past.

Elyse: I think that that's such a great point.

How [00:11:00] did you develop that original network? How did you come in contact with these people? Did you do this intentionally? Did you just meet these people in the course of your work? Like, how'd you build this network?

Hikari: Yeah, absolutely. I'm kind of, of this thought that work is something that comes to you when you're passionate about working on a compelling project. That people want to join you. People want to work with you. People want to help you if you're pursuing this compelling vision that is motivating for a lot of other people.

And so I don't think I went with this goal necessarily per se of, I want to create a network of investors and other entrepreneurs. It is by, okay, well, I need to raise for my company, I need to go speak with investors and I need to speak with other founders who've done something in the past so that I can make Quickhelp successful. It was through that motivation that I then met really great investors and that I met really great founders. Let's say you have a side hustle and you say, okay, so I'm trying to figure out some supply chain issues for my D to C product that I'm running Shopify.

Like how do I set up [00:12:00] Shopify site? And how do I figure inventory, through that process, you're going to reach out to other founders who've done that in the past. And that process is going to build out your network.

You're saying, okay, I need to raise capital to grow my company. Through that you're going to reach out to investors initially, probably even just for advice. And so the network building is almost like a natural part of the process of building a company, as you try to accomplish each of these goals that are required to build the company.

Elyse: It sounds like it's a very organic process and it's learning by doing it sounds like. It's basically you encounter a problem and you reach out to people that you think can help you fix it.

And how did you reach out to those people? Did you just look people up on LinkedIn? Did you have family or friends? Like how did you find them?

Hikari: Cold emails, cold emails. Absolutely. That is like a super power. The ability to write cold emails. The trick to writing cold emails, you want to keep it short, write three sentences, like number one, who you are, number two, why you're legit, and number three the ask. [00:13:00]

Especially during my Quickhelp days, when I didn't have really have a network, sent a lot, a lot of cold emails.

Elyse: Yeah. That makes sense. So interesting. So it sounds like you already had this network in place, you had kind of gotten to a point where you learned what you needed to learn from Yup. You had identified another problem that would serve as the basis for your next company, which is Omnekey. You had sort of practiced this risk-taking skill, or this, the skill of

building a company from the ground up because you've done it before. So when did you make the jump and what was the genesis of Omnekey?

Hikari: For Omnekey our mission is about democratizing growth and empowering small businesses with AI and with technology.

A lot of your listeners are entrepreneurs or soon to be entrepreneurs. My background is that of being a serial entrepreneur. And so I just have deep empathy for the struggle that it takes to go from nothing to building something. And so the mission is to build a technological [00:14:00] platform, to empower entrepreneurs, to empower small businesses with the growth that they need. The particular specific problem that we started off by solving was using AI to better quantify design. Design used to not be quantifiable. It used to be a lot more intuitive. So computer vision, kind of revolutionizes design by making design more quantifiable. And then also using generative content to run more AB tests.

Because we live in the age of big data, where Advantages accrue to those that have the most amount of relevant data. It almost becomes well then how can you get high quality data? And a large part of that is running a lot of AB tests.

And it's very difficult for a team of people even to run the billions of AB tests you really need given the number of people that your product is touching potentially. How could a group of five people make all the AB tests for the potential billions of users that day an app or product may be touching?

And so we can use AI to generate those AB tests driven by data. [00:15:00] And it was just really seeing that massive opportunity there that just, I was just hot to start on making.

Elyse: Interesting. I think that the mission of Omnekey is so great. I think it's such a cool concept.

And I think it's really beneficial and it's something that I think can really, really help a lot of small businesses. And you've kind of alluded to this, obviously growth is a huge obstacle when it comes to starting a business. But what do you think kind of gets in people's way?

What are some of the main challenges that you are finding that these small businesses are facing? Is it that they just don't have the time to run all these different tests to like optimize their growth strategy in the best way? Or they don't have the budget? what's the main obstacle there?

Hikari: So there's really, there's really two parts to that. The thing that scares when it comes to startups and starting company is attention . Like functionally, you need attention to raise capital. You need attention to get customers, to build a team.

All these things are necessary for a [00:16:00] company to grow. And traditionally, the levers for attention have only really been accessible to those with large marketing budgets or those with those relationships. And the idea is that with Omnekey, we're democratizing that access so that any business, whether you're a speech pathologist in Kansas with a business looking

to grow, or you're a part-time high school teacher in Michigan, growth should be available for you as well.

So that's the first part, which is how can we democratize the access to levers of attention. And then there was a massive need for creative. So creative is the big lever for driving results on these performance platforms, better creative content results in better performing campaigns.

And so it's really then becomes a discovery process of running as many tests as possible to create the best creative for all the different audiences that you're targeting. And what that requires is just a lot of [00:17:00] testing and those resources are not available for most small businesses. Most small entrepreneurs are there because they're passionate about their core product, but they're not necessarily like experts when it comes to running high promise, AB testing campaigns for performance marketing.

And so we make that accessible to those entrepreneurs.

Elyse: That's interesting. Do you find that most of the entrepreneurs that you're working with are sort of doing this as a side hustle? I mean, you mentioned a part-time teacher in Michigan, a speech pathologist in Kansas. Are they, are they trying to, in a full-time sense, hang their own shingle or are they starting these things as, as side hustles?

What do you see are the main kind of themes with these entrepreneurs?

Hikari: Our average customer is the small business. Long tail e-commerce direct to consumer brands, that's the majority of our customer base.

It is a lot of these entrepreneurs that are very early in. Largely overlooked by agencies because [00:18:00] they don't have the budgets that would warrant usually the attention of an advertising agency. And so that has been the market that we've been growing the fastest.

And it's because we do a lot of the work that an agency does regarding creating the content and managing the campaigns, it's all automated. With an AI, we've been able to lower the cost of running these campaigns. And actually also we've been able to improve the results.

Because of this, we've been able to lower the cost of advertising. Therefore we can service just a whole new market of potential companies.

Elyse: That's awesome. And like I said, I think it's just an interesting concept and clearly has so many benefits for so many people. And hopefully removes a lot of barriers for people as they decide to start their own company, which obviously I think even more people than ever are doing now, coming out of this pandemic.

Hikari: Absolutely. And I think also, because we focus on the marketing and the scaling of the marketing, it lets the founders focus on building compelling products and building great products and just do other high leverage things. In the past, maybe past decade in particular, [00:19:00] there was this interesting kind of path, which is like in order to be an entrepreneur, you had to first be an influencer and that like you had to build a large following on social media, before you could sell them a product. And I think that is not necessarily the

most efficient. It's not like the best influencers make the most compelling products, or even that the influencers aren't necessarily even great judges of products per se.

And so the idea that by lowering the cost of advertising, we're actually letting the best products in the best businesses succeed. Even if the founder doesn't happen to have millions of followers on social media that we are democratizing growth, that we are making growth accessible for any entrepreneur that has a compelling product.

Elyse: Yeah. So tell me, I mean, and I think we see evidence of that everywhere. There is such like a thing in the zeitgeists of the celebrity entrepreneur, and I think people do tend to think that, if I'm going to be an entrepreneur, I need to have a large social media following. You need to somehow become an influencer, [00:20:00] but we will also see a lot of examples of really successful people who are not influencers. And don't have that. I mean, look at the bestselling Etsy shops, look at Any number of different products that you see online.

Hikari: What it's funny, right?

I mean, cause it's kind of like a human bias where like everyone who is successful is by definition famous. And so therefore the bias is okay, well, to be successful, I need to be famous. You don't, by definition, know the successful people who aren't famous, because they're not in your, so it's like, it is this kind of, you're just this massive blind spot.

There's actually a lot of very successful people that no one has ever heard about. That are not interested in becoming famous. And so that is a viable path.

Elyse: And at the end of the day, it's about selling a product that people want.

And it doesn't have to be you, it can be a product. So you don't have to be caught up in this idea or this like, invisible script that we have that, if people have to buy it to you,

Hikari: right. Yeah. It is quite [00:21:00] interesting. Right. I mean, I'm like, why is it that you have these influencers, some of them are becoming billionaires.

I think it's a very unique moment in time where the value of attention has just gone so much higher, right? I mean, you can look at Facebook, CPMs cost per impressions, and you can see that the cost per impression is constantly steadily rising. This is just a fair reflection of the fact that attention is becoming more expensive than ever before.

And so therefore if you're a celebrity, I can command attention. That's a lot of value that could potentially, generate a lot of cells.

And all the businesses are valued based on the growth rate. And the biggest lever for growth is attention. And so therefore like the people that command the most intention capture a lot of value.

But the reality is, with advertising with positive return on ad spend campaigns with a good business model you can build probably more successful businesses than just relying on the celebrity power of one entrepreneur. A lot of the big businesses we all use, they're not necessarily run by [00:22:00] a celebrity entrepreneur.

And so at the end of the day, the best products do win out.

You're meeting a need that people want, you're selling a product that people want. And you have a great business and that's defensible and, and so that's really what matters at the end of the day. Creating great products that meet the needs and services, people to live better lives.

Elyse: Absolutely. Absolutely. So what do you think it is that actually holds back people from becoming entrepreneurs or taking that leap?

Hikari: I think partly it's, you mentioned this, it's that kind of social safety net. The idea that you're kind of forgoing being paid.

Oftentimes for least the first couple of years. And I think that's probably the biggest thing that keeps people from being entrepreneurs that you do need to kind of go out there and take a risk and not have income for a while and maybe potentially have partners also that aren't making a lot initially.

Elyse: Yeah. I think that's true. So what advice then do you have for anybody [00:23:00] who's listening who may want to look into becoming an entrepreneur?

Hikari: Do not have investors be a gatekeeper to you pursuing your dreams.

At the end of the day, as we mentioned, it's about creating great products. It's about creating great services, about meeting these people. And so as long as you can find a customer that's willing to pay you for that, then that's a business.

There's many ways one can become an entrepreneur. One method, which is you're working full time at a business. You're making that passive income by being an employee, but you also have all these different side experiments and side projects that you're testing out very rapidly. And then maybe one of them happens to be the next eBay or the next apple. But you have to just keep experimenting, keep taking shots on goal while working full time for another job.

The other option is perhaps starting consultancy or doing some product that you can actually support yourself doing while [00:24:00] building on that product. For example companies like MailChimp started off as consultancies. I think Shopify also was initially more of like a website consultancy.

You can create some kind of business that pays the bills and then the team, with whatever time they have left, you can work on building great products.

Or you get great investors very early on, you go through accelerators and that leads to fundraising from investors and they just provide all the capital upfront. So you can focus on the component, creative and creating a compelling product from the get go. And so I think there was different ways of doing this at the end of the day, it is about creating great products because products are generally how you scale value and how you create great businesses are built on great products.

Elyse: Okay. That's great. So I have one more question for you, which is what is your definition of success?

Hikari: I think it's about having a positive impact in the world. I think when you're old person and you kind of looking back, everybody wants to feel like, always has these kind of [00:25:00] existential questions that they're always asking themselves. And I think there's nothing more fulfilling than creating something.

That has a positive impact on the lives of other humans and leaving kind of this lasting legacy of good.

Elyse: Yeah, absolutely. Well, that's awesome. Hikari, thank you so much for sharing all of your insights with us and having this conversation. Where can people find you and where can people find Omnekey?

Hikari: Yeah, absolutely. So www.omnekey.com, there's a website. You can email me at hi@omnekey.

I'm always happy to provide advice, help in any way I can.

Elyse: Wonderful. Well, it's been wonderful having you on the show. Thanks so much for your time.

Hikari: Thank you so much, Elyse. I really enjoyed our conversation.