

INTERVIEW



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TokuOra - Startup Launches to Help the COVID-Unemployed to get Back to Work and Close the Skills Gap

Interview conducted by:
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CEOCFO Magazine



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Founder/President
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CEOCFO: Mr. Sharp, what is the overall vision at TokuOra? What led you to the idea?

Mr. Sharp: The idea came to me back in 2001. I was the international marketing director for a company in Florida and part of my role was to go around the world and talk to partners and offices and so on. At that time, I was in London on The Tube and I hear some kid say, "Hey, what are you going to be after leaving high school," and another kid says, "I do not know, what are you going to be?" Then this went around five kids. My brain starts popping up light bulbs and saying, "Why can we not create a tool to help these kids." That is how it came about.

CEOCFO: According to the TokuOra site, you use proprietary software to psychometrically match students, workforce, veterans and parolees to careers. What does psychometrically mean in this context?

Mr. Sharp: Psychometrics is a tool that is about psychology. It is basically a combination of psychology and data. Psychometrics has been around for, I would say, over 50 years. If you look on LinkedIn right now and go to the Group of psychometrics on LinkedIn, you would find that there are over 2,000 people on there who have the title of psychometrics manager, director, person, and so on.

CEOCFO: How does your software work? What is different about how you are using color?

Mr. Sharp: The psychometrics are based in color, not words. The reason for that is color has been around for many, many, many decades. Today, we use color in advertising. For example, if you drive down the highway and see fast food chains, the main color in every fast-food chain is red, and then typically the other colors are white or yellow. The reason for this is psychology knows that if you look at red that one of the things that it does is it induces hunger. Therefore, red is represented as hunger, but also as passion and many other things, but red and yellow; they perceive that the colors are either economic, fun or fast.

If you think about McDonalds, it would be hunger, fun, food, fast. It is very simple. If you look at banks, predominantly banks are blue. The reason for that is that since we have had police forces, which are security, they wear blue uniforms, they have had blue cars, and they have had blue sirens, so blue has meant security. Therefore, banks like to give the perception of security.

Color has been around for many years and what happened was this assessment has been around for over 20 years. It was done originally from a sample base of 772,000 people. What they found was that when they interviewed them, the people who liked their jobs had a commonality in various colors.

CEOCFO: Is that true across the board? Might veterans perceive colors in the same way that a student might or are there differences for the point in life of the person or perhaps their background or is it close to universal?

Mr. Sharp: We were talking to an associate here in California. He was in his early 20's. He went home that night and talked to his mom, who is Hispanic. She emigrated from Mexico some 20 years ago, she has been a cleaner. He went home and told her about TokuOra. He said, "Mom, check this out on the phone." She checked it out and went through the colors. She does not speak a lot of English. She went through the colors and got matched to marketing. She went and applied to a marketing course with the local community college that night, including an English course as well. Keep in mind, one third of Americans are not proficient in reading, so one way that we are going to help, especially the underserved, who did not have great schooling and have problems with reading; they do not have to read long winded questions about trying to find out who and what they are. They can go through color.

The reason why many people apply to the armed forces is because, coming out of school, they do not know who and what they want to be, and they believe that the armed forces can give them careers. The problem is that when they exit the armed forces, right now, there are not many tools that can help them. This is why we have such a huge population of homeless veterans. However, the bigger thing is that many of the careers inside the armed forces are not suitable for coming back into civilian life. With prisoners, the reason why they got into crime originally is because they also did not know who and what they wanted to be. This is why this tool is going to be amazing for, not only for students, but it also going to be amazing for getting workforce back to work, getting veterans into careers and paths that suit them. It is the same with parolees.

Right now, in America, eighty two percent of prisoners that are paroled return to prison within a month because they get out there and they say, "Oh, I still do not know what to do and now I have got this burden on me because I have got a record," and so on. Therefore, what we can do is the impact that we can have on helping parolees, helping veterans, helping the workforce, helping students; this really is big!

CEOCFO: How do you go from what you know and what you are able to do, to reaching people in all the various categories where you can be of help? How do people find out about you? How are you going out in to the world to let people know what you have at TokuOra?

Mr. Sharp: We are currently in the throes of partnering with a foundation who deals with these. We are talking with our local Goodwill and in time, all of their stores, they actually work with veterans, unemployed, parolees, students (they have after school programs). We are going to be able to help all of their members, being students, parolees, veterans, the unemployed, and we are going to bundle that data and then show government agencies the value.

Keep in mind that we are going to be very cautious about privacy, because we have to be. We do not give out any information that is private, but we have already got intros into the government agencies, so we are working with the DOL, the DOD, the DOJ and the DOE.

CEOCFO: The color concept; hearing it seems almost too simple, almost too good to be true. Is the really challenging part being able to help people get the training and make the initial steps?

Mr. Sharp: You are actually correct. It does seem too simple. However, I can assure you that the technology in behind the color is massive. That part of the technology is very, very large. There are a whole lot of algorithms. There is a whole lot of predictive analysis. It is a whole lot of machinery. I understand that people will say that it is too good to be true. However, here is the thing.

When Henry Ford was asked why he did not go and ask the market what they wanted, he said, "If I had asked the market what they wanted, they would have wanted a faster horse." Therefore, this is the same kind of thing. When people had Sony cassettes and the Walkman, they did not know that in a year's time that Steve Jobs was going to come out with a much simpler tool, which was the iPod.

CEOCFO: How are you growing your company? How are you setting an atmosphere based on kindness, a key factor for you? What is different when someone comes into the fold?

Mr. Sharp: One of the bigger things that I am doing as a CEO and founder is building the culture. We are very aware that right now 87 percent of Americans dislike their jobs; either their jobs or their managers. Part of that is because a lot of it is old school, it is hierarchy. What I have done is a lot of research. I know that the 8-hour day as done by Henry Ford back in the day, and everyone just followed it. No one every checked it out. I believe it is Sweden that did a study over five years, with one half of the country being six hours, and one half of the country being 8 hours. It turned out that the 6-hour workday is more productive than an 8-hour workday.

With regard to kindness, when we interview, we have got a questionnaire that we have done that shows us if this person is kind, is someone who has empathy, is someone who is mission driven, rather than job driven. For example, those people who applied to us, to come and develop our work with us and who just send us a CV; we do not interview them. For example, we had a female apply to us yesterday and in the email, she wrote, "I believe in the mission that you are doing, I am very keen to work with this and help people around the world help their lives, please see my CV and respond to me." That is the kind of person that we want, not the person who just wants a job.

We want people who believe in the mission and it is a good mission, therefore they have to have a good heart. The reason why we want to do it around kindness is that we do not stand for hate and we do not stand for racism. We do not stand for anything that is negative in the company. We want people to come to work knowing that they are safe, knowing that they are respected, knowing that they have flexibility and knowing that they can either learn from someone of they can teach someone in the company.

CEOCFO: How do you get people to understand you mean that and not just giving lip service to the concept? You are giving a lot of benefits and days off and time off, but when do your employees understand your desire to provide a different type of environment?

Mr. Sharp: I, personally, have done a lot of work on myself. I am now someone who meditates; I am now someone who takes the high road. For example, we had someone who joined us 3 weeks ago and they were a very senior person in the company. However, in their 3 weeks they did nothing. They literally did nothing and in the last week there was no communication. I was in the process of about to let that person go and this person came back and not only emailed me and said, "I hereby resign," and then came back and criticized us for doing stuff that was actually not true! Rather than going back and saying to, "Well, you are an idiot, you do not know what you are talking about," the simple way to go back to them was, "I appreciate your email, we will take this under consideration, and we wish you the best in the future." Because what he did was, he Bcc'd the rest of the team, this was like, "Oh my, the team are reading this fake news!"

Because we use Slack as our internal messaging system, I sent a Slack message that rebutted all of his charges to the team, and we gave them truth in links to prove that we were doing is right. Then I also mentioned to the team that this person had said that they agreed to do this and that, and it was not done. We have had some incredibly kooky, weird emails! There was no point going out and being angry with them, going back and trying to destroy them; it is does not get anywhere. Please do not get that wrong, because being kind does not mean being weak. You can still be kind and strong and that is what I do.

All of my communication is taking the high road, it is not a negative. I get spam email all the time. However, the ones that are persistent, I am going to say, "Look, I am sorry, I appreciate you reaching out, it is not for us at the time or it is not for us ever. Please take me off of your list." I do not go back and say, "Will you please stop emailing me, you are a this, you are a that." It does not help. You do not know that the person on other end of the email or the other end of the phone call has been through. Everyone has got a story and you do not know, on that day, what they have been through. Therefore, you just always take the high road.

CEOCFO: You are in San Jose and what recently happened with the VTA killings. Would you explain how that really shows why being in a career that is not for you or being a disgruntled employee makes such a difference and such a potential difference, to everyone, not just to the individual? Tell us how TokuOra might fostered a different outcome.

Mr. Sharp: The latest news on this shooter was that he was an employee of the VTA, and he was disgruntled, and he was actually stopped at the airport 5 years ago, by homeland security, because he was bringing back terrorist publications and he had mentioned in the interview that he hated his job. I know that many people stay in their job because of financial security. They are living week to week and I get it, I understand. However, if he had known about TokuOra, some one, two, three years ago and had gone there and he had been matched to something similar in what he does and it was with another company, then it is possible that he would have changed jobs and not been disgruntled at the employees. He went around and he shot people who he was after. He literally pointed the gun at various people and said, "No, I am not going to shoot you, I am not going to shoot you, but I am going to shoot you." That is because, I guess at some point, he had been bullied at the company, I do not know if he had issues with the company. However, what I do know, is that if someone is disgruntled and takes it to the next level, where they feel they have to go in and kill their associates, their peers, something is very, very wrong! Here is what I know.

I have gotten emails from students, locally, who had said to me, "Mr. Sharp, thanks so much for building TokuOra. If I had not stumbled across it last night, this morning I had intended to go out to the Cal-Train tracks, (the Cal-Train is our local Bay Area train system,) at 5:30 in the morning and in the dust of the morning, stand on the lines and let the 5:43 train take my life, because of the pressures on me from peers, from parents, from school, from society, on who and what am I going to be and I just do not know!" I guarantee that if you had asked this guy when they interviewed him at Homeland Security 5 years ago at whatever airport he came back in, if they had asked him, "Sir, why are you disgruntled, what do you want to be," He would have said, "I do not know what I want to be, but I know that this job is my paycheck, it pays my mortgage, pays my rent, pays my food and so on, but I am disgruntled. Therefore, I believe that TokuOra can have a huge impact on these types of things in the future, because we can help someone who is angry. I have seen it.

I have been at shopping malls and I have overheard kids talking about high school and what they were going to be and I stopped them and I said, "Excuse me, my name is Wayne Sharp, I am the founder of TokuOra and we can match you to careers in under a minute and it is free. Do you want to have a look?" They jump on their phones, they take it. I can tell you that I have done this to over 1,000 kids and I have seen these kids look at their phones, they go through, they pick the colors, they come out and they get matched. Half of them say, "I did not even know that this career even existed." Then the other ones go and look through and their heads pop up, their shoulders roll back, their heads pop up and they always have a smile on their face, and they say, "Oh my! Look what I got! What did you get! What did you get! Look what I got!" And they are amazed! I just recently reached out to CSU, California State University, who have done studies on people who were happy at their jobs, to find out if they have done studies on what it is like to find out that they are in the right job. They can do it, but they cannot do it in the next two months, but they can look at it and we are going to do it. However, I can tell you that I have seen the change in people who have been, not depressed, but who are on the way to depression, who have been on TokuOra and who have literally been matched and said, "Oh my, this is amazing," and it has literally changed their lives! I know that these kids who have taken the time to email me have changed their lives! How many kids have actually stood in front of that train or thought about it, and then have not emailed me? It is literally mind blowing!

CEOCFO: I understand you are out seeking funding?

Mr. Sharp: Yes, we are out talking to Angel Investors raising \$1MM.

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