

The Impact of Educational Technology as Parents Navigate Remote Learning

PAYCHEX
Business
Series

Coronavirus



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Full transcript

Gene Marks:

Hey, everybody. I'm your host Gene Marks, and this is season two of the Paychex Business Series podcast. I'm a certified public accountant, a regular business columnist for a bunch of publications you probably know like *The Guardian* and *The Philadelphia Enquirer* and *The Hill*, and *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*; but most importantly, I'm a small business owner of a financial and technology management services company. And I have teamed up with Paychex, the leading provider of human resources, payroll, benefits, and insurance services to bring you real-life advice from real-life business owners and experts.

Last season, we talked about the challenges associated with COVID-19, and this season we're kind of moving beyond that. We're going to focus on moving forward, innovating, and navigating the road to recovery. This is kind of a crossover episode because my guest today is Alice Locatelli. Alice is the co-founder of CoPod. Her website is thecopod.com. CoPod is a platform that's designed to bring communities together for remote learning. And Alice, first of all, let me say hello to you. You're there?

Alice Locatelli:

Hello, I'm here. Yes. Very excited to be with you today, Gene.

Gene Marks:

Yeah. Great to speak with you as well. Like I was just saying, this is sort of a transitional episode because CoPod, what you're doing now is so relevant in these times of COVID and as people are trying to emerge. Tell me a little bit about what your company does and tell me about the history of CoPod.

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, absolutely. CoPod's really built to enable users to find solutions for their families and students for remote learning or hybrid learning, or whatever kind of learning they're getting into this fall. The site's really built so that users can find each other based on common values or things that they care about. Things like how strictly you quarantine or how you teach or how you want your students to learn. It then helps them to connect with each other.

Alice Locatelli:

There's a chat platform built in where they can connect with each other. You really get to look at the profiles of other users and get a sense of who they are, and then connect with them to build whatever your pod looks like. We see that pods can look sometimes similar and sometimes different. Pods can be based on ages of students or locations. There are some remote pods that pop up. It's really all about enabling parents to do what they need to do this fall and to see their students learning and growing in the way that they want.

Gene Marks:

And this platform itself, it's not providing the education, right? It's more like a compliment to the teachers and the parents who are trying to form these pods, is that correct?

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, that's exactly right. Interestingly, we've partnered with several districts who are using CoPod specifically to try to ensure that students stay enrolled in the public schools or in their districts. We are focused on pairing up parents to find other parents and other students who can come together in a pod to support remote learning for those districts in that example.

There could be a group of three students who go to parent A's house on Monday and parent B's house on Tuesday and parent C's house on Wednesday just to spread out the caregiving and make it easier for those parents to work, and also make it easier for the students to engage in the remote learning that those teachers are giving. In that example, with those districts, they're really trying to ensure that students stay enrolled and stay focused on the remote learning. They've employed CoPod as a solution to allow students to get together to engage in their remote learning.

We're not actually providing any curriculum or anything like that. We're talking to a few partners that are interested in doing that, but we don't have any functionality related to that.

Gene Marks:

Got it. Alice, this must be somewhat of a new idea, right? I mean, I honestly, before COVID I was not even aware of what a pod is and now everybody's talking about them. How long ago did you start the business and where did you get the idea from?

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, great question. I mean, as parents are going into this fall, everyone's faced with this challenge of how to manage learning for their students. And we've seen that parents started thinking about this in the spring, but we didn't have enough data on COVID then to know whether this was a possibility and what kind of risk you were thinking about taking then.

My parent friends were, were talking about this idea in the spring, but really didn't feel safe executing on it back then. Fast forward to June when the school year ended and people started reflecting on how the spring worked or didn't work in many cases, and that's about when people started really getting more serious about this idea of pods as a result of COVID.

We started our business in July based on this idea that we were seeing a lot of parents getting into building these pods and forming these pods. A pretty recent business and really born out of COVID in a lot of ways.

Gene Marks:

Besides just the normal startup issues that you've got, you've got two unique problems and you're on the bleeding edge is the first issue, right? I mean, you must have this hurdle of trying to explain to people even what a pod is, let alone what your business does. Can you tell me about how you're addressing that?

Alice Locatelli:

In most cases, the education piece isn't as tough because parents are really looking for a solution. In many cases, as soon as you start to talk about pods, it clicks in for parents of what's going on and really we have a lot of news and media going on about it. The industry of ed tech isn't new and the need to educate users isn't new, and what's really fortuitous for CoPod right now is that parents are really, really looking for a solution here so they need to connect students together for remote learning.

We're getting really big reactions to our platform. And as soon as we say, we're connecting parents for pods, the immediate question is, where do I sign up? There isn't even really a need for a lot of education around pods. And what we see is that within our platform, parents are educating each other through their chats and parents are really developing the idea of pods through our platform.

As we see different parents connect up, they all connect up with slightly different spins on a pod. We see some that are interested in connecting around a subject area, some specifically want to be remote, some want certain quarantined standards, some want to work with their districts. And what a pod is, is actually being developed by our users as we speak, and we're really providing the platform for them to connect and share ideas and solve the problem together.

But the way that we think about it is that COVID was really hard for a lot of parents in the spring; and that going into the fall, what we're seeing parents have is this really problem-solving-oriented approach to handling the fall. The more that parents bring to the table and the more solutions they're trying to bring, the better our business gets and the better they can use our software.

Gene Marks:

Next question, the other challenge that I thought that you also have, it's controversial. I mean, do you have pushback from teachers or teachers unions or people saying that what you're doing is working against the best interests of school districts or schools trying to provide their own basis for learning?

Alice Locatelli:

So far the districts that we've engaged with really have been very positive about this. And the thinking generally is that what the first goal of the districts right now is to keep students enrolled in the district. That enables the money to stay within the district. And how do they do that? They do that by providing effective remote learning, where they are providing remote learning. And they do that by providing effective hybrid learning, where it's hybrid or in-person learning, where it's in person.

So far CoPod has been able to provide complimentary services to that. In these cases where we're working with districts, they see that we're able to help support their districts. Parents working together in this in a way that the district, frankly, just doesn't have time or capacity to do. There's no one sitting in the district saying, "Yeah, let me pull together these lists of parents and understand what they care about and connect them up in pods that make sense for them and build trust among parents." There's just no one in the district with that kind of capacity available. CoPod is really a complimentary system to districts to help them keep students enrolled in many cases.

Gene Marks:

Makes sense. To me, this seems like a big opportunity for educators. A lot of teachers are afraid to go back to school right now; and yet, they do need a source of income. Other people might want to be getting in to the education field and looking to be entrepreneurial there. It seems like forming a pod, getting parents involved, and then obviously being hired to run the pod to teach the kids, it's another potential small business for some people out there. Do you agree? And if that is the case, what have you seen some of these sort of educational entrepreneurs doing that makes sense that you could provide some advice for anybody that wants to get into this field?

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the interesting things about CoPod is that I think we've really come along this sliver of education technology that wasn't provided before. CoPod is a pretty unique solution and bringing parents together in this way.

There are a lot of educational technology solutions that we knew of before or are becoming aware of now, including some of the things you're talking about. There are groups of teachers who specialize in providing remote learning, which is really a different scale, in and of itself, than classroom teaching. There are teachers that provide remote learning and they are obviously booming right now, because whether students are involved in their district curriculum or not, sometimes parents want to hire a STEM specialist to remotely teach their students. That's one area that we see.

We also see educators that want to get involved in this more in various ways or retired educators in many cases are coming back and helping in this capacity, some in volunteer ways and others in paid ways to try to help these pods work together to solve this problem.

I'd say from an advice perspective for any educators that are interested in this, my advice to educators always is to pivot on what you know. If you are a current or former educator, focus on the skills that you bring to the table of whatever you specialize in and find ways to connect those into the podding solutions. Pivot on those skills that you already have in order to bring your solution to bear to the table.

Gene Marks:

What about CoPod? I mean, have you been helping to connect educators or potential educators with groups of parents that want to form pods or is that pretty much left up to the parents?

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, we do have a caregiver solutions. We take caregiver profiles and parents can search for caregivers in their area. Frankly, it hasn't been the biggest focus of our business, mostly because there are a lot of solutions out there that provide that particular service. It's been something... Tutoring placement, nanny placement, all of those kinds of organizations are already really focused in that space.

We're doubling down mostly on the service that doesn't exist other places, which is to connect parents. But we have this caregiver profile and we're also beginning to work on providing some discounts to our users to get access to those services. We're going to be putting up a resources link shortly that will allow parents to, once they've formed a pod, find a teacher through some of these businesses that really specialize in that area.

Gene Marks:

How about the future, Alice? I mean, if I was investing in your company, and I'm sure you've gotten this question before, where is this heading? Who's to say that vaccines aren't found, COVID ends, everybody gets back to normal in a year. What happens to the pod business then and to your business?

Alice Locatelli:

Yeah, great question. I see this as a huge shift in education and in the education space, and something that's really been needed for a long time. We've had educational technology that could help students more than it has been employed to help students for a number of years now, from the time that I was a teacher in the early 2000s and created my own personalized learning software. And in 2010, I know there was a lot of educational software out there. And I think it's an underutilized source of learning for students broadly in the ed tech industry.

Our goal at CoPod is to provide this service that is really needed for parents right now and to continue to follow the wave of what do parents need, what do students need, how do we need to connect this up? An example of where we might go next is the 10 year old who lives next door from me has finished up with his group of friends as happens when you're a 10, he's just kind of sick of them and he's going to need new friends soon. There isn't really a good way for him to connect into new friends without having some sort of online solution.

What I see happening is as we move forward, I think we'll see a similar revolution in education as we saw in dating just a few years ago, which is a strange analogy to use I know. But 10 years ago, nobody met each other online and now most people who meet, meet each other online. And I think we're going to start to see that similar shift in education where there's a lot more online, a lot more technology, a lot more connections made that way. CoPod's looking to grow into that space and to understand where the needs are as we go through this transformation and ensure that parents and students have all of those social needs fulfilled through our platform over the years.

Gene Marks:

Alice Locatelli is the co-founder of CoPod, thecopod.com, T-H-E-C-O-P-O-D .com. CoPod is designed to bring communities together for remote learning. Alice, not giving you any editorial comments, but I can say this at the very end, I think you're absolutely right about this is the future of education. I think you're in a great space and I think it's a great opportunity for a lot of entrepreneurs that want to get into education. It opens up a lot of doors for people that want to help kids in much more different ways, unfortunately, thanks to the pandemic. Alice, thank you so much. This is a great conversation and great information.

For more great podcast episodes from the Paychex Business Series Podcast and other information to help you run your business, please visit us at paychex.com/worx, W-O-R-X. That's paychex.com/worx. My name is Gene Marks. Thanks for listening. We'll be back with another episode real soon. Take care.