

Meet RideTandem: the startup tackling UK transport poverty

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Tatseng Chiam, cofounder of RideTandem, about UK transport poverty and the need to connect people to opportunities sustainable transport options.

In the small town of Rochdale, just outside of Manchester, we met a group of unemployed fathers with the conversation quickly shifting to the struggles they faced to find work. When asked what the biggest barrier was, they replied: transportation. Without any local jobs or reliable public transportation, the fathers struggled to provide for their families, especially with the prohibitive cost of vehicle ownership.

This story and many others we would hear were quite upsetting to us as co-founders, and we decided to tackle the issue of transport poverty head on and create a unique platform that would help commuters who live in parts of the country typically under-served by high-quality public transportation.

Tell me about the business

Our vision is to connect people to opportunities through sustainable transport. Transport poverty is on the rise. In the UK alone, more than 25% of bus routes have been cut in the last decade and the cost of car ownership has gone up 35% in the last five years. These trends are contributing to reduced access to

work, increased inequalities, and stagnating economic growth. Equally, nearly 10% of global CO2 emissions come from passenger transportation, making cities and communities less sustainable.

RideTandem are building a uniquely flexible model of shared transport to solve these challenges. Our technology turns local transport fleets into smart, shared shuttles: available when they're needed but incurring zero costs and creating zero emissions when they're not. We're helping employers struggling to find and retain workers in areas poorly served by public transport. This in turn enables thousands of people to access work who wouldn't otherwise be able to. And to do so sustainably.

Our services operate on a B2B2C approach where we sell directly to clients like blue-collar employers who in turn help recruit passengers on our behalf. Many of our customers hear of us through word of mouth after seeing the success we've had with other businesses such as Banham Poultry (one of Nando's key suppliers) and DPD.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Since launching in 2019, we've enabled over £25M in wages, providing vital access to work and supporting economic growth in dozens of communities. We've also helped to avoid the emissions of over 4000 metric tonnes in carbon emissions in that time through our shared transport model (average occupancy on RideTandem vehicles is over 25 people, compared to the typical commuter car of 1.16 passengers), helping those communities become more sustainable.

We've grown from a single route back in October 2019 to enabling over 250,000 passenger return trips per year in less than four years. Our routes operate at all times of day and our passengers can always count on the support of our 24/7 helpline which can provide transport updates, help with questions or ticket queries and even find emergency transportation whenever necessary. Since our launch we've also developed bespoke technology built 100% in-house, enabling passengers to book tickets online and track the progress of their transport as well as allowing companies to monitor arrival and departure times for each of their employees.

Tell us about the working culture at Ride

Tandem

RideTandem recently won an award for 'Best Employee Recognition Culture' at the Wagestream Small Business Best Employer Awards, which we felt reinstated the importance of the work we do at RideTandem to create a solid culture that values hard work and recognises employees for their contributions to the business and the continued success of RideTandem.

We value each of our employees and aim to celebrate them every week with our weekly round of shout-outs as well as our 'Employee Appreciation' slack channel where our co-workers can express gratitude for each other's hard work as well as share positive feedback from our customers. This helps us to stay in touch with our values and reminds us of our mission, to do good in the world and bring an end to transport poverty!

We are proud that more than half of our team are women (extremely rare for a transport or technology company) and that more than half our initial angel investors are women. We make a conscious effort to hire diverse staff by ensuring that all CV and interviewing processes include diverse team members. We also explicitly encourage people to apply even if they don't meet every single criteria on the person specification, given research that certain groups – particularly women – are less likely to apply for a role if they don't meet every single criteria.

How are you funded?

To date we've raised £2.2M of equity funding across two rounds, securing investments from the likes of Ascension, Sustainable Ventures, 1818 Ventures, and leading angel investors including the likes of the co-founders of allplants and Olio, the former UK Country Head of Stripe and Softbank Vision Fund's first female partner.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

If you had a crystal ball in 2019 and knew what Covid would bring in 2020, you'd probably not choose to launch a shared transportation startup. Whilst we didn't have a crystal ball up their sleeves when launching operations in October 2019, what we did have was the belief that the problem we set out to solve demanded our creativity and resilience. There were a lot of long days and nights during the early days of Covid, but in hindsight facing such a massive disruption so early on in the business journey accelerated our move to product

market fit – in particular, our decision to go with a B2B2C sales approach focused on blue-collar workers who still had to travel every day regardless of which stage of the pandemic we were in.

How does Ride Tandem answer an unmet need?

In 2019, a government-commissioned report on the inequalities in mobility and access in the UK transport system found that 57% of the working-age population lived in an area without ready access to jobs when estimating a maximum 45-minute commute by public transport. Furthermore the report also found that low-income households were spending roughly 25% of their income on commuting costs, 15% above the 10% which is usually seen as an indicator for transport poverty. Exacerbating this has been the steadily increasing cost of car ownership with costs coming to nearly £4k per year for the average household.

RideTandem seeks to solve this problem by working with existing transport providers to create demand-responsive transport shuttles. By working directly with employers we are able to lower and sometimes completely eliminate costs for passengers, with the highest cost for a return trip being £5. We further help employers attract and retain their workforce.

What's in store for the future?

We plan to continue a strong growth velocity, targeting close to 3x YoY growth for the coming year and a similar level for 2024. This will come through a combination of

- Continuing to grow our core blue-collar employer client base

- Expanding to new domestic segments e.g. white collar workers, public sector opportunities

- Potential international expansion

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

You will experience a full emotional rollercoaster as a startup founder. Make sure you truly care about both the problem you're solving and the people that

you're working with, or it'll be hard to maintain motivation during the many tough times you'll inevitably face.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I've noticed I've become more of an early bird over the last few years, so I increasingly start work a bit earlier (e.g. 7AM) to be more in sync with my body.

I spent most of my childhood growing up in Brunei where our family home was right next to a jungle – whilst I encounter a slightly different kind of greenery in central London, I do try to find time at least once a day to spend a few minutes outdoors with some fresh air – this often happens right after lunch on days when I might be experiencing a mini food-coma!

As a founder it's easy to always be thinking about work, so I've tried to be firmer in implementing a more formal shutdown routine which involves closing my work email browser tab + Slack application so that it's less tempting to have a peek at what's going on (especially because our operations are 24/7).

And in general, I'm trying to be more grateful and something I try to remind myself of is that it can be very easy to compare the less glamorous behind-the-scenes of your own life with the carefully edited highlight reels of others, especially on social media. So much of our happiness is derived from comparison relative to others, and reminding myself of how distorted your view of others' lives might be is a helpful bucket of cold water!