

# WONK: keeping the edge in the era of artificial intelligence

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## Introduction

It was late in the year 2022, when Rohin Kapoor, the chief operating officer (COO) and cofounder of MyEdge was having his regular meetings with his team. He had started a culture of monthly meetings where team members would discuss future opportunities and challenges. He held these informal meetings regularly that served as a platform for idea sharing, brainstorming and future scanning. This time, discussion was surrounding the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in education where media had been pouring over the latest developments in AI and how it would disrupt the education industry. Kapoor had a strong belief that technology acted as a good complement or supplement to the core problem you wanted to solve.

WONK, the tutor discovery and booking app, was launched in 2016 to cater to the needs of parents, students and teachers. The Edtech companies at the time were making investments in online teaching-learning platforms. India had a flourishing “private tuition” system parallel to the formal education system not only for academic learning but also for extracurricular activities such as sports, arts & crafts and music. While the demand for private tutors was high, parents found it difficult to verify the credentials and background of the tutors. For some, it was random trials, while others went by word of mouth or advertisements in the media. On the other side, some tutors faced limitations in connecting with parents and students to offer their services. Vidhu Goyal, a Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduate, decided to leave her full-time job and dive deep into developing a service that would connect tutors with their prospective students and parents. After extensive market research and an understanding of the demand and technology requirements, the WONK app was launched.

In the year 2020, the pandemic hit. With the lockdown, the company experienced a surge in demand for online tutoring. Their feature social learning experience was a big hit during this period, as students were missing any social contact. While it was good for revenues and enrolment, they needed to quickly scale up their systems to cater to the demand surge and to take advantage of this new opportunity. They scaled their online platform so that tutors could use their platform for teaching if needed. However, online learning during the pandemic took a heavy toll on students. By early 2022, parents had started demanding physical tutoring which meant that the company had to pivot to the old business model. While their online service had a wider reach, the student tutor matching for physical tutoring had a geographical limitation. The company was getting huge demand from both students and parents from other cities as well. But, expanding into other geographies was carefully planned after conducting a thorough background work. With their focus on quality over quantity, the company followed a tutor onboarding process. Another development was in terms of technology. With the introduction of AI, critics were divided about whether it was

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going to boost the teacher's capabilities or make the teacher role redundant with time. New AI-based apps were frequently being launched in the market. Faced with the new technological developments, Kapoor had to decide whether to integrate AI into its current service offering. For this, he needed to understand how AI-based applications were going to affect the Edtech sector and specifically the current services offered by WONK.

Listening to his team, Kapoor was wondering whether the AI revolution was going to pose a challenge or bring new opportunities. He called a formal meeting of the department heads in the following week to discuss the geographic expansion or AI integration for the learning experience and the subsequent action plan.

## Edtech in India

With the adoption of technology for teaching and learning experience, Edtech companies in India experienced a massive boost. As it gained popularity owing to individualized learning experiences, many Edtech startups came to the fore, each with their approach to providing learning and interaction with the technology platform. Their success was attributed to being interactive and allowing learners to create their personalized learning paths. The growth in the Edtech sector saw 32 times increase from US\$500m in 2010 to US\$16.1bn in 2022 with further expectations to reach US\$30bn by 2031 (Agarwal, 2023). Edtech model of learning anytime, anywhere at affordable cost led to its success evident from the investment so far and the investments predicted in the future.

Once touted as an education model that would disrupt the traditional education system by making learning more engaging and accessible, online education was impacted after the reopening of schools after the pandemic. From completely online mode, the focus shifted more to the hybrid model. With fewer takers for the online learning models, the industry saw the shutting down of some of the businesses. This led to massive layoffs in the industry of about 9,000 employees in the year 2022 (CNBC, 2023) as a cost cutting measure. Keeping learners' needs at the center, the companies in the Edtech sector needed to rethink their business models.

## MyEdge

Goyal, cofounder of WONK app, had a flourishing career in strategy and marketing after finishing her MBA. In one of the parent forums, she came across the problems parents were facing when it came to finding quality after-school programs for their children. She realized that parents were looking for expert guidance for their children not only for academics but also for extracurricular activities. It was during one of the meetings at a school that she realized the concern of parents of school going children "finding the right tutor:"

Finding a tutor is not only about finding a person with subject knowledge but also reviewing the profile, verifying teaching experience & qualification, comparing fees and finalizing whether to go for individual private tuitions or group classes. (Vidhu Goyal)

At that time, services provided by the Edtech companies were mostly focused on online classes offered through their platform. While these sites offered good content and a virtual learning environment, there was no connection with the tutors. Their success was attributed to the digitized learning content and personalized and student-centered model. While the online platform provided a cost-effective way to support learning and gaining additional skills, parents were still concerned about the "teaching effectiveness," "fee being charged," "fee refunds if they find offerings below expectations," "false promise," "transparency" and "trust." Before launching their services, Goyal wanted to ensure that they do not fall into the trap of success stories of edtech companies.

Through their research, media reports, consultation with advisors and deep discussion with parents, they realized that parents preferred physical tutoring but found it difficult to find a

good tutor. While tutors were available, parents found it a hassle to verify a tutor's knowledge, expertise and educational background. Students wanted an empathetic tutor who used the best academic resources and who they could turn to for counseling for exam and peer pressure related stress. On the other hand, tutors had time but were not able to find enough clients. Most of their clients were through referrals. Another challenge that they faced was delayed payment by parents or parents refusing to pay after taking their services. Following up on pending payments took away their time from teaching. One tutor commented:

Parents want exceptional track records but would not like to pay premium charges for that.  
(Tutor)

Another tutor had expressed that they needed training in soft skills and student counseling for better relationships with parents and students.

Having met students, parents and tutors, she realized that the common concern for all was the absence of a service that would connect them all with a focus on quality tutoring without the hassles that they were all facing. There was a huge market for private tutoring where parents were ready to pay money provided their child received a good service. Word of mouth was the prominent driver when parents looked for a private tutor for their children. Parents tend to develop trust when the recommendation comes from a close social member. That motivated her to leave her high paying job and start this new venture where students and parents could look for verified tutors and tutors could find more classes to offer.

## WONK

MyEdge, registered as LLP in 2013, started its operations in 2015. Goyal started the company in 2015 with an initial team of three employees. Over a few months, the WONK app was developed and launched in 2016 as a platform to connect tutors and students and to facilitate the exchange of ideas, notes and experiences.

Within one year of the launch of the WONK app, it saw a huge enrolment from 15,000 tutors and 10,000 students and parents. With 30,000+ classes booked through the app and a jump in income by 50%, Goyal rolled out an expansion plan. In 2017, her husband, Kapoor left his job and joined as cofounder and COO to help her expand geographically while maintaining the quality of their service. Kapoor had a rich experience in the education sector as director and head of the education sector consulting team at Deloitte and as a member of the Confederation of Indian Industry Education Committee. During his 18+ years of education sector experience, he had authored and quoted in over 100 articles in domestic and international publications on the education and skills development sector.

Kapoor began by expanding the team. The new team consisted of advisors, board members, strategy, technology and operations team members. The strategy team looked after launching new initiatives and products. The technology team was responsible for implementing the initiatives. The smooth operation of launch in new cities, tutor onboarding and resolving queries were handled by their operations team. Both the strategy head and technology head reported to Kapoor who reported to the board. Goyal started to look after the marketing and social initiatives of the firm.

Whenever Kapoor met with the investors or the Chambers of Commerce, their suggestion was to develop a platform to offer online courses. Kapoor was firm that only an online model would not work. They focused on developing a robust platform to meet the needs of their stakeholders. While designing the platform and the services to be offered, the concerns shown by parents, students and tutors were taken into consideration. Each of these customer groups was important for the success and had their own needs and expectations from the platform.

Kapoor had a technology background and believed that technology acts as a complement or a supplement to the core problem to be solved. For technology to deliver the result, the core problem must be understood keeping the needs of the users at the center.

### *Tutor onboarding process*

One of the major concerns that both parents and students had was the tutor's teaching effectiveness and empathy. To address this concern, the team decided to not only check the educational background and experience of the teacher but also to verify their teaching style and effectiveness through an established set of parameters developed in-house. Only tutors verified through this process were allowed to offer their services through WONK.

To offer their services through WONK, tutors first needed to register on the platform for free to begin the verification process. Tutors create their profiles and upload their educational qualification documents, subjects they would like to teach and the student level that they would like to teach. Considering their educational background, communication skills, number of years of experience, subjects taught, expertise and recommendation by parents, they were given a match score, e.g. 70% match with WONK's criteria. A panel of experts comprising members from academics, technology and quality control made a final decision about accepting or rejecting the tutor. To empower the tutors and enhance their skills, they were advised about the shortcomings and asked to apply again after a few months. While the process maintained the quality and effectiveness of teaching, it also ensured that the tutors got critical feedback to improve their skills.

While tutoring services through WONK were available for K–12 school children, undergraduate students, competitive examinations for admission to college as well as hobby classes, about 70% demand for tutors was for grades 9–12. The higher demand was because this was the period when students decided their field of studies in college and prepared to get admission to those colleges that were highly competitive. Even for this group, the demand was high for science and mathematics tutors. All the teachers had a bachelor's degree in their field of interest and a supplemental degree or certificate. For example, tutors for foreign languages had a certificate in that language in addition to the bachelor's degree.

### *Student–tutor matching*

Like tutors, students also needed to register themselves on the WONK platform. They needed to provide their education level, geographical location and the subjects that they needed tutoring in. Once the tutors fulfilled the criteria for onboarding, their profile was made visible on the platform. During the initial phase of the launch of the app, the student–tutor matching was a manual process. Based on the subject requirements and the location, the matching was done manually. The challenge with the manual matching process was that it was a slow process and could handle only a few criteria. With the exponential growth in enrolments, the manual matching process was not a viable solution for expanding their services. The technology team developed an algorithm for student–tutor matching. Based on the student requirements, and location, the algorithm matched the tutors and students. In addition to requirements as matching criteria, social and psychological factors were also taken into consideration. For physical classes, some safety measures were taken into account. For example, female students were matched with female tutors which made parents feel comfortable.

### *Deciding the geographical expansion*

In the initial phase, WONK offered the tutor discovery service only in the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR). This limitation was due to the tutor verification process and manual

matching of the tutors to student requirements. With the launch of an algorithm for the matching process, the strategy team rolled out a plan for the geographical expansion of the services. For expansion, they considered desirability (human factor), feasibility (technology factor) and viability (economic factor). The huge demand from outside of the geographies that they served indicated that their service model was meeting the desires of their customers. For every new initiative or upgrade to the earlier services, the teams carefully considered all the options to ensure that they would be well supported by the technology. Even though the service model had proved to be successful, new cities were added based on tutor registrations, population density, purchasing power, quality of schools and colleges and other indicators to ensure that the expansion was economically viable.

By 2019, WONK, the tutor discovery app, had started catering to all boards, subjects and classes (which continued to be a unique tutoring offering across the world). Starting their services from Delhi-NCR, they expanded to other cities (see Exhibit 1). During the pandemic lockdown, they were able to offer online tutoring to the USA, UK, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, Europe, Singapore Malaysia and the Middle East as well. The international expansion was possible only for the online one-on-one classes.

### ***Revenue model***

Registration for taking or offering the service was offered for free. Parents or students booked a tutor through the WONK app using PayTM wallet, UPI, credit/debit card and internet banking. They could book the tutor for a month, quarter or the full course. The available tutor slots were selected on WONK before making the payment. Parents made the payment to the company which was passed on to the tutor through formal banking channels for the number of classes completed as per the attendance marked by the parent on the app. MyEdge charged a nominal convenience fee from the parents who booked tutors on their app.

### **The road ahead**

While Kapoor was very confident about the technological developments and their deliveries, his experience had shown that it was the human factor that had made his services a success. With the pressing situation, he called a meeting of the departmental heads to take their view before deciding the course of action.

A week later, the team met with their background research. Goyal, founder of the company, welcomed everyone and opened the meeting proceedings. She added:

The WONK app was launched to connect verified tutors and students. Over the years, the company had taken into consideration the market trend, and feedback from parents and tutors to improve the service. It is this ease of finding a tutor and the trust that tutor credentials have been verified, that has led to the growth that we see today. It has been recognized very well by the industry and government where this platform was used for training the trainers program.

At the same time, we see that the new AI-enabled tools are coming to market. We need to see whether they will act as a supplement to teacher content, and our services or replace the need for a tutor. Our experience and the current state of AI technology say that there is no replacement for physical tutoring. But, with AI enabled tools being able to provide solutions to queries, will the demand for physical tutoring reduce if not go away completely?

She further added:

We need to see how our current resources can be best utilized to do what we are good at and what is needed in the future. The capabilities of AI are still not known. We must separate hype from reality when we deliberate our options.

Referring to the growth that WONK had seen over the years, the technology disruptions and the current emerging technology trends, Kapoor presented two options. One was to keep the focus on expanding their customer base which had proved to be highly successful. The other option was to add an AI-enabled new feature to their existing services. He invited the heads of the departments to present their views.

The technology head began by explaining how his team had been able to scale up the service infrastructure during the pandemic lockdown. From the technology point of view, they were already using algorithms to match the tutor and student. With the right staffing, he was confident that an AI-enabled feature that responded to queries in real time could be implemented. But, he needed clarity:

First, we need to identify the role of AI in our app. Will it be used for administrative queries or also as a learning resource for students? For AI, we will need investment in technology infrastructure and grow our technology team. Even before we begin, my team will need to prepare a feasibility report, resource requirements, and accordingly the cost for this project.

If we go with option 1 i.e. our current offering, all processes are set and no new development is needed from the technology point of view. Our role will be the same as maintaining the existing services and adding new features to existing services as and when needed.

The operations head elaborated on how the staff was well trained for both the tutor onboarding process and geographical expansion to offer services in new cities. Their existing partnerships with Unilever Foundation, Sheroes and Naaree.com helped in quickly rolling out the opportunity in a new city. Social media and WONK tutor testimonials were used to spread the positive word in the new city. His opinion was:

If we go for geographical expansion, we have the strength, trained resources, and established processes. The costs associated are not very high as we use the powers of technology & partnerships for low-cost hassle-free enrollment with a team of max 3-5 people spending approximately 3-4 man months in enrollment in a new city. We have a huge scope for geographical expansion as we do not have any competitors yet. This will bring in more revenue. If we go for embedding the AI feature, it will not affect our existing processes. Also, the new feature will not contribute to the revenue directly.

Because his team was also responsible for handling queries and complaints, he observed that real time query handling would offload some of the work from his team. He added:

Tutors are available for only a limited time for which the student has booked them. An AI enabled tool will assist students with their queries outside of this time window. Thus, it will help us add further value to our service offering.

He also reminded everyone that students experienced technostress during the pandemic online tutoring and parents had moved away from online to physical tutoring. He added:

This is an indication that people may not receive any technology driven feature as expected or portrayed in the media.

Finally, it was time for the finance manager to present his views as any decision would be based on forecasted budgets and the availability of finance. He emphasized the need to conduct a feasibility study for both options. He explained:

The geographical expansion will require 3-5 resource persons to support the activities in a new city and the onboarding process of tutors. This additional cost can be managed from the retained earnings and finance. With this option, the revenue generation will start in a few months.

He further elaborated:

In the past, we had to stop operations in a few cities as our services were not being taken. In such a scenario, the loss is not much as the investment is only on a few resources that can be assigned for expansion in other cities.

He seemed a bit skeptical about the second option, as it would need huge investment in infrastructure and in hiring technical experts and would not generate any direct revenue. He explained:

We need to prepare the budget outlay for the project incorporating all relevant costs associated with technology infrastructure and hiring software developers, team leaders, and maybe a project manager. Actual budgets can be formulated once the technology team provides the project plan, the time it will take to develop and implement, and the resource requirements.

Having carefully listened to the points that his team members were deliberating upon, Kapoor needed to decide the future course of action.

### *The dilemma*

Looking back Kapoor could see that revenues had grown over the years. Before the pandemic, the year-on-year revenue growth was about 40%. Over the last three years, the revenue growth was at 250% annually with profitable operations. They were being approached by government bodies and private organizations for integrating their services. The recognitions achieved during the past few years (see Exhibit 2) and the social initiatives (see Exhibit 3) had created a brand value with a promising future. Their existing partnerships with Unilever Foundation, Sheroes and Naaree.com were an added advantage in rolling out their services in a new city.

AI-based applications were being projected as a new resource for teaching and learning with platforms such as Duolingo and Khan Academy integrating AI in the services they offered with a potential advisory about errors. The opportunities, risks and challenges associated with AI were still evolving and so were the policy and governance frameworks.

While Kapoor was very confident about the technological developments in the field of AI and its potential, his experience had shown that it was the customer demand that had made his services a success. Now, it was time to decide the next step.

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## Exhibit 1. Cities where WONK services offered

Table E1		
Sr. no.	Cities	State
1	Delhi-NCR	Delhi
2	Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, Nashik	Maharashtra
3	Noida, Agra, Ghaziabad, Meerut, Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad, Jhansi	Uttar Pradesh
4	Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur	Rajasthan
5	Amritsar, Chandigarh	Punjab
6	Bhubneshwar	Orissa
7	Faridabad, Gurugram, Sonipat, Panipat, Rohtak	Haryana
8	Bangalore, Mysore	Karnataka
9	Ahmedabad, Surat, Baroda, Gandhinagar	Gujarat
10	Chennai, Coimbatore	Tamil Nadu
11	Kochi, Kozhikode, Trivandrum	Kerala
12	Hyderabad	Telangana
13	Bhopal	Madhya Pradesh
14	Vishakhapatnam	Andhra Pradesh
15	Roorkee, Dehradun	Uttarakhand

Source: In consultation with the company

## Exhibit 2. Recognitions (Source: information provided by the company)

2023 – Goyal received the FICCI FLO Women Achiever’s Award for Education & Skill Development Category

2022 – Train the trainers – Glow & Lovely Foundation of the Hindustan Unilever Group

2023 – WONK, second best money making App in India – zupee.com

2019 – MyEdge received the Digital Innovation Award from the Government of Haryana

2018 – Goyal was recognized by Facebook as the Best Women Tech StartUp in India

Goyal was selected for the Facebook SheLeads Tech India Program and Ignite Program by Sonder connect.

Goyal was selected for the global FbStart program and NASSCOM 10,000 Startups Program.

## Exhibit 3. Social value initiatives (Source: information provided by the company)

WONK has provided its platform free for train – the trainers program by partnering with various organizations.

2019 – Hindustan Lever Limited (HUL) partnership – WONK has partnered with HUL to train, educate and empower women to take teaching as a career. Most of the women are from Tier II cities and have used the money earned to pursue higher education or contribute to the household.

2020 – Common Service Centers (CSC) – The WONK platform is provided for free to all CSCs, the Government of India.

2023 – Head held high foundation – to train, upskill and technologically empower girls from remote parts of the country to embrace tutoring as a stable career option to achieve financial independence thereby promoting the concept of rural entrepreneurship.

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