Charlie Lougheed says workforce challenges are 'a lot harder' with third Cleveland startup

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Axuall founder and CEO, Charlie Lougheed
Axuall photo

By Mary Vanac - Staff Reporter

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Charlie Lougheed is on his third big-data startup in Cleveland since 1999.

His latest company, Axuall (pronounced like "actual"), is a workforce intelligence company built on top of a national, real-time data network that tracks, verifies and reports on the credentials of medical practitioners.

In addition to enabling physicians and other medical professionals to quickly produce digital CVs, Axuall is starting to use its data to bridge gaps in patient care.

The Cleveland company also is moving from the startup phase to the scale-up phase, thanks, in part, to a $10.4 million Series A funding round in July.

Lougheed talked to the Cleveland Business Journal about some of the things he learned at his past startups that are making growth at Axuall a little easier. *This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*

What's the most satisfying part of your work?

Working through tough scaling challenges and learning quickly from them has been really important for us. That sometimes takes a little while to learn. We're so execution-oriented that we get into the mindset of just getting something done. But as you scale up, it's important to take a step back and ask questions like, "Is that really an efficient way to do it?" and "Is that what our customers still want?"

How do you manage this task-oriented mentality?

Automation is one of the key elements of our business. We're a data and automation company; that's what we do. But we need to recognize that not everything can be automated. Sometimes, the glass is half full, meaning, if we can automate 90% of our tasks, we don't necessarily have to kill ourselves to try to close the gap today. Our customers are pretty good with having only 10% left to automate.

I've also learned that it's important to understand and pay attention to how we're delivering our services and the pressure that puts on our team, in good ways and bad. Just learning through the process feels good.

How is your work changing as your company scales up?

At a startup, you wear many different hats. But as you scale, it doesn't matter how smart you are, you can't wear that many hats. You have to understand how teams evolve and grow. So in the last six months, we've added client services implementation and quality verification teams. We sort of all did quality verification, but now we have someone fully in charge of just that. I've been through this maturation and learning process a number of times. It's never easy, and it's a little different every single time, but I would tell you that just seeing the team grow through that is probably the most satisfying.

Does this learning process get any easier, over time?

I don't know <laugh>, good question. That's like asking, "Does Mount Everest ever get easier to climb?" Absolutely, yes, there are some mistakes I know not to make again.

Name one thing that is different for you at Axuall than at your previous startups.

There are cultural differences in our workforce. People have different expectations than I had when I got into my career. By and large, that's a good thing. There's a lot more work-life balance going on. And having a mission that our team members can align around is incredibly important to them. A mission gives clarity. It enables you to focus on the North Star, as opposed to the tasks.

As I get older, I feel more responsible for my team. When things go a little sideways, the impact on my team hits me a lot harder. We've got pretty low turnover. I don't ever take that for granted, especially in a job market in which it is incredibly hard to hire. You've got to care about your team, because if they walk out the door, it would get pretty hard to serve our customers. They are really important, and I want them to be part of the vision for our company.

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