

Silicon Valley's Hottest Young Founder Right Now | Cluely, Roy Lee

Hello, my name is Roy. I founded this company called Cluely, and I just got kicked out of Columbia for building this tool called Interview Coder. It's like a cheating tool for software engineering. Technical interviews. I used the technology to build a much bigger company. Cluely, the desktop app that lets you cheat on everything right now. We just launched about a month ago. We're closing in on \$5 million in annual recurring revenue, and we also just closed a \$5.3 million seed round led by Abstract Ventures and Susa Ventures. I was a pretty wild kid. I got in a lot of trouble, but I was pretty smart. I think I was pretty good at math. I did a bit of math competition when I was younger. I was on the debate team. I played some cello. I loved girls, you know, every year I had a new girlfriend. Yeah, my mom made me do a lot of studying, but I hated studying. I was always trying to go out and like, have fun, play with my friends. I've always been very competitive. When I was a kid, I had an older brother who was two years older than me, and I always wanted to be smarter than him. I always wanted to do better and get better grades at school than him. I'm always trying to win. I'm trying to beat 'Juhn-Gyo Eel-Deung' at everything. Top of the class You know, in the world of software engineering, if you want to get a job at a big tech company, you have to answer these sort of riddle-esque questions that are called LeetCode questions. And pretty much every developer you know at a big company has gone through the gauntlet of memorizing 300-600 riddles and just sort of memorizing the solutions and regurgitating them in interviews. I'm very, very competitive. So the second I knew that there was a global ranking on LeetCode, I knew I had to be one of the best. So I spent hundreds of hours studying, grinding the riddles, even though I don't care about LeetCode, I didn't enjoy it. I didn't really have a good time, but I was just competitive. So I thought, if there's a ranking, then I've got to be on the top of the ranking. But I mean, it just ended up with me wasting a bunch of hours. LeetCode just has nothing to do with what you do on the job. It's like the modern day equivalent of asking how many balloons fit in the Empire State Building. It's supposed to test your critical thinking, but the questions are online to the extent that rather than practicing critical thinking, you just practice memorizing the riddles. You're going to sit through and memorize all the 1000 questions, because it means you get a \$200K a year job. This is not good for anybody. You don't learn anything from practicing these riddles, and you just end up wasting time when you should be programming. I thought this was pretty stupid and this has been going on for around 20 years right now. The technology was there to develop this tool that would

invisibly let you use AI to cheat on these interviews. So I built the tool. I publicly recorded myself using it on the Amazon interview. I got the job and I posted this everywhere saying, look how easy it is to hack these interviews. Eventually this got me in some trouble. But, the impetus of everything was when I decided that it's just a stupid industry practice and I wanted to change it. A lot of people think it was explosive from the start, but it took about a month before it really started to take off, and for a month I posted everything. Amazon was getting mad at me, and Columbia saw it and was getting mad at me, and everyone was just upset and it didn't really go that viral for about a month. And during that time I was really stressed. I just gave up my entire career and my entire education for the hope of a company. But it didn't even go viral like I did all this for like 15,000 views. And I was really worried.

Everybody in my life, including even my co-founders, were telling me like, hey, we should probably stop. We should probably shut this down. But I don't know. There's just a voice in my head that said, this has potential. Like I have to keep going. And I did keep going. And then at one point it did go viral, like super viral. And everybody in tech saw it. At that point, I was safe. Virality protected me from further punishment from Columbia. It made the path to entrepreneurship a lot easier and clearer. I've sort of committed my life to building companies. Once I made that decision, it was very easy for me to decide to leave Columbia. And once I did leave Columbia, I knew I'm going to do the only thing that I can do now, which is build companies. I think it also helps position me. I'm a very unique person now who got kicked out of an Ivy League. And as a result, there's a lot of interest from Silicon Valley about what I'm going to do next. At the time, it felt like things were moving really slow. As soon as Interview Coder went viral, I knew that I had to capitalize on the moment because the attention wasn't going to be there for long. The product was a product designed to die, the product to cheat on technical interviews. So the second companies change technical interviews, the product dies. Meaning I have a few short moments before my spot in the limelight dies and I thought, I have to raise a round. I have to start a bigger company that's more sustainable and defensible long term. So for me, it felt like things were moving so slow. I had to push back my fundraise like two weeks. I was going to fundraise two weeks earlier than I did. To me at the time, I felt like I was in such a time crunch and I had to wrap things up and do the next thing, and it felt like things were moving super slow. But I guess I was under the pressure of the situation. I mean, we planned for me to use Interview Coder to cheat on a bunch of big tech interviews and get the jobs, and we thought that was going to be a viral moment. So in that sense, we planned it. But for the last three months I've made

probably like maybe a thousand tweets, and since then, I've figured out how to make tweets that will go viral. How to make tweets that will be more controversial and get more engagement. I think for X especially, I've only really cracked X, because I think people on Twitter are a very unique type of people. They love controversy, they love drama, they love attention, and they love to either dog on people or watch people get dogged on. I think every single time you tweet something, if you don't think half the people in the world would feel very negative about this, then it's probably not going to be viral as a tweet. All of your tweets that you're planning on making go viral, they need to have a very strong, controversial twist that makes people pause and be like, what the fuck? And this is not the case for Instagram, TikTok or LinkedIn or whatever, but it is the case for Twitter. And yeah, I think Twitter is - the more controversial you're willing to make your tweet, the better and the more viral you will go. Interview Coder on Twitter was received so positively. It was just like this scrappy young kid who was trying to fight back against big industry, big tech, and everyone on Twitter was very supportive. I think as I got bigger and my account grew, people grew less supportive, which is like to be expected. I'm generally very good at receiving hate and criticism. I'm a very polarizing personality, and I do a lot of crazy stuff throughout my life. I've always had people giving me hate. None of the negative comments really stood out, but I was very surprised to see how positively Interview Coder was received on Twitter when I first launched it. I think people are often so worried that they're going to say something bad online, and it's just going to get back to them and their reputation is over. And I don't know, like it's going to bury them. But I think in reality 'all press is good press' I say a ton of super controversial stuff. And in every video I'm in, there's like a bunch of comments saying, oh, this guy's evil. This guy's like, this and that, and there's always some hate. But it's like, this stuff really doesn't matter. Yeah. I mean, I've learned that it really doesn't matter if everybody in the world just doesn't like you. Well, actually, it's done pretty much the opposite. I've realized that even if I say extremely crazy shit online, it will just make people more interested in me and the company, and it'll just drive more downloads and conversions and get more eyeballs onto Cluely. If anything, I've learned that I need to become crazier online so that people will keep funneling attention towards the core product. I think it's very, very rare that you will say something online that translates to something negative happening in the real world, like online is not real life. I'm a pretty chill person in real life, but online I'm crazy because it gets me engagement and attention. When you are so polarizing and controversial online, you need to very clearly distinguish this is my real world life and this is the online life. And

in my real world life, there are very few people who I trust fully and who I think I love and love me. My parents will always be on my side, no matter what crazy shit I do online and my future wife and kids They will always be on my side no matter what crazy shit I do online. And I think it is very, very important to distinguish. This is my real life family and friends and they love me unconditionally and I love them and everything online is just noise. Even if everyone online or everyone outside this box hates me, it doesn't matter because the most important people are in this box, and the people that I love and love me back. Interview Coder is a tool designed to let you cheat on technical interviews, but what we realized as we built Interview Coder is that the idea of an AI that sees your screen and hears your audio sort of shows itself as this translucent screen overlay. This has never really been attempted before. This is a completely novel user experience, and it's very shortsighted to think that this is only good for cheating. Ultimately, what we're building is we're building for a future where models are multimodal and the models are not there yet, and they're probably not going to be there yet for another three years. Nobody's really thought of what happens when chatbots are no longer relevant. What happens when you don't want to prompt GPT anymore? And it just knows what you want? Then how will you interact with AI? Nobody's really attempted this before, and I think Interview Coder was the first proof of concept of a user experience that could work in this world. So we realized that. And that's what we're building Cluely. I mean, Cluley is the new way you will use AI in five years. Hopefully if we do things right then in two years. The phrase "cheat on everything" is intentionally ambiguous. Like what is cheat on everything? Like, I know what cheat on test means, but I don't know what cheat on everything means. It's left to be sort of confusing and make you sit on it and reflect for a moment. When you see someone using AI for everything, it makes you think this is unfair. They're not supposed to be doing that. They're cheating. In reality, if you can use this for everything, like what is cheating on a meeting look like? It's not really a thing. It's just our gut human reaction to think, this is so different. This is such a big advantage that it's unfair. And what we hope to do is we hope to give everyone this advantage. When every single person is using AI to cheat on meetings, then it's not that you're cheating anymore. this is just how humans will operate and think in the future. I think when you can use AI, you should use AI. If it helps you, then you should use it. If using a calculator will help you, then you should use it. If using spellcheck will help you, then you will use it. Eventually, the spell check will teach you how to spell the right words, because you'll get used to it so much or you just won't need to know how to spell anymore. You'll just need to know what the

word is. If you can use AI to help, then you should. And if you can already do the job, then you'll never need to do the job in the future. Assuming AI is everywhere, which it will be. All technical interviews need to change, not just in software engineering, but everywhere in the world. If you get asked the question and AI can answer the question, then you should probably get that out of your interview. I think interviews will be a lot more holistic, and I really question whether we even need job interviews at all in the future. If there is an AI that knows everything about you, everything you're good at, why do you need a one hour interview to assess anything other than culture fit? I already know all the work you've done, or at least the AI already knows the work you've done. It knows how good it is. It knows what skills you're good at, and if there is a skill match, then I should just be able to match you directly to the job. Assuming that we get along after like a 30 minute conversation. I really don't know that there is a need for interviews in today's age, but right now what we use is really just a conversation. We check if you're a culture fit, we talk about past work you've done, and that's pretty much it. The whole point of Cluley is to get everybody used to the fact, or used to a life where they use AI for everything. Once everybody uses AI in every instance possible, there's going to be a lot of jobs that get replaced, and there's going to be a lot of people who are able to do so much more than they previously were. If every scientist decided one day, like today, I'm going to start using AI as much as possible, they will be 100 times more productive. When scientists are a hundred times more productive, we cure cancer ten years earlier. We cure Alzheimer's ten years earlier. Everyone lives to 400 years old and we're on the next flight to fucking Mars in like two years. The rate of societal progression will just expand and exponentiate significantly once everyone gets along to the fact that we're all using AI now. And that's what Cluley hopes to achieve, is to get everybody used to "we're all using AI now." I think for the user experience, I spent a lot of time making the user experience very seamless. It's less of a technical challenge, I think, and more of a taste challenge. The concept of a translucent screen overlay is something that really has never been attempted before. And it's something that I tried, and I think I only got to it after like dozens of iterations of different tools that would be a more seamless use of AI in your life. Yeah, I think that was probably the biggest technical challenge, just figuring out what exactly is the best user experience for someone using this tool. I mean, latency, response speed and accuracy are the two biggest things. This is what every model, like OpenAI, is working to improve: latency and accuracy. There's ways that we can get to a much faster response, for example, if we host models on our own servers. This eliminates a lot of latency that

comes from the load balancing and request handling that is just inherent in OpenAI's servers. That's probably what we will end up doing. There's ways that we can cache the input and sort of parameterize the inputs so that you get the same condensed info. Same information, but just condensed in a smaller way and the smaller the input size, the faster the time to first token. Also, generally, accuracy can be improved by specific system prompts. We're developing custom evals in-house based on a lot of the analytics and usage that we're seeing. And like everything is getting better. Like every single day, the Cluely gets more accurate and faster. At a certain point, we're going to know exactly what type of responses you prefer as an individual, what sort of conversations that you're in, and we can use all that data to generate a very, very hyper specific, personalized, fine-tuned model for you that knows that, hey, I'm a media reporter, I conduct these sorts of interviews, and I generally want these types of responses. The tonality of my emails is this. So I would like you to respond in this way. And we can just get the most personalized model in the world. And once we have that data as like a moat, defending us from the other big tech companies, then we'll pretty much be unstoppable. More so than the data, I think the user experience is just interesting, untapped and novel. If we're correct about this, then we'll be the first to market. And there's a huge first mover advantage when you're trying a new form of UX. And if we can capture the market quickly enough by going viral enough sufficiently, then I think it will be very hard to compete with us. The entire way we're going to think will be changed. Every single one of my thoughts is formulated by the information I have at this moment. But what happens when that information I have isn't just what's in my brain, but it's everything that humanity has ever collected and put online, ever. What happens when AI literally helps me think in real time, the entire way that humans will interact with each other, with the world, all of our thoughts will be changed. Like what happens when I know about every single post you've made online ever. And I use that to distill down into a condensed blurb of everything about you ever. What does our interaction look like then? It's really hard to say, but I think this is a turning point for humanity, and it will fundamentally change the way that we think and the way that we behave as humans. Well, if you're not building a company in AI right now, then you're probably not doing the right thing. AI just enables you to build such cool stuff, and it's such a new technology that even if you're 19 and you've been playing with it for two months, you are one of the brightest minds. You are one of the pioneers of the field. It's not like biology where if you haven't studied for ten, 20 years, then you don't, then you're not an expert in biology. You can study AI for two months and you'll be an expert in AI.

This technology is so gigantic, and it's so new that you can be really, really young. And you can know it more deeply than anyone else, and you'll have the opportunity to build like a billion, \$10 billion company out of it. I would say take bigger risks. This is the only advice I have for anyone, really. You are smart enough. You're capable enough, you're hard working enough. Just take bigger risks. If you take bigger risks and force yourself into positions where you have to make it, you'll find that you're a lot more hard working than you thought you were, and you'll also find that life gets a lot more interesting. And very often the downside risk is much smaller than you think, and the upside of risk is much bigger than you think. I wasn't really like this five months ago. I mean, literally like, half a year ago, I was thinking, I just want to get a job at a big tech company. That's all I want to do. And it wasn't until very recently that I thought, oh, I actually want to build companies and go all in on this, taking risks initially. It means being willing to get rid of the constructs and limiting beliefs in your mind that make you think, hey, when I graduate, I have to be an engineer or lawyer or doctor or whatever. Just being willing to see what would happen if you didn't do it. Every risk starts very small. Right now, I think people look at me and think I'm a crazy risk taker. But it didn't start like this. It started with me taking smaller risks. Like the first risk I took was, hey, what if I built this tool and told nobody about it? Then the next risk I took was what if I post it online but made it free and didn't really associate with it so that people, more people would see it and eventually the risk just snowballed and snowballed. Until now, I'm like fully posting whatever confidential document Columbia gives me because like, I don't care. Like the risk is not that much of a risk anymore, and I've grown used to it. So grow used to taking bigger risks. I feel like my life is very easy. My life has been very easy. I mean, my mom. I've got loving parents, my mom, she made me study even when I didn't want to. She would just say, Roy, you should go study. So I studied and as a result, I did well in school and I hung out with smart kids and they helped me do better in life. Like, I have two amazing, great parents and I come from a great family. I don't really feel like my life has been all that challenging. Getting kicked out of Columbia? It's not that challenging when you're out there building companies, and I was going to drop out anyways. Getting rescinded from Harvard? This is also not that challenging when you have a loving family at home. There's kids out there who are starving in Uganda and like my life is not that hard. Really. A lot of everything that you should think is you should just try and think more positively about life and be more optimistic about things. It's very rare that you're going to be in America, you're going to have the opportunity to go to college, and you're really in an actually challenging situation. In

reality, we're in the most interesting time in history. If you live in America and you're not in poverty and your parents aren't crackheads, you have the opportunity to make billions of dollars and make generational wealth and do the most interesting thing ever. There's very few challenging situations that are so challenging that you're just, like, limited right now. Anybody can do anything, and you should just try and take risks and be bold because, you're very privileged right now to be living in this world. Success is having a wife, having 12 kids and having people remember me. I think Steve Jobs and Elon Musk are very cool in that everyone has a strong opinion about them, whether it's good or bad. Everyone has something to say about Elon Musk, and I think that's really cool. We're all gonna die eventually and nobody's gonna remember us in a thousand years. I might as well be remembered as strongly as possible for the time that I'm here. I think the biggest thing is confidence. Like, truly, you hear all the time that, the people that build big companies are not geniuses. They're not smarter than you. They're just they take more risks than you, and they're hard work, harder workers than you. And I think this is generally true. Five months ago, I was just some random student at some random school and I didn't really have anything going for me. And now I just raised \$5 million, and I'm in this giant office, and I'm building a company that I hope will change the world one day. And very little has changed about me except the fact that I took a risk. Even moving forward, if I do end up becoming the next trillionaire, like as big as Mark Zuckerberg, there will be nothing about me that changed. It'll just be a series of well calculated risks that I took that will lead me there. And I think the gap between Mark Zuckerberg and your average human, it's really not that big. And if you just have the confidence to take bigger risks, then very often you will win.