

# Interview with Arvind Venkataraman

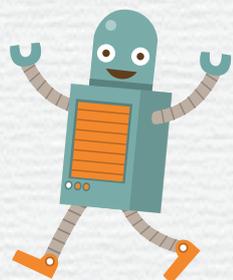
Apollo Tutors



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breadnbeyond



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## Apollo Tutors



Arvind Venkataraman met his friend and co-founder Shameel Thawerbhoy during their study at Southern Methodist University. They visited a school in West Dallas and realized how different the school was from the one they attended at Northern Dallas.

Both of them quickly realized they could do something to help.

Arvind hated math because his teacher forced him to remember, while he is more the 'learning-by-doing' type of kid. Experienced in being students, Arvind and Shameel came up with the idea of personalized learning as they wanted to help students learn better by personalizing their study method.

It was called Apollo Tutors.

The name Apollo itself was inspired by the Greek God of Light, and they metaphorize knowledge with light. Besides that, Apollo is the name of NASA's moon expedition and they wanted to associate their company with world's frontier in space exploration.

**Interviewer:** As a start, can you introduce Apollo Tutors to the readers - what it is and what it does?

**Arvind Venkataraman:** Apollo Tutors is an education social enterprise that provides private tutoring and tech solutions to promote social responsibility in educational outcomes. We provide private tutoring for over 200 subjects for students pre-k through college in 6 cities across Texas by using a personalized learning approach. Our social enterprise model distinguishes us from competitors; every hour we tutor a client, we tutor a child for free in urban school districts- We call it Buy One, Teach One.

**Interviewer:** In the website (and also just now, if you do mention it), I read that Apollo is a social enterprise, an organization that has a commitment to social responsibility where profit meets purpose. Can you share the 'Apollo ways' in living the title?

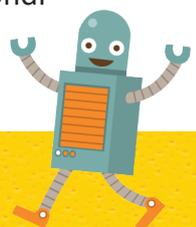
**Arvind Venkataraman:** We promote social responsibility through our Buy One, Teach One Program. We work closely with local schools and nonprofits to provide volunteer opportunities for students and individuals to mentor children in urban school districts.

To date, we've provided over 3500 hours of free tutoring to the community. Some of our partners have included helping gifted and talented students print research books, teaching 6th graders pre-algebra concepts, and helping elementary schoolers practice their math and reading.

Shameel and I also volunteer at a school in West Dallas every week. 20% of our free tutoring comes from our current tutors or management, who share our mission of social responsibility.

**Interviewer:** It's enlightening, what Apollo had decided to do. Is there a background story that started the mission?

**Arvind Venkataraman:** It was almost by accident that we founded Apollo and the Buy One Teach One program. We first started Apollo Tutors as a way to make pocket money, when one of our original co-founders who is no longer with the company came to us with the idea of starting a tutoring company. Growing up in the Dallas metroplex, Shameel and I both went to great schools, but were alarmed when visiting schools in neighboring Dallas ISD where schools didn't really have an engaging way for students to learn skills that were missed in the classroom. Seeing these conditions first-hand inspired our social



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mission to use our business as a platform to improve student outcomes.

**Interviewer:** Can you guide briefly guide us through the usual process in Apollo Tutors? We mainly serve 2 types of customers - parents of K-12 students, and college students so i will guide you through the process for both types of students.

**Arvind Venkataraman:** Parents contact us or register a profile on our website, letting us know their student's school information, the classes they are looking for help with, their schedule, and their learning style.

College students usually register directly and enter their classes and availability to their profile.

Our matching algorithm takes over from here and searches our database of tutors for matches who live near the student, are proficient in the subject, share a similar schedule, and also share a similar learning style.

Once tutors are notified, the first tutor to respond to the opportunity gets connected to the student. We are able to match students in a matter of minutes as for some subjects it can get competitive.

Tutors then communicate with the student to figure out a time to meet, and after meeting with the student the tutor writes a note to reflect on how the session went and any suggestions for improvement. Finally, We'll send students a survey to get their feedback.

**Interviewer:** How do you choose the tutors? Is there a standard that each applicant have to pass, and other requirements such as a teaching permit or certification, or do you see above that as well - like their passion to work alongside

Apollo's mission?

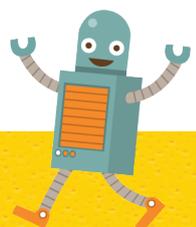
**Arvind Venkataraman:** We hire tutors who are undergraduates, graduate students, or working professionals. We require a minimum GPA of 3.3 out of 4.0, and for certain math subjects we require a proficiency test. Above the academics we also value having a good fit- some applicants are very bright academically, but lack strong communication skills. We look for candidates that have a genuine passion for learning and working alongside our mission as well. Many of our tutors express an interest in volunteering and they also contribute about 10% of our free tutoring hours. We also have a referral program for tutors and provide referral bonuses to tutors for suggesting potential candidates.

**Interviewer:** And how did you do the pairing between the students and the tutors?

**Arvind Venkataraman:** In our early days Shameel and I would match students and tutors based off the information they provided in their tutor profiles. As we built our website we developed our matching algorithm to take the system we were using and standardizing it for different locations. 1) is near them or attends the same university, 2) has mastered the subject material, 3) shares a similar scheduled, and 4) shares a similar learning style.

The matching is competitive where only the best tutors get matched with students, and as we learn more about the traits that make good tutors we are able to incorporate this into our algorithm.

**Interviewer:** Now that we know more about Apollo Tutors, what do you think sets Apollo apart in the industry?



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**Arvind Venkataraman:** What sets us apart from our competitors in the industry are our purpose, our variety of services, and our flexible matching system. As a social enterprise we are focused on not only providing premier service but also to make a difference. We also offer tutoring for a broad range of subjects, whether it is early childhood phonics, high school algebra, or Differential Equations. Unlike other tutoring centers, or marketplaces who provide fixed schedules, we also offer flexible scheduling and on-campus tutoring for college students. Our matching system is able to find the right tutor for students fast, and to ensure a good fit between students and tutors.

**Interviewer:** One of the challenge in school now, other than the obvious ones like Mathematics and Science related subjects, is the foreign language class. Based on your experience, can you share the Apollo way on how students can sharpen their Spanish or French - for example?

**Arvind Venkataraman:** Learning Foreign languages requires a lot of immersion to reinforce the language. You have to train yourself to “think in the language” so that you are not translating and are natively practicing the grammar and concepts.

What we’ve found is that practicing conversations is the best way to sharpen a language. Whether this is watching movies in the language, reading the newspaper, or going out to the market and speaking the language, and speaking with a conversation partner help tremendously to focus on the language because you are not only learning from each other, but can directly apply the language to your situation.

While a student may not recognize a certain tense or verb when they are in class, if they talk through a scenario, let’s say bargaining with a

shopkeeper, they may discover they know more than they think just by thinking on the spot instead of translating. We also love the app DuoLingo- I use this whenever I have a break to practice my pronunciation for Spanish.

**Interviewer:** What is your next plan for Apollo Tutors?

**Arvind Venkataraman:** We plan to scale our private tutoring arms from 6 colleges in 5 cities, to 20 colleges in 10 cities over the upcoming year. We are forging partnerships to facilitate volunteers and nonprofits. Next year our platform will track and measure over 100,000 volunteer hours.

We are working on using our matching algorithm to match volunteers with nonprofits that have opportunities and to help schools get insights from their after school programs.

In the long term, we aim to become more than a tutoring company to evolve into an education-technology company by applying technology and data-driven decision making to the education industry and pave a new generation of personalized learning, bringing students together across nations.

