# Jose Ferreira Steps Down as Knewton CEO, Eyes Next Education Startup

Tony Wan



Few technologists have championed the role of big data, personalized learning and many other education buzzwords as vociferously and for as long as Jose Ferreira. So it comes as a surprise that the founder and CEO of Knewton has decided to step down from the perch and lay low—for now.

Yesterday, the New York-based company announced that Ryan Prichard, who has been with the company since July 2012, most recently as Chief Technology Officer, will assume the CEO position. Ferreira, who founded the company in 2008, will remain on the company's board of directors.

Ferreira's decision marks the end of a nearly nine-year run at Knewton, where he strived to build technology to pinpoint what students know, don't know and should learn next. Key to such a tool was the ability to capture data —lots of it—to adjust the feedback and sequence of content that learners would encounter based on their performance. (He claims to be among the

first to coin this approach as "adaptive learning." It's a dubious assertion, although the company did try to trademark the term.)

Not everyone bought into his vision at first. Knewton initially applied this technology to test prep content "to convince people that our data-driven recommendations would stand," says Ferreira. In 2012 the company expanded to deliver online courseware to a few universities—in particular, a math readiness course with Arizona State University. The decision raised eyebrows at the time, Ferreira recalls: "There were people who thought that ASU was crazy to be signing a contract with a startup. But that's becoming more the norm now."

"Our focus today is still very much on adaptive learning courseware," he adds. To build these tools, the company has partnered with more than 30 publishers and digital content producers across six continents that currently use Knewton's engine to power their personalized learning products. These partners range from household names such as Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, to upstarts like Waggle. Through them Knewton claims it has helped make more than 25 billion recommendations for over 13 million students.

The company proved just as capable with securing funding, raising more than $157 million in venture capital from investors including Accel Partners, Atomico, Bessemer Venture Partners, Founders Fund, GSV and China-based TAL Education Group.

Yet under Ferreira, the company also weathered through twists and false starts. A much publicized pilot to deploy Knewton's technology to help incarcerated youth never materialized. Last year the company briefly gave the public a peek at its adaptive learning platform through a [free tool] that allows users to work through content and questions. It was sparsely used and is no

longer available on the company website. "That was a little bit off strategy," he says.

Ferreira's fiery assertions about Knewton's adaptive learning capabilities also attracted plenty of detractors. At conferences, he has openly questioned whether teachers can out-do technology when it comes to assessing what a student knows or doesn't. Stories in which he described technology as a "magic pill" and "robot tutor [that] can essentially read your mind" further fueled these perceptions.

The company's focus on collecting and analyzing large amounts of user data also stoked worries. "As an early champion of using big data in education, we had to deal with misunderstandings about privacy implications," he recalls. "There was a moment of controversy when inBloom went down," he adds, referring to the now-defunct effort to create a student data warehousing service in 2014, "and people thought we were monetizing student data."

Never one to be bashful, Ferreira believes his work has steered the edtech industry to see what's possible with data—even if that means introducing jargon that irk educators, researchers and reporters. "At the beginning, nobody was talking about adaptive learning," he contends. "Now, it's become a buzzword that's often misused." He believes that's a validation of his efforts "to influence the future of educational materials so that they are as personalized as possible based on the best data you can get."

Driving both a company and industry conversations appears to have left Ferreira exhausted, at least according to the company statement on his departure. "I wanted to prove to the world that adaptive learning was possible, would improve learning outcomes, and was the inevitable future of course materials," he wrote. "But after nearly a decade, I need a break. I would like to recharge for a bit and then maybe try something different."

The time off is temporary, he assures EdSurge. "As much as I love adaptive learning, and no one loves it more than I do, there's more to education than adaptive learning."

"I want to do something else," he adds. "I think I'm going to start a new company."

He kept mum on the timing and specifics of what's brewing. But it likely won't be long before Ferreira returns to the scene. And who knows what new buzzwords he'll bring.