START-UP NATION

Reengineering Public Transport

**An Interview with
Daniel Ramot, Co-Founder and CEO, Via**

EDITORS' NOTE *Via was co-founded by Daniel Ramot and Oren Shoval. Ramot, Via's CEO, has a Ph.D. from Stanford in neuroscience, while Shoval has a Ph.D. in systems biology from the Weizmann Institute. Prior to Via, Ramot built supercomputers designed to discover new pharmaceutical drugs and developed avionic systems for F-15s and F-16s for the Israeli Air Force.*

Daniel Ramot

COMPANY BRIEF *Founded in 2012, Via (ridewithvia.com) is reengineering public transit – from a regulated system of rigid routes and schedules to a fully dynamic, on-demand network. The Via algorithm matches, in real time, multiple passengers headed the same way with a single large SUV or van. Passengers request rides through a mobile app, and Via's systems instantly select and, if necessary, reroute the vehicle that best matches the passenger's route. Targeting the gap between outdated public transit and expensive luxury car services, the Via platform operates in New York City and Chicago, has provided more than two million rides, and is growing rapidly. Via is headquartered in New York with offices in Tel Aviv and Chicago.*

What did you see in the market that made you feel the opportunity was there for the development of this business?

We are very much focused on rethinking and reengineering public transit. We looked at cities and how people in cities get around. We saw a very interesting pattern, which was that cities with better public transit systems have exponentially more riders and fewer residents own cars. Our conclusion was that when a city has an efficient public transit system, people choose to use it and it can displace the private auto.

We felt that was a tremendous opportunity because so many cities in the U.S. don't have efficient public transit systems, and building a public transit system is extremely expensive and unlikely to happen through government efforts.

We believe that by combining technology with smaller, more agile vehicles instead of large buses and trains, we can create a mass transit system that can be deployed quickly and inexpensively into cities. This could greatly improve the quality of life and cut back on congestion and pollution, while providing residents with an alternative they might find very compelling.

How do you get to that mission? Where is the company today?

That was our big vision – to bring efficient public transit to cities and do it in a way that is driven by technology. Rather than having buses that are running on fixed routes and schedules, the idea is to utilize smaller vehicles that are routed dynamically and provide on-demand service that is substantially more convenient and efficient.

We started in New York, where we launched a service in September 2013 that we have since been building from the ground up. Initially, we served commuters on the Upper East Side and in Midtown Manhattan. Over the past two years, we have been expanding so that we now cover all of Manhattan south of 110th Street and serve nearly 20,000 riders per day.

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We recently launched in Chicago and we're looking to take it to the next city early next year.

Do you see this more as an innovative or disruptive company?

It's more of an innovative company. There is always going to be a need for bus and train systems that use large vehicles and run fixed routes with fixed schedules. I don't think the dynamic system we're building is going to replace that. It's a complement to that system.

Where there might be disruption happening may be in the private auto space. In cities where Via operates at scale, fewer people will need to buy a car.

Certainly, a lot of disruption is happening in transportation. We like to focus on where we're being innovative in creating solutions that are providing new and more efficient services to people rather than replacing their existing service.

From a people perspective, how have you gone about attracting talent as the growth has come?

This is critical for business in general, and certainly has been for us. We hire quickly but also work extremely hard to make sure we're hiring the right people. We spend a lot of resources to search for, recruit, interview, and attract the best people we can to maintain our culture of excellence as we grow.

At what point did you realize you had something and when did you know it would work?

My co-founder Oren and I have known each other for about 20 years. We were in the military together and we had wanted to start a company for a while, and would brainstorm different ideas. Oren called me one day and said he had an idea based on the sherut taxis in Israel. Sheruts are privately operated vans that follow the same routes as the buses and supplement the public transit system. They don't have technology like Via's but they are flexible in that people can hop on and off anywhere along the route.

Oren asked, what if we develop technology that allows us to route these vans dynamically so they don't have to follow a fixed route or schedule, and can be summoned with smartphones using an algorithm that computes the most optimal route? As he was talking, I was convinced it was an absolutely great idea and that if we didn't do it, someone else would – I have been a big believer that it worked from that first moment.

As a country that is such an entrepreneurial hub with so much innovation, what is it culturally about Israel that mades it a leader in that area?

To some extent, it's born of the fact that every Israeli thinks he or she should be the boss. In the workplace, this can have some interesting consequences. It drives an entrepreneurial culture. There is also something that comes from the early experience in the military where part of the doctrine champions initiative and that gets into the psyche.

What makes your partnership with Oren work so well?

It's a matter of personal fit and knowing each other well. We are close friends but also experienced working together professionally. Our approaches are quite similar. We mesh on a personal level. ●