



Publishing / Education

# How A.Team and McGraw Hill built the “TikTok for textbooks” with 1M+ downloads

**1,800+**

4.8 star App Store ratings

**28%**

Growth in digital billings

**1M+**

Downloads

## The Challenge

For 130 years, McGraw Hill has been the world's most trusted educational publisher, reaching over 20M students globally and generating over \$1B in revenue. But a few years ago, McGraw Hill Chief Transformation and Strategy Officer Justin Singh realized something: Increasingly, students were searching TikTok and YouTube for study materials, bypassing textbooks and official study guides. In the process, they were often getting the wrong information.

Singh and his team realized they needed to develop a digital experience that mirrored the apps that students love.

McGraw Hill's vision for the Sharpen app was to provide a feed of videos and swipeable study tools that mimicked the felt — as one future student would put it — “like TikTok and Duolingo had a baby.” They wanted to bring study guides out of the 90s, and into the age of TikTok. But they needed a prototype to obtain their board's approval.

McGraw Hill had previously engaged traditional management consultants with this challenge with little to show for it. Instead, Singh turned to A.Team to onboard a team of top Silicon Valley product and engineering talent that'd built iconic mobile experiences before — from iOS to Tinder.

“If you’re going to engage and do the exact same thing again and again, it’s unlikely that you’re going to get any groundbreaking innovation. We as a team wanted a more flexible, agile way to undergo product development,” said Singh.

**What we found with A.Team was they had a passion to help us grow, a passion to be flexible, and a passion to support us on our project.**



— Justin Singh, Chief Transformation and Strategy Officer,  
McGraw Hill

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## The Build

McGraw Hill decided to kick things off with a fractional team of domain experts. They brought in a small three-person A.Team to build a prototype.

Responses to the initial prototype were promising after a preliminary round of user testing with students. Singh told us: “We tested our initial prototype with over 30 students and we just got such heartwarming responses. That allowed us to change the culture from the bottom within the team, cause they started believing in the project. They said, ‘We’ve never been in a user interview where the student is reacting in this manner!’”

The next hurdle was getting the board's approval. To do so, they ditched the PowerPoint and went straight to a product demo in a board meeting.

Singh and his team showed the prototype to the board, telling them to imagine having the Sharpen app when they were in college, helping them to navigate their studies and their academic life.

Singh said: “And then we showed what students were saying about the prototype. All of a sudden the board was able to say, ‘Wow. We get it.’”

With the board’s sign-off, Singh had less than a year to deliver the Sharpen app. This is where the experience, speed, and flexibility of the Sharpen A.Team paid off.

McGraw Hill’s A.Team grew to eight product builders as they built the MVP, and then expanded again to an A.Team of 27 builders spanning product managers, engineering leaders, software architects, designers, and growth marketing as they geared up towards

launch, blending seamlessly with the internal team for the duration of the build.

Their build included video-streaming embeds, integrated social learning tools, progress-tracking analytics, and adaptive learning algorithms for micro-learning solutions. Thanks to A.Team, McGraw Hill had access to a talent pool that a traditional publishing company wouldn't otherwise have. Ultimately, Sharpen launched with a robust catalog of 95 gamified courses.

**Typically an innovation process is long and hard to scale. It's hard to bring together a team of different capabilities in a short period of time. With A.Team, we could quickly bring in A.Teamers that had a fantastic, diverse background that enriched our product development process, from prototype to MVP stage to implementation.**



— Justin Singh, Chief Transformation and Strategy Officer,  
McGraw Hill

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## Outcomes

The Sharpen app quickly went viral and was adopted among over a million students across the country. McGraw Hill had accomplished the seemingly impossible: making studying fun. And in doing so, they've inspired a new way to think about innovation at legacy companies.

The app was splashed across the front page of Forbes ([Students Viewed This Type of TikTok 412 Million Times—And It's Not Porn](#)), and [led McGraw Hill's quarterly earnings report](#) by catalyzing a 28% growth in digital billings. Reporters gushed about it, and students raved that it was just like all the other apps they loved.

It now has over 1.8k+ ratings averaging 4.8 stars, and retention numbers 30% higher than its education app competitors.

“Students have described Sharpen in many ways: they've said it's like their textbook and TikTok had a baby. They've described it as motivating them like DuoLingo. They've described it as providing motivation just like Apple Fitness,” said Singh. “From the start, A.Team enabled us to prototype and iterate more efficiently. Then ultimately, at the product

development stage, they gave us the agility to quickly scale up and down with the resources needed to get to market sooner.” With Sharpen, McGraw Hill has shown what true digital transformation looks like for enterprise companies—proving that anything is possible when you have the right team.