

# Connecting Consumers with the Latest Technology:

Embracing Flexible Change in an Unpredictable Era

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Amid the cutting-edge technological competition between Google and the other big tech companies in recent years, Sourcenext has successfully established itself as a vital player.

With its corporate mission of “Creating products that inspire joy and move the world,” it has created many hit products such as the Pocketalk AI translation device (this device’s business has been spun-off into a separate company).

Tomoaki Kojima has been an active member of Sourcenext since its founding years, and was Pocketalk’s first producer. CMIC Group’s, CEO Nakamura invited Kojima to talk about the mindset and approach to work that supports Sourcenext’s unique business model, as well as about his progress to date.

### Discovering the Excitement of Business at University

**Nakamura** You have always prioritized users’ needs in product development and continually pursued ease of use and innovation. This approach has brought you numerous successes with Pocketalk and many other products, establishing Sourcenext as a unique company. But, how did you spend your time in university before joining the company?

**Kojima** I was born in Tokyo and raised in neighboring Kanagawa Prefecture, but I visited Kyoto every year with my parents, who love history. As their passion had rubbed off on me, I decided to study in the Faculty of Letters at Kyoto University, though I majored in European rather than Japanese history.

**Nakamura** What other passions did you have apart from your studies

**Kojima** While working part-time, I

joined a university club that researched business. The club’s main activity was to invite successful business people to give us business-related lectures, and for each member to conceive of and launch their own business. As I had worked at prep schools among my many other part-time jobs, I decided to launch a consultancy for prep schools.

**Nakamura** So, you started consulting as a university student? I enrolled in the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Kyoto University with the aim of becoming a researcher. However, I was captivated by Kyoto’s culture and environment and also ended up joining a band at the university’s music club in the hope of becoming popular with girls. I became more engrossed in music as time went on. In my third year at university, I had my own band, and I even came to run things at the club as its overall manager. I gathered funds to buy and maintain instruments, and I held a local live show. My role was similar to an entertainment production agency. Every day, I was thinking about how to support the 100 or so club

members. Looking back, I think this opportunity brought me my first taste of management activities. I imagine that you may have experienced something similar yourself, perhaps. **Kojima** Yes, I did. Among other things, I created a system for recruiting students for prep schools and appointing teachers. I originally used a system in which teachers were paid by the hour, but I ultimately switched to a performance-based system measured by increases in student attendance. This was a success, and it helped me discover the fun of business.

### Choosing a Life in Business After a Surprising Encounter

**Nakamura** It’s a valuable experience to learn about the joy of business while in university. On the other hand, I imagine this experience may have made you feel reluctant to get a job with a company.

**Kojima** Nowadays, people have the option of side jobs, and it is possible to run multiple businesses in parallel. However, back then, people usually had one job at a single company, and so my projects came to a close. Nonetheless, I was still interested in business, I studied at the University of California for a year to learn more. Fortunately, I got the chance to attend a monthly lecture by Peter Drucker at the Claremont Colleges in the town across from my university. Peter was over 90 at the time and he needed a cane and hearing aids, but he poured his heart and soul into his lectures. The



students and entrepreneurs in the audience listened to him with a glint in their eyes. It was a deeply moving sight to see. I was filled with a strong desire to lead a life like his, and I wondered what I could do to fulfill this dream.

**Nakamura** That was a very valuable encounter. I similarly look up to and respect one person who taught me. He had a motto to “live strongly and resiliently like a weed,” and taught me never to give up, come what may, because an opportunity would always come in time. I was deeply moved by his approach to life, and I always felt empowered when I met him. You must see Peter in the same way that I see my own mentor.

**Kojima** In my case, I was simply a fan admiring him from a distance, but I still vividly remember the powerful energy that I felt back then. I realized that the best way to inspire the younger generation with life experience and dreams, in the same way he did, was by choosing a path of management. When I got older, I wanted to have a life in which, as an investor, I supported next-generation businesses and drew inspiration and energy from them. So, I searched for a company where I could gain managerial experience as quickly as possible. That was how I found Sourcnext. It was a young company at the time—it had been established for about five years, with some 50 employees—and it mainly dealt in computer software.

**Traveling across Japan for Marketing after the 2007–2008 Financial Crisis**

**Nakamura** What kind of work did you do after joining the company?

**Kojima** In my first year, I scouted for interesting products overseas and then did negotiations and preparations to sell them in Japan. Later on, I built up a wide range of experience through different kinds of work, such as building an online store and launching a B2B initiative. I was assigned to the



Management Planning Office when the company was getting ready to go public. I was the manager there for about four years, including the period when the company held its IPO.

**Nakamura** Did you face any challenges in human resource management?

**Kojima** I found things going against my plans again and again. Many of my subordinates left the company, and I was at a loss at some points. However, my supervisor at the time reassured me that I had been entrusted with the role of manager and so I should trust my methods. This gave me the courage to believe in my own sense and intuition.

**Nakamura** All managers must strengthen their resolve at one point. Those valuable words from your supervisor must have helped you take that step. So, what kind of role did you have after the company went public?

**Kojima** The 2007–2008 financial crisis hit soon after we went public, bringing a drop in performance. I joined the frontline with marketing employees and called for everyone to collaborate in increasing revenue. I visited consumer electronics stores across Japan and diligently continued business discussions on-site. This continued for a total of 10 years.

**Nakamura** That bears some resemblance with your business origins in prep schools.

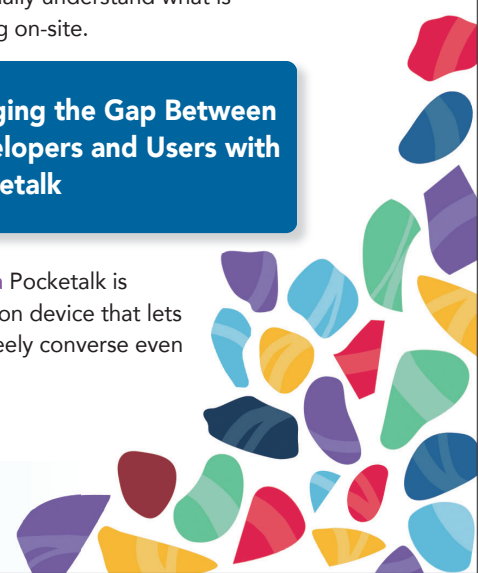
**Kojima** I drew from what I had learned as a student—not dry theory, but by doing everything myself, from scheduling appointments on the phone

to interviewing lecturers. I understood the importance of being on-site and so I always made a point to visits in person whenever the company faced hard times.

**Nakamura** I agree that one’s experience as a student helps with business. In the music club, I sold tickets for local concerts, raised funds for them, and organized them. I needed to make a profit to buy instruments, so I always focused on getting a strong attendance. In business, it is crucial to think about how to gain more profits while having fun in the process, so this experience greatly assisted me later. The secret to success in business can always be found at the site where this business takes place, and managers need to have a strong awareness of the workplace to be persuasive to the people working there. Having a solid understanding of the perspectives and experiences of people working on the floor helps with making more accurate decisions and instructions, so it is vital to continually understand what is happening on-site.

**Bridging the Gap Between Developers and Users with Pocketalk**

**Nakamura** Pocketalk is a translation device that lets people freely converse even



if they don't speak the same language. What was the background behind the development of this product?

**Kojima** Creating a translation device has been our founder's big dream ever since he created Sourcnext. He wanted to make a two-way translator that anyone could use easily, just like the "translation gummy" in Doraemon, a famous children's TV show in Japan. Unfortunately, AI, hardware, network connections, and other essential technologies had not suitably matured back then, and so that dream was put on hold. However, there was a huge turning point in 2017 with progress in a type of AI technology called deep learning, resulting in highly accurate machine translation tools being used in Google Translate and other platforms. At that point, our founder felt that he could change the world by creating a translation device—he finally had his chance to realize his long-held dream.

**Nakamura** Competing in the world of translation would pit you against Google and other big tech companies. Did you have any fears about a Japanese company entering the fray? What was your mindset in this undertaking?

**Kojima** Actually, we are not in competition with those companies. They are always creating cutting-edge technologies that regular people may have heard of but cannot use. There is

a gap here, and Sourcnext's role and entire reason for existence is to bridge this gap. Pocketalk embodies this philosophy.

**Nakamura** So, you incorporated other companies' technologies, rather than developing a translation engine yourself?

**Kojima** Yes, that's right. There are already translation engines around the world that boast high accuracy, like the ones at Google and DeepL, so we pay royalties to utilize those. There is a broad selection of translation engines across many countries, each with its own unique qualities. We gather information about each one and regularly assess its performance in each language combination. For example, one engine might be best at translating Japanese into Vietnamese. We select the most accurate engine for each case, which theoretically makes Pocketalk the best translation device in the world.

**Nakamura** I see. Now I understand how it works. The external interface is simple and easy to use—you just press a button and talk—but the device contains the newest and most optimal engine and AI for each language. Did you think of utilizing this kind of combination from the very start?

**Kojima** We could not compete with big tech companies from the U.S. regarding core technologies for machine translation, so we decided to

utilize existing technology. In fact, we expanded our greatest creative efforts for the voice input. Regular translation engines expect users to speak clearly and articulately by design, but people make mistakes and often speak in areas where there is a lot of background noise. That's why we focus on bridging the gap between the design philosophy of humans using technology rationally and flawlessly, and the actual reality. For example, we configured AI to automatically revise slight hesitations in speech. We instilled a high degree of originality into the product through this tuning process.

### Spinning off Pocketalk and Focusing on New Innovation at the Headquarters

**Nakamura** At what point were you certain that Pocketalk would succeed?

**Kojima** We launched it with a production lot of 5,000 units, and it sold out in just 10 days. That was when I was sure it would do well. We worked on producing more right away. It was our first time making hardware, and we faced many issues that we had never encountered before, such as low yield rates and shipping problems. I visited the plants in China several times immediately after launch to harmonize delivery times and check quality on site.

**Nakamura** Were you responsible for the launch?

**Kojima** Yes, I was Pocketalk's first producer.

**Nakamura** I actually use Pocketalk myself on a daily basis. It even helped me speak with a couple from Korea in the past. People from outside Japan have a particularly keen interest in Pocketalk. It was enjoyable to continue the conversation, and we all found ourselves with smiles on our faces at the end. I imagine that Pocketalk will spread even more across the world going forward.

**Kojima** Thank you. We have strong sales outside Japan, most of all in the



U.S. I sense that this region has a high demand for multilingual support, owing to the large number of immigrants and its growing population.

**Challenges and Opportunities Are Two Sides of the Same Coin**

**Nakamura** I would like to work as a producer for as long as I live. How about you? What would you like to do next?

**Kojima** My aim is to always connect consumers with the latest technology, and right now, that would be generative AI. When ChatGPT-4 was released in 2023, I spurred the company to action by holding an internal business competition. I thought that Sourcnext would lose its reason for existence if we did not work fast to develop a product using generative AI. I joined the competition with my own proposal, which resulted in a dialogue-based golf AI device called BirdieTalk (which launched in September 2024).

**Nakamura** That product features AI that gives advice during a round of golf, right? I like that. For my next question, what was your greatest struggle in business?

**Kojima** We had many challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic spreading just when we had fully expanded our production capacity in the wake of Pocketalk’s strong performance. I felt that success could dramatically give way to failure—or the other way around—in an instant. However, this is part of what makes life interesting.

**Nakamura** I agree. I always say that challenges are opportunities and vice versa. There are two crucial things to



consider when facing a challenge: how to perceive it and how to respond to it. Do you have a motto that supports you when you feel down?

**Kojima** I don’t feel down very often. Perhaps that is because of my love of history—I always compare the present with other eras, and I feel that the modern day is much better. I think about things by starting with the idea of how fortunate I am in my current situation.

**Nakamura** I can very much relate to that sentiment. Thinking about the big picture, the evolution from great apes to *Homo sapiens*, helps me change my outlook. I sometimes think about how interesting *Homo sapiens* is, as if observing humanity like a species of animal.

**Aiming to Work while Enjoying Change**

**Nakamura** What is your “IKIGAI” (purpose in life)?

**Kojima** Work takes up a large portion of my lifetime, so I can only enjoy my life if my job is fun. If I were to consider the kind of job that I would enjoy the most, I think it would be something that helps people, or something that I can be proud of when talking to my child or partner. Looking back, all the successful products that I have produced have all cut to the core of what I love while also helping people. My idea for BirdieTalk came from my love of golf as well as the fact that golfers have longer healthy lifespans. Japan will face a significant challenge going forward in terms of achieving longer healthy lifespans, and my IKIGAI is to do work that can help solve this challenge.

**Nakamura** In closing, could you give a message to the younger generation?

**Kojima** It is important to enjoy change. Change brings opportunities. If you make a decision that results in change, you may end up feeling more satisfied when you look back on things later.

**Nakamura** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

**PROFILE** Tomoaki Kojima .....

President and COO of Sourcnext Corporation  
 Born in Tokyo in 1977, Tomoaki Kojima graduated from the Faculty of Letters at Kyoto University in 2000 and studied marketing at the University of California before joining Sourcnext in 2001. He has served as a producer in many large-scale collaborative projects with overseas companies, including Bitdefender and Sun Microsystems (currently Oracle). He has also handled acquisition projects for products including Fudemame, Fudeoh, and B’s Recorder. Before assuming his current position, he was previously responsible for sales of the company’s products in Europe and Asia, and served as CEO of Sourcnext B.V. in the Netherlands, among other roles.

