

Madison Travis:

What is up you guys, we are back with another episode of investigating innovation with the EITC. I'm your host Madison, Travis, on today's episode, we're going to be sitting down with Matt Sloan. He's the CEO of Skyfire and also a new tenant here that you see, we're going to be asking him about what made him move to Huntsville, what his company's looking like and what his big goals are. Now that he's moved into the ITC. Let's roll. Hey, Matt, what's up? We're so glad to have you here today. Thanks for having me. Yeah. We're super excited. You know, you're three hours now to see, and you got to get those in the spark studio early, so super excited to have you a while to introduce yourself. Tell us a little about your company. I don't know, just give us the rundown.

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, absolutely. So my name's Matt Sloan, I'm the founder and CEO of Skyfire consulting. We are actually a, a bigger company called Atlanta drone group incorporated, which I'm also the CEO. It's really just one big company, but the, the primary focus of our company is a public safety, drone integration. So we work a lot with police and fire departments, emergency management agencies. And the goal is to get them this life saving technology of drones that they can incorporate into their daily workflows. So you know, the, the technology obviously the military has been using for quite a long time, but really integrating it into public safety is something that's only happened in the last four to five years. We've been doing this for six. And so we were, when we first started doing it you know, we would talk to people about drones and they're like, what do I need that for?

Matt Sloane:

That's a toy, you know, I've seen that at best buy. But really over the last couple of years, people have come to understand that, you know, with thermal imaging cameras and the ability to basically send a robot where you would rather not send a human being actually makes the job a lot safer. And so that's, that's kind of our goal. So we, we actually do a fair bit of education. That's kind of, most of what we do is just getting people to understand you know, that this data is accurate on the law enforcement side, you know, they want to know, is it accurate enough to take to court as evidence? Things like that. So there's, there's a lot of work going on here at UAH and, and other places where they have UAS programs to really validate the data and make sure that it's accurate enough to to stand by. But yeah, I mean, we talk about this all the time, particularly in the mapping part of what we do you know, is like, you can actually get a more accurate map of something with a drone than you can with a guy at a survey, you know, GPS and all that kind of stuff. So it really does. It really makes the workflow more effective.

Madison Travis:

Yeah. So this is kind of an off topic question, but related. So are you guys planning to kind of like work with like UAH students and like different programs here to kind of like, I dunno research or maybe like aspects like that?

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, I mean, that's the goal. You know, we we've actually done some work with the UAS program here at UAH long before I even thought about moving to Huntsville. KC, Collin Mayo is one of the researchers there and there, they do a lot of stuff with wildfire predictive mapping. So that's how we sort of crossed paths and and actually that's how I ended up here at ITC. So I called Casey and asked if fel had a program like this. And and he pointed me in this direction. So yeah, I think that's my goal is to really work with them. You know, obviously they have some FAA sanctioned programs that we would love to, you know,

help out with and then take advantage of the, of the students here, the engineering background that Huntsville is a whole house is going to be excited.

Madison Travis:

Oh, for sure. For sure. So how did this all come about? I mean, you've mentioned two companies now that you're kind of CEO of like, was there like a specific moment where you kind of realized like, Oh, like, this is what I want to do, or was it a process, like, how did that, what did that look like?

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, so I spent 14 years actually working at CNN. I was a producer there. Yeah, it was, I really enjoyed it a lot. It's a, it's a little bit of a different organization today than it was when I was there, but I worked in medical news. So I was sort of out of the fray of all this political nonsense, but it was a lot of fun and I was a producer there, like I said, for a long time. And actually when we I, I decided in early 2014 I was gonna leave and do something as an entrepreneur and I had no idea what that was going to be. But in I was still freelancing for CNN at the time. And I got asked to come speak to a group of firefighters about how the media covers major stories.

Matt Sloane:

And so I went down to our public safety training center in Georgia and gave them a little explainer on how CNN covers stories. I had just gotten my first drone the day before. And I said, Oh, no, this is the new thing. We've got these flying cameras now. So you thought reporters were paying when they were on a tripod with a microphone. Now we got these flying things and I had four fire chiefs come up to me afterward and they say, Hey, how do we get that for our department? And it was like a light bulb went off in my head. I had also worked in EMS for several years during college. And so I sort of knew the public safety world a little. And honestly we started the company the next day and just started researching. And like I said, we went to our first show and everybody was like, what, wait, what are you doing? So we were a little discouraged by that, but you know, it's, it's definitely come a long way

Madison Travis:

Sometimes, especially like with the tech startup world, you know, everything that is here that you see, that's how a lot of people look at entrepreneurs in the beginning. It's like, I just don't know if I can get behind it. And then we were too early. Right. And then later down the road, they're like, man should have got on that train in the past, you know? But you know, it's been around for a minute, you know, what does your day-to-day look like? How has that changed over the years? And like, you know, what, what, what are you doing?

Matt Sloane:

Bigger company, bigger problems. So you know, before it was a, you know, can we keep the lights on? It's not so much that anymore, but you know, I have 22 people working for me now. So now it's, you know, can I keep 22 people's families? That, that's kind of my, my main goal, but no, it's funny because, you know, in the beginning I was doing everything and I had three business partners. Two of them had day jobs at the time, actually three of them, all the other three had day jobs. So this was like, kind of just me. That's obviously changed, but you know, I was doing everything at the beginning and now I don't get to do much in the way of flying drones. So I think that's changed quite a bit. I've I, as they say, I've started working on the business instead of working in the business.

Matt Sloane:

And and at that, that took a little getting used to you know, the, the the majority of what I do is, you know, partnerships and schmoozing and investor relations and stuff like that. And I can't tell you the last time I put my hands on, on a drone. But it's cool. I mean, that's, you know, as a producer that's kinda what I did in my last life was, you know, choose and talk to people and grease the wheels. And so I'm doing a lot of that and actually what's been cool about it is because I'm not so integral to the day to day that allowed me to move out to here to Huntsville while the other people are back in Atlanta. And and that's been a really cool change.

Madison Travis:

It gives you a lot of opportunity to focus on the growth side of things without I have it. It's great. Whenever you actually get good people working for you, and then you trust them to actually run those days. Yeah.

Matt Sloane:

Yeah. I have, I mean, I can't say enough about my team. We have such an incredible team of people who are just so good at what they do and you know, and their growth and we're growing and, you know, we've acquired two companies in the last year. In the last year. And so that's provided its own challenges, but I think it's really

Madison Travis:

Cool. Yeah. That's awesome. So kind of going off of, you know, how you've grown and you have more people now, would you say, what kind of, what kind of challenges did 2020 pose for you? Like when did things change or would you say it was pretty steady? Like, what did it look like that,

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, this is fascinating to me. About 2020, just I think the books and the studies and all the stuff that's going to come out about this time is going to be so interesting. But, you know, w we had gone into 2020 we had just taken some investor money. So we w you know, we had some money in the bank, which was nice. And we were kind of looking at 2020 as a transition year. We used to sell a lot of drone equipment. We stopped doing that because there it's just, there's a lot of people that do that and do it well, and we didn't need to do it. And it was, it was work intensive and the, the profit margins were very thin and it just, it was a lot of work for, you know so we, we would still, you know, direct people in the right way.

Matt Sloane:

We'd help them pick the equipment, but we just wouldn't actually sell it. So one of the things we told our investors going into 2020 was, Hey, just be ready for our revenue to drop like, crazy, because we're going to get rid of this line of business, but our costs are going to go down significantly because we're not fronting, you know, hundreds of thousands of dollars. So we sorta knew it was going to be a transition year anyway, but we felt kind of bad about it because we're like, Oh my God, the market's going to be like churning and burning. And then the pandemic hit. And like, in some ways it actually gave us an excuse to kind of take a step back as sure. So that was unexpected. You know, business definitely slowed down. And so we, we did take advantage of some of the COVID loans and things that were out there, and we're, we're still in that process, but it really set us up to, to go into this year strong you know, get the team where we want it to be.

Matt Sloane:

Like I said, we, you know, the pandemic had already started when we acquired the first company, and then we acquired another one in August. We also hired our director of public safety, Mike Rogers, who he just retired out of the FBI as their nationwide UAS program manager. So like literally the best expert in the world enforcement drones. Yeah. so we're super excited to have him. That's also part of the reason for the move to Huntsville too, because obviously the FBI is coming here in a big way. So yeah, it's been, it's been weird, like our revenue actually didn't go down all that much, which was great. And but in the fact that it did, you know, our investors are like, Oh yeah, 20, 20.

Madison Travis:

I, I think it gives you a lot of time to focus on those things that you may not have focused on in a normal year or a year of like crazy growth pushes. You didn't have the time to, so 2020 gave you a time to like step back and just look at things for what it is like, what can we work on? How can we grow next year? Because this year just doesn't seem like the year. So, you know, speaking of that, what is 2021 look like? Like what goals do you kind of have for this year moving forward?

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, we're, we're super excited about what's coming this year. As I said a couple of times we acquired two companies last year. One was a company called Viking UAS. Viking actually manufactured some test aircraft for the army that actually went through airworthiness testing here at the arsenal, which is cool. And we've really kind of pushed them into the public safety, drone, manufacturing area. So lots of really exciting stuff or is going to be coming out here pretty soon. I can't say a whole lot about it. I'll come back and tell you once a day, lots of really great stuff coming. And, and we've got a massive client ready to accept some very cool drones here in the next month or two. So that's really exciting. So I think that's honestly become a huge focus of what we're doing. And then also with us bringing on Mike Rogers you know, his big focus is going to be on training. And so you know, he's trained pretty much every FBI agent that flies a drone today has gone through Mike's training at some point. So we're looking forward to kind of adding his knowledge into the mix. We're doing a lot more specialized training. So SWAT specific you know, law enforcement stuff evidence collection, things like that. So moving on from the basics into the real specifics,

Madison Travis:

Which only makes you more valuable and more profitable. So that's awesome. Well, you know, you kind of mentioned a little bit about what brought you here to Huntsville and ITC, but you know, Huntsville is very much growing and has a lot of opportunity. What kind of specifics kind of drew you to the ad to see, like, what are you liking so far, you know, w you know, go to the benefits.

Matt Sloane:

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think, let me back up a step and say, we actually started thinking about moving to Huntsville for family reasons, right. We had family here and we, I had never been here. I mean, I'd certainly heard about it. We came up from Atlanta and just fell in love with it because it's a little bit slower pace than Atlanta. And, you know, my wife said, I want a subdivision with a lot of kids, but I also want mountains. And I also want a whole bunch of open space. And I was like, we're never going to find all that in one place. And then we did. So we live in a great subdivision with tons of kids, and there's a mountain out back, and we can get, you know, on top of on top of Cecil Ashburn or whatever, 10 minutes and go hiking if we want.

Matt Sloane:

So so that's what initially drew us here. And then as I said, you know, I started talking to my, my coworkers and the one was like, well, you know, our aircraft go through airworthiness testing at the arsenal. And then Mike said, you know, the FBI is moving a whole bunch of people there. And I was like, wow, this is all roads lead. So we kind of like literally on a whim, just like solar house and found one here and moved to Huntsville. So a great decision, by the way, I've only been here a month and a half, but I'm loving it. And then as far as ITC, I mean, honestly, what, what started the conversation was I have two young kids and I absolutely cannot work from home or I'll lose my mind. And so I was just, I was like looking around for, you know, what could possibly be a good fit.

Matt Sloane:

And I talked to Casey, as I said, one of the UAS researchers here at UAH. And I was like, do you guys have any kind of program like that? And he pointed me towards ITC, and then I spent some time talking to Rick red and I was just like, wow, this is exactly what I'm looking for. Because I don't need a ton of space. I don't need a huge office. It's just me. But I love the idea of being able to collaborate with students and with researchers. And there's lots of, you know, grant funded projects and FAA sponsored projects and you know, a lot of the defense stuff. And so it just, it made a ton of sense. You know, the facility is beautiful, you got everything I'm looking for. And it's, you know, out, out of my house, I love my kids, but they don't exactly. They're not conducive to getting work done.

Madison Travis:

No, not the best helpers, not at all. Right. Yeah. Well, we're super excited to have you here. And it really is one of those places that I feel like once you get in, it's really hard to leave. Like, it, it brings so many benefits to your business to even like, just life in general, where you're just constantly networking and just building that one year portfolio too, but also just your, your clientele, your, your connections, and, you know, it's just one of those things that it helps people with. Like, I mean, no matter what stage you're at, I mean, I'm an intern I'm running like crazy, but the entrepreneurs that are here, I mean, all their stories. And I love talking to them and kind of see, and just checking in with them and really seeing like how things are going, because I love the companies that are here. It's so much fun. I learned so much from all of you guys. So just checking in.

Matt Sloane:

It's cool because I was like, if I could just get an office space somewhere, but I wouldn't need anybody, there would be no networking, you know? And so this made a whole lot more sense. Oh, for sure. Super looking forward to like the post COVID era when we can all actually like get together and talk about stuff. And I'm sure it'll take me longer to meet everybody just because everybody's kind of remote,

Madison Travis:

But we networking events. So we used to have like, you know, before COVID hit, Oh my gosh. So much fun. Like literally just sit out there in the lobby for like hours, just talk at it. It's so much fun. The workshops. It's great. They're probably going to be bigger and better, you know,

Matt Sloane:

Can't wait. Yeah, you're in for good.

Madison Travis:

Sure. So what are you most looking forward to about being here in Huntsville? There's so many benefits. You've kind of mentioned a lot of it, you know, business wise and personal life wise. What are you most looking forward to?

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, I mean, honestly, I, you know, I've first of all, I'm a total space nerd. So like the idea that I, yeah, I mean, I'm in the right place for that. So the idea that I can like drive down the highway and drive past the Saturn five rocket all the time is pretty cool. But I also, you know defense is not a place that we've played a lot in. And I think we have the infrastructure to really do that now more so than ever. And so I'm just looking forward to learning. You know, what's really cool about living here is like literally every one of my neighbors either works for NASA or the military. So I knew there was going to be a lot of it. I didn't realize it was like, actually everybody, literally everyone, everyone. So that's been cool already.

Matt Sloane:

I've met some great neighbors who have some ideas for me, which is cool. But yeah, I mean, I think that's I, you know, I lived in Atlanta for 20 years. I grew up in Philadelphia for 18 years. So this is like only the third place I've ever lived. And so and as an adult, you know, I came to Atlanta when I was 18. So it's kind of cool to be in a new place as an adult, just to get to like check out the bars and restaurants. And it's, you know people were like, I don't, I think Huntsville is kind of a small town. I'm like, it's not that small anymore. And, and growing like crazy. So

Madison Travis:

It's crazy because Huntsville just was very different. Whenever, because my hometown is only about, I've mentioned this before on here, but only about 45 minutes and hustle is the place we went to like shop to the movies, things like that. Now Huntsville is crazy different to me. Like the side of Hunt's philosophy now is, is totally different. Always, always meeting like innovative people and creative mindsets. And it's great. I love it. I thrive here for sure. I'll be sad to leave, but I'm super, it's great

Matt Sloane:

Cheesecake factory. So like, you know, you've made it when she's [inaudible] cheesecake factory bread. No, it's great. So,

Madison Travis:

You know, you have so much experience and a lot of just depth in, in your work experience, what kind of advice would you give to those looking to start their own company?

Matt Sloane:

Yeah, I mean, I think that the one thing that's helped me through my entire career even before I was an entrepreneur was just ask for what you want, because you're never going to get it. If you don't ask, you may not get it, even if you do ask, but it's worth asking. So just a quick sort of sidebar here, but when I got my, my internship at CNN I was 18. I had just started at, in school at Emory. And it was the the day after the 2000 election. So we didn't have a president, which was the first time that had happened in my lifetime. So my roommates and I were like, Hey, let's just go down to CNN. Like cool has gotta be going on. So we literally just went down there. They happened to be giving away free tickets to a talk show that was in the atrium at the time.

Matt Sloane:

And I just was in the audience. I actually sat right behind the host. So my mom was like watching, saw me on TV. And I just walked up to the host after the show. And I was like, Hey, how do I get an internship here? And she was like, Oh, talk to that lady a month later, I was working at CNN as a freshmen, which as you probably know, is like unheard of. And I never left. So I was there for 14 years. So I think the long and short of it is, you know, if you don't ask, you're not going to get it. And you know, I think entrepreneurs have to understand that it's risky. There's a lot of stress involved and I think I heard this on shark tank. They said, you know, entrepreneurs are the only group of people that will work a hundred hours a week, so they don't have to work 40 hours a week.

Matt Sloane:

And that's so true. I mean, I literally, it never turns off and you just have to know that going into it. I have a lot of colleagues who are still at CNN who were like, man, I couldn't do what you're doing. Like I have to have somebody to like tell me what to do every day. And and I hated that and I've told my staff, like, I don't care what time you come to work? I don't care what time you go home. If you, we get unlimited vacation at Skyfire because I'm like you either going to put the work in or you're not. So I try to like keep the corporate, like, you know, rules to a minimum cause I just, I hate those constraints. And so you know, Mark Zuckerberg said move fast and break things. We have another investor who his thing is, burn it, break it, blow it up. I felt really strongly that, you know, you have to try things and see what works and there's no magic to it. It's just a lot of hard work. I don't feel like we had a great master plan going in. I feel like we've just made a series of good decisions along the way. And we learned, we learned some pretty hard lessons, but we learned them quickly and didn't do it again. Right,

Madison Travis:

Right. And it helps when you have good people around you and just a good team that is all motivated. Really. That's all. I mean, motivation, I feel like is really key. And, and I talked with Jonathan, he has data CATIA here and he was talking about just the optimism that you really just have to have. Like he was like, just some days are harder than others. You've just got to,

Matt Sloane:

Well, sometimes you, you think to yourself like why am I doing this again? Is this really going to pay off? When we went to go get a mortgage for our house that we just bought here, I was like, why am I doing this again? This is a real pain.

Madison Travis:

Yeah. For real. And you're like this decision, like just up and moving. At least it's not too far. Like she didn't like move across the country. Yeah.

Matt Sloane:

Oh no. And I'm back in Atlanta like every other week. So it's not that big a deal, but you know, but just like getting a mortgage as a, as a business owner was a massive struggle. And you know, you just, you start to question like, why am I doing this to myself? But then you realize that the upside is, is huge. I mean, I've been able to be there for my kids growing up, you know? And I, I travel as much as I did when I worked at CNN, but I'm doing it for my own business for my family.

Madison Travis:

I feel like you see the immediate benefit more. And you really feel that, and you know, when people support your business, they're not just supporting your business, they're supporting you too. It's a very personal, intimate relationship that you have with the work you do each day. Yeah,

Matt Sloane:

Yeah. Yeah. And you know, like, as he said, you know there's been times where you just like, you're looking at the mounting bills and the credit card statements. And that's the other thing too, is like, I think you, you just have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I mean, we've had every credit card maxed out forever and you just you know, somebody called it the visa round of funding you know, you haven't taken any investor money yet, but all of your credit cards are maxed out. So, you know, it's just, that's, I'd never once carried a balance on a credit card before I started this company. And you just have to get comfortable being a car.

Madison Travis:

Yup. A hundred percent. Well, Matt, thank you so much for going into today. We are so excited to see you, what Scott fire does here at the B2C. We're looking forward to seeing you guys grow and just to hear about how much you love in Huntsville. We're super excited, super excited to have your family here. So thank you for coming on and we gotta have you back on in a few months, so we can hear about the exciting stuff that you can't tell us about.

Matt Sloane:

Be thrilled to hear very cool stuff.

Madison Travis:

Thanks, Matt. Talk to you soon. Take care. And that concludes today's episode. You guys. I hope you really enjoy getting to hear about Matt story and all the endeavors he's embarking on as he's coming here to the rocket city. We're super excited to see what Scott does be on the lookout for who I'm going to interview next in the meantime, make sure you're following us on all of our socials at I to see on Instagram and UHC inventions innovation center on Facebook, onward and upward.