PARAG DESAI



Director & Partner at Tradecom
Bachelor of Business Administration – Finance, International Business (1997)

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Parag was an active student in the NUS Business School, getting involved in numerous CCAs, most particularly, the NUS Bizad Club, which he committed most of his time to. He was especially involved in Rag & Flag Day as Vice-Chair of the Jam and Hop event and even held the role of Counsellor for the Bizad Freshmen Orientation Camp, which was also where he created close bonds with his juniors and still stays in touch with them even till now. Parag was also one of the first students selected for the NUS Business School's student exchange program, which he completed one semester at McMaster University. Besides that, he participated in other activities such as learning the Tabla at Centre for Arts and performing in concerts.

Apart from school activities, he did external community service activities and had the chance to do an interesting internship with a local SME at the end of his second year, which he then followed up with a project on the same company as part of his Small Business module in his third year.

BIZCONNECT

Bizad Club
NUS STUDENTS' BUSINESS CLUB

INTERVIEW

Knowing that this book will be distributed amongst the Business School community, how would you want to be known to the readers?

I am a businessman who tries to do business in a proper, fair manner and I try to uplift the employees of my company. At the same time, very importantly, I try to give back to the community. In terms of the company itself, we give back to the community by doing activities and infuse it in the way we conduct our operations. I personally provide my time, maybe a bit of my knowledge or experience to help others, be it students or others in the community to see how I can uplift everybody.

What were your aspirations? Have you attained them?

Interestingly, I was choosing between Accountancy and Business. I went with Business in the end because I thought that would give me a broader range of skills. However, in the Business community, it is not necessarily always about the knowledge, but more in the process and thinking, and the way to go about things. I thought NUS was a good choice and I managed to get into it, which provided me with the university experience of academic learning and process thinking training. Not only that, NUS helped me to meet new people regardless of faculty, which I found very important. Apart from that, I found joining CCAs to be important. When you go into certain CCAs, you meet people from a variety of backgrounds and of around the same age. As such, you would be growing up together which interestingly helps you along in life in different parts. I also joined 4 clubs just to try different things, and I tried double major at that time as well.

In the end, I gravitated towards Finance because my aspirations at that time were 2 options: One was to try out a career in Finance, which I did. I joined JP Morgan straight after that. I was in Emerging Markets; I was in Risk Management. Beyond that was then thinking about whether I should go for further studies or carry on in Finance or came the second option which was where my family had already started a business and being second generation, I thought I would go into that. After a few years in the Finance world, I took a leap of faith and went into my family business. I don't think I would have imagined where I was right now when I was a Year 1. To conclude, in a way, yes, it did fit my aspirations of hoping to get into the business which I am still doing. However, I did not know what exactly I was going to do back then.

When did you think it was time to switch to a new environment? Did you have any struggles and how did you overcome them?

When I started university and went into Finance, I told myself that it is interesting, and I like the content. When I heard about the environment of working in a bank, I told myself that is where I would like to go to get the experience of the environment and atmosphere that is created. Hence, I managed to get a job in JP Morgan where they provided me with a fair amount of training. Banks were doing much better then and had funds to train me with. I went to New York for a few months, London for a few weeks, and had training here in Singapore as well, being mentored, and learning from different people. Those training lasted about 2 years.

After those 2 years, that was when I came into a bit of a crossroad, where I asked myself: Do I carry on with the same job, because I am doing well but do I need to go higher? Next, I was thinking: Do I do a Master's since it is not a bad idea after getting 2 to 3 years of experience? The third option I was thinking of was: Do I leave Finance altogether to join my family business? The factors I was thinking of at that time were how the Finance industry was doing and it looked great. I could see myself finding ways to move along, whether in the same 'vertical' or different 'verticals'. At the same time, I was trying to project myself for the 15 or 20 years ahead. I was thinking maybe that's not where I want to be. At the same time, the family company was starting to slowly expand, and they needed people as well. I told myself that is an interesting thing to venture into, so I could give it a try as well. And based on that thinking process, I eventually turned to the family company. I came out of Finance with many colleagues and bosses wondering why I was leaving, questioning what kind of leap and risk I am taking as I had

already got a certain path there in Finance, where I am doing well and getting along with the people. They asked why don't I just continue with the job? I know I would be doing okay if I had stayed in that job, but I also found that I could do something at the family business, where it is with my family too. That is why I went into my family business.

Firstly, I struggled with the difference between working at an MNC and an SME. I did do a course related to SMEs, but that was only one small component. I went to JP Morgan which was a larger company. So, the main struggle then was to move from a larger company to a small one, that transition on how we operate, how the whole management and thinking structure work. It took me a few months to get into the rhythm of it, and trying to think in simpler terms. After a while, that struggle becomes something that you see as beneficial because you start to learn to do all these things and now 20 years later, I tell myself that it is a very good thing that I did all that. Because the fact that I went all the way throughout the supply chain: meeting the logistics companies, meeting the suppliers, meeting the customers etc., they help me to understand the entire chain.

The other struggle was about learning a different set of things because in university you learn Finance, Marketing, a bit of Human Resource (HR), but here, you have to go deeper into content matter. Since I am dealing with chemicals, additives and spare parts, I had to learn those things. In addition, lacking that background means that you have a bigger challenge when you meet your customers because they will wonder, "Why is this business guy talking to me and selling me chemicals?". You have to spend that effort to convince them that you do know what you're talking about, or you have people who have the ability to explain the kind of connection and establish a link.

The final struggle would be balancing professional and personal ties in the family company. You have to be clear about that and it takes time to figure out how it works. From the employees' view, I, or even my father did not want them to think I was being planted into the company because of family relations. I had to get the respect of my colleagues that I am here because I have something to contribute. So, I had to earn their respect by trying to make sure that I did things correctly, and then slowly evolve the company. Hence, those were the initial struggles that took maybe up to a year or two to get over with.

What are some highlights of your career in Tradecom?

One is building up the business that we are in now, which is more to do with additives and chemicals. I think I helped a fair bit to build and cement that into the company, formalising the different services that we can provide, the types of products, meeting different customers and suppliers to put those information in. Another one was constantly keeping a lookout for new opportunities, to continue to expand the business because Tradecom is in the business of providing supply chain services from end to end, from sourcing to delivery. If we can bring in new 'verticals', this will help to expand the company.

The next highlight is probably 4-5 years ago, where I, together with the rest of the family, decided to formalise more of the company. So, the thing about SMEs is that you can carry on but at some point, we realised that we have to find our identity and put it out there to people. It could be more external in terms of a logo and tagline etc. but also internal: who we are, what do we represent, what our core values are, what do we want to instil in

all the colleagues whom we have? We went through a long exercise, easily 1-2 years, formalising that information, relaying it to everyone and I think that made all of us feel a bit better, like we are kind of heading out there.

What are the pros and cons of being in an MNC and SME?

Just to clarify, my answers may be based on old information as this was 20 years ago. In a larger company, the pros are the fact that you have a bit more training and possibly more guidance. When I say guidance, it means guiding someone at various levels throughout their experience there. Training - in a sense that you will obtain more formal training. Since you are in a larger company and you've probably got many more people in the department, it's easier for a boss to send someone to training, to go and learn something new as others are able to take on someone's responsibilities. However, if you imagine a smaller company, each role has only one person to take on, so it is very difficult to do the same. Of course, there is job variation, in terms of many more different kinds of things that you could potentially go to in a company, although it may not be so easy to laterally move to these other roles. Nevertheless, if you aspire to move up the corporate ladder, there are many levels you can aspire to enter.

The first advantage of being in a smaller company is the closeness and the family culture that you can build in the company, where you work in an environment with people you feel close to. Secondly, it is the flexibility you get in a small company that does not have rigid rules. Next, you get to experience more being in charge of roles in a smaller company. Let's say you're doing logistics, and someone in sales is not there that day, the management can still cross-train the logistics employee to do a bit of sales, which normally would not happen in a big company. You would have that different way of working and culture, where you can also have a bit more breadth and length in terms of picking up more skills because you are trying out different roles. Also, you will probably have more chances to meet your customers, suppliers and partners more often. Final thing is that when you participate in the growth of the company where you feel a bit more personally responsible and personally connected, you will feel like you played a big part when the company grows since you are one out of the few in the company to make it happen.

Do you have any advice for current NUS business students?

It has always been fascinating to me how all of you learn many different things while managing so many responsibilities. During our time there was no social media, computers only came halfway through, and we were still typewriting some of our stuff. Technology has come in so much and the pace of change is much faster than before.

All I can advise is to try to keep up with the pace of change. If not, it might be tough, and you might be left behind. Do businesses you are interested in. At the same time, while keeping track of what is going on in the world, I feel that you do not have to run after the latest thing that is out there. If you like something, go for it. If you think that you can do something else or make a change somewhere else, go do that too.

As you go on in life, try to give it back as much as you can. I'm not saying that it has to be in the monetary form but just sharing what you know can help. Maybe, you can join your company's CSR programs to get a flavour of how things happen, help someone nearby or contribute to something else. It will enrich your own life as you do that. You will see meaning slowly coming into your life. Even though you might be busy, you will see that suddenly you can find time for it.

The final advice is to keep in touch with one another because it is easy to lose track as many of you go into different companies and accomplish different things in your life. However, you will be surprised at how this journey of coming together will bind you with others as you go along, and it is interesting where you meet one another each time. It could help your career or other things in your life, or it could just help you be who you are and become better. Of course, remember to destress, to stay safe and well, and keep in touch with your friends and family.