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NEXT STEP

The young and the restless

Sharif Shaham, CEO of Elite Technologies, is one of the youngest leaders of tech industry. This passionate go-getter talks about entrepreneurship, business and technology with The Daily Star.

Why step in to the technology sector?

About 30 years back some brave entrepreneurs took some bold moves to step into the global RMG sector. And now we can see how wonderfully that played out – it's the largest foreign currency earning sector for Bangladesh. Similarly, after conducting extensive research, we believe that the next breakthrough will occur in the technology sector and it is high time to invest here. Slowly and steadily, we will be able to design, develop and market premium quality handsets to the local and international market. Of course we will be collaborating with our foreign counterparts, but the innovation will be from Bangladesh. So we took a big risk and entered the technology sector.

As an entrepreneur, what are the key principles that you believe in?

Well, being an entrepreneur and starting a business or startup isn't easy. But if you are passionate enough then it's not as hard. I follow a golden rule: "Do what you love and love what you do." So we only hire and work with people who believe in what we are doing. I really believe that an entrepreneur has to take bold and calculated risks. So everyone supporting him should be on the same page. As an entrepreneur, I have to know the field I am working in inside out.

What are the steps that one should take when they intend to start up a business?

I'm going to share how we do things at Elite. The business model that we follow is a bit different



compared to others. First we do extensive research to find out how good of a business it can be and what would be the revenue in the long term. Then we do a pilot project to test our hypothesis – we call it 'the test drive phase.' If successful, we move ahead and start to set up our business. At the initial phase anyone is bound to face countless challenges. We consider that a blessing. Because the more problems or challenges you overcome, the better your product will be.

What are the challenges that you faced when you started Elite Technologies?

The initial challenge was actually

convincing ourselves – whether we should embark on this journey at all. Some common challenges were there too, i.e. setting up the company, setting up the office, developing a marketing plan, sourcing, branding, hiring the right people, etc. Starting from the small things like the official logo and font, to high stake matters like designing the product and campaigns – every part of the initial journey was a challenge.

Some say that generally a tech business requires a young CEO. What would be your opinion on that?

I don't completely believe that. Young people might be visionary

when it comes to technology, but running a business smoothly requires people who have sound business experience. A tech business should be a mix of both youngsters and experienced people.

You plan to launch several handsets in a very competitive market. How is it going to set itself apart from the crowd?

When we started our journey they were the sole thing we focused on. We made sure that each and every product got the right amount of attention, be it an entry level basic phone or a pricey flagship. We know that every user's experience

is important. All the phones that we designed were tested and operated by our top management so that we could understand and eventually cater to the need of the users. Every aspect of our phones is reviewed by global industry veterans to ensure the best possible experience. We've put up the best possible hardware at the most affordable price. We've tailored accessories and packaging keeping in mind our target group. In addition to that, we've focused on after-sales services. Most of our products are not even in the market, yet we have already opened up 30 plus service centres. We are on the verge of launching our call centre with a dedicated short code. These are some of the main things that I believe will put us ahead of our competitors.

How diverse will your product portfolio be?

We have fashioned a diverse portfolio. Our main categories will be: basic, feature and high-end. We will also be having several sub-categories, such as entry-level, mid-range and flagship.

What would be your target market?

Our first target is Bangladesh. This year we plan to spread out as much as possible throughout Bangladesh. Next year, if everything goes as planned, we will start operation in Myanmar, some African countries and the Middle East. We believe we are the only local handset manufacturer who plans to export handsets abroad. This will be a milestone in Bangladesh's business scenario.

INTERVIEWED BY:
SHAHRAR RAHMAN

WATER COOLER CHRONICLES

How to get away with murder white lies

There are times when post-scripts and clarifications need to be given at the start. So in case my boss or any potential future employer is reading this, the following story is fictitious and any resemblance to anyone, mostly me, is purely coincidental. Let it be known for all future references, I do not or have not at any point of time done any of these.

But it is no great secret that we all lie – be it the inconsequential traffic jam excuse to the "No mum, that definitely was not a female voice you heard in the background." And the workplace is no different. A generation which grew up using the excuse of roadblocks and traffic jams to cover for their tardiness does not just one day decide that waking up on time is a skill worth learning. What we forget is that it never worked on our teachers and that it won't work now, even though our bosses might not be able to send us to the corner to stand holding our ears. Hallelujah for the HR department.

Workplace lies can take many forms – but leaving out the kind which involves Swiss Bank accounts, the lies we tell everyday tend to be within the bounds of the following.

The troll ate my email

You did this when it came to university assignments. Of course you sent in your work last night, it's not your fault the boss did not get the email. Check the spam



I just got your text.

(Three hours ago but didn't want to reply)

folder maybe? Not there either, huh? Well the internet trolls must have eaten it then. Your boss must definitely get a new antivirus and let's just leave it at that.

Drop the jargon

This works if you are a slow or lazy worker and your superior is not really sure what you actually get paid to do. Drop the jargon like sleet and rain during a *kalboishakhi*. Words to know for pulling this off can range from social media hits, rendering, Giga hertz, horsepower, scheduling and so on. You get the gist.

Argh the office internet sucks

This only works when the workplace has a connection slower than that teacher who taught you Bangla grammar at school. You come in to work on time, your boss has not seen you leave the desk for hours but yet somehow nothing has been completed. Why? Blame it on the internet. "The files are still downloading; the files are still uploading; the website is malfunctioning; the computer is slow because the internet sucks here." Take your pick.

No, of course I did not JUST walk in to the office

You woke up early for once and walked into your cubicle – only to find you are the only one present. What do you do? The hard worker that you are, you go hang out with the new canteen boy for half an hour. By the time you come back, your boss is there. "Of course I did not just get in, I was taking care of some lose ends, umm, getting print outs, etc. etc. etc."

But of course, you must remember, all these are white lies as long as you eventually get the work done. And on time. Your teachers were smart enough to see through you and so will your boss. Use sparsely and use wisely. Words to remember – if this is what brings in your pay cheque, better not muck about too much.

MOYUKH MAHTAB

PROJEKT.CO

Face time with Waiz Rahim, founder of the local crowd-funding platform

So, what exactly is projekt.co?

Projekt.co is an online crowd funding website. In the past few years, we've seen sites like Kickstarter, Indiegogo and GoFundMe take off, but Bangladesh has fallen behind since many of those sites require US residency or international credit cards for the transactions. Projekt.co aims to bring the power of crowd-funding to the local community of artists, social change-makers and entrepreneurs.

Why do you think Bangladesh needs crowd-funding?

I've been conversing with artists, activists and entrepreneurs, and the one thing everyone has in common is the obstacle they face raising funds for their projects. Family members are usually the first to help but most of the time the amounts required are too much for one or two individuals to bear. Corporate sponsors on the other hand are extremely difficult to approach and usually come with a list of restrictions, thus hindering creative freedom. Initiatives such as Jaago required only a small sum of money from friends and family in the beginning but can go on to make huge social impacts in the longer run.

Take us through your startup process. Is there anything you would do differently if given the chance?

I was initially introduced to the world of crowd-funding in the fall of 2013 by my friend Arbab Mazumdar. I worked with him on a Kickstarter campaign in

Los Angeles that went on to raise more than USD 250,000 in pre-orders for odorless athletic apparel. Since then, the power of crowd-funding won me over. I've had a deep desire to bring that to Bangladesh to help empower our local community. If I were to do it again, I would have spent more time trying to build a strong team around the startup instead of doing everything myself. It's been a difficult process and I'm still looking for the right minds to bring together on this.

What are the major obstacles you faced in realising the initial idea of projekt.co?
I started working on projekt.co last summer but almost everyone told me that this would never work in Bangladesh. They said the online payments infrastructure is very inconvenient and that we didn't have enough artists and tech savvy people to make use of this platform. I chose to ignore the naysayers and went back into my cave to work on this. At every stage of the process, everyone said this was a waste of time, but there were people in the startup community who were very helpful and gave me hope when things looked bleak.

What are your thoughts on the

startup scene in Bangladesh?
I think a lot has changed in the past three years. The documentary made by Startup Dhaka played a huge role in raising awareness of the startup scene that was blooming in Dhaka. Many more people are proactively looking out for opportunities where they can disrupt the traditional ways of doing business by using technology. However, I fear that the word "startup" is becoming more of a buzzword and a "cool thing to be a part of" rather than actually trying to solve real problems and delivering real products and results.

Plans for the future? Where do you see projekt.co in a year and a half?
I want projekt.co to become synonymous with crowd-funding in Bangladesh. I want young professionals and students in schools and colleges to know that if they have an entrepreneurial idea, they can test out the market by launching a crowd-funding campaign and see if it's something people actually want. They can pitch their idea to the mass audience and we can tackle the problems in our society together. One "projekt" at a time.

INTERVIEWED BY: SHAER REAZ



HOW IT WORKS

CREATE A PROJECT

Submit your projekt details and verification documents on the site. Individuals can submit any projekt that falls under the categories of creativity, community and startups. The team will then review your submission and provide feedback to improve your projekt.



SHARE

Once approved, shoot out the projekt via facebook, whatsapp, email, etc. and share your story with your friends, family, fans and community.



COLLECT FUNDS

Anyone who wants to contribute to your projekt can use local payment options such as bKash, credit cards, bank deposits and cheques. Get excited as you watch your funding progress bar get nearer to your goal. Unfortunately if you fail to cross your funding goal, backers will have to be refunded (unless it's for a social cause).



DO MORE

Now that you've raised the funds that you need, go out and change the world. Make sure to update your contributors at least once every 3 weeks.



OLT
ONLINE
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TOOLS

Energize your career
with e-learning

Your free e-learning course
this week:

Initiating and
Planning a Project

Please visit: <http://www.oltstore.com/nextstep/>

Course overview

Initiating and planning are crucial phases in developing and executing any successful project. Companies that are embarking on a new project initiative must assign people to gather facts and decide what exactly they want to produce and how they are going to produce it. This course examines which factors should weigh in during the project selection process and how to effectively plan a project from beginning to end. This course is targeted toward a diverse range of managers and staff members who wish to acquire the necessary skills to successfully manage small to medium sized projects.