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NEXT STEP

PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF INNOVATION

Abdur Chowdhury
—innovator, co-founder, investor. These three titles don't necessarily do justice to the person we are meeting. Donning a mischievous smile throughout the interview, Abdur, former Chief Scientist of Twitter and Co-founder of Aura Frames, talks about his plans, passions, and most importantly what brings him to Dhaka.



Tell us about your journey from Summize to Twitter.

At Summize, my co-founder Eric Jensen and I were exploring our theory that real-time summarisation and sentiment analysis—looking at how people feel about a given topic—were important. Once we realised that Twitter's content and Summize's technology were a good fit, a union between Twitter's 12 employees and Summize's six was inevitable.

You were working for corporates before, including as the Chief Architect of AOL. What compelled you to switch?

I left academia because I was excited about building things that people actually used. If the natural progression of the desire to build things that people use brought me to the corporate world, the only next logical step is to build things that you think people need instead of what corporations think people need. Then you start building your own and investing in other people who are building things.

Your tech-lifestyle startup, Pushd, has several products, i.e. Steven, Aura Frames, Social Space, etc.

Which is the most promising?

Right now Pushd is solely focused on Aura Frames. We are really excited—Aura is the only example of a social platform of hardware devices that physically live in people's homes. Aura Frames takes the concept of a simple digital picture frame that allows all family members to automatically contribute photos via facial recognition. So, I can take photos of our daughter and they automatically show up at my parents' house without my having to do everything.

You have also invested in Ando, a NY-based restaurant, and Alta Vista, a school. These are so far from tech. What do you look for before you invest in any venture?

Alta Vista is a school that solves a problem—there isn't enough STEM education in San Francisco. I wanted to be part of bringing that to the Bay area because I believe STEM education is so important. We helped to create the school and our daughter is a student there.

What I look for in investments is sector or industry agnosticism. My investment thesis is the following: 1) Invest in things you think the world should have, or 2) Invest in people. Even better if you can find both in the same investment!

What brings you to Dhaka?

I'm here in Dhaka because I wanted to accompany my father to visit some of our relatives, and to support my cousin Sylvania Sinha, who is the Founder of Praava Health. I'm so excited to see what she is building here. As someone with a passion for information technology, I'm most excited that Praava is harnessing cutting-edge technology tools to deliver a better patient experience and improve access and outcomes for Bangladeshis. In a country like Bangladesh, which has only three physicians for every 10,000 people—when the UN recommends 10 physicians per 10,000—the best way to improve access to healthcare is to leverage technology to improve efficiency in processes and access.

Praava is bringing Bangladesh its first patient portal, which will allow you to access medical records, make appointments, and communicate with your doctor on your phone (through an app) or through Praava's website. You can even upload your medical records from other facilities to the portal, allowing you to have all of your medical records in one place.

From an entrepreneur's point of view, what do you think is going to

be the next big thing in Bangladesh?

The biggest challenge for entrepreneurs seems to be access to capital. It's time for venture capital to come in and see Bangladesh as a promising market for investment. By all measures, it should be seen as such, but I know Western markets still perceive Bangladesh as a risky and unknown frontier, even though Bangladesh is at a critical juncture in its economic development as one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

I can see on this trip what Sylvania has been telling me for awhile—if you're someone who wants to build or create something, being here feels like being a kid in a candy store. There is tremendous need and opportunity as well as a talented and growing workforce that is ready for the future. The most challenging obstacle is convincing investors that the local financial and banking institutions will welcome and facilitate their investments in this market.

INTERVIEWED BY: SHAHRIAR RAHMAN

Engineer-turned-writer, Shahriar Rahman is Sub-Editor of the tech publication of The Daily Star. He also leads Kutumbita, a social impact startup.

THE BOSSMAN BY E. RAZA RONNY



Get hands-on early

Kids these days are on top of their ECA game. But doing extracurriculars relevant to your dream job is more important than bulking up your CV, according to Ajeyo Rohitashwo ~ Al Quazi, Group Chief People Officer at aamra companies. "If you're considering a career in HR, it's important to be involved in extracurricular activities that require communication and thinking. HR is a thought-driven function," he advises to students who are about to enter the corporate world.

On the other hand, Sabbir Hasan Nasir, Executive Director at ACI Logistics Limited, suggests youngsters who want to build a career in retail to develop their tech side too.

"We require various skills in our day-to-day activity. So I think everyone should at least have some basic skills, i.e. IT, graphics design, programming, etc. Try to develop these

skills; it will invigorate your resume!" he explains.

And on the marketing side, Aftab Mahmud Khurshi, CMO of Bengal Group of Industries, emphasises the importance of building your personal brand. His advice to a young professional is to not be a bookish person. "To be a successful marketer, you have to know the market as well as the culture besides the theory. You need to have business acumen and some natural in-built talents. Reality is different from the books," he shares. And that means staying updated on recent trends, always: "People engagement is the future of marketing and innovative engagement models are coming up every day."

Age isn't the only thing that gives you an edge

People often believe that experience requirement is a hindrance for moving up in their careers, but Rohitashwo says, "It's not only age

that gives you an edge. Your personality and intention to learn also matter. These two complement each other. One makes you agile and able to act, the other makes you think strategically." The right attitude and willingness to learn are what make a young candidate a strong one.

Rubaba Dowla, Co-Founder and Managing Director of PlusOne Services and former Chief Service Officer at airtel, points in a similar direction: "You have to look out for what is happening around the world. For gathering knowledge, do not keep confine yourself to the Bangladeshi context. Go global. Especially in the telecom industry, we are constantly looking for innovation." When asked what skill sets would give young grads an extra edge in the work force, she believes getting things done on time makes all the difference. "In university, you are given an assignment that needs to be

completed within a month or so. In the corporate world, things need to get done right now. So it is always a race with time," she says.

Put out your real self

According to Rumana Rahman, Head of Human Resources at BAT Bangladesh, the worst thing somebody could do at a job interview is project a different self: "The people on the side will know. We are not looking for clones. We are looking for individuals who bring a difference." By not being your real self, you're missing out on an opportunity to make a mark, because even if you make it through the door, the organisation might not be the right fit for you.

Solaiman Alam, Head of Marketing at Grameenphone, also advises youngsters to not oversell themselves at interviews: "Frankly speaking, if you are in your early 20s, it's obvious you haven't con

quered the world. The interviewer doesn't expect that either. Just be yourself. Be confident, try to highlight your strengths, let them know what values you can add." But he adds that recruiters love to hire a person who has made an impact. Why? "Because despite being a fresh grad, he or she has proved himself or herself amongst peers. We consider them achievers," explains Alam.

Know what you're getting into

It's expected for a graduate fresh out of uni to feel like he or she has been cast into a vast ocean, but it's also your job to figure out how the whole system works. "Before anybody gets into a job, they need to understand the industry, the company, the roles, and the responsibilities. Do your research before you actually get involved in a job. Make

sure you do not confine yourself to the text only," recommends Rubaba Dowla. According to her, after the initial shock, some persist—they learn and adapt in a short amount of time, and this is of paramount importance if a young grad is to cope with the stress of the corporate world in Bangladesh.

And it's equally crucial to know how to behave in such a confluence of people, clients, and organisation, Dowla adds. "When you are working for a company, it is not only your skills, but also your attitude that plays a role in your success. If you are not able to work in a team then it might be over for you. No company will keep you, even if you are the best resource."

AMIYA HALDER

Amiya is In-charge of the career publication of The Daily Star.

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