



ACHIEVERS

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The IIM Lucknow Alumni Association's "Achievers" series seeks to highlight profiles of IIM Lucknow Alumni. This month, we bring you **Sonjoy Mohanty, CEO, A Little World**. Sonjoy is an alumnus from the Class of 1987, the very first batch of IIM Lucknow.



In an interview with the Alumni Committee, Sonjoy shared his career path post IIM L, some of his most memorable moments on campus, challenges he has faced and advice for budding managers. Following is the detailed interview.

What has been your career path post IIM Lucknow?

Asian Paints is where I landed straight from campus, where 7 years of competitive learning and a large extended family like relationship was experienced. There could not have been a better foundation to the long journey ahead with stints in Field Sales, Branch Operations, and Marketing, teaching me the basics of business in the India beyond the large cities.

Making a strategic shift in my career, I decided to learn and understand the power and value of a "Brand" and hence switched to a MNC where "Brand" drove the core of building value of the business. The next 5 years were in Shell and ICI Paints, where as Marketing Manager, one drove the value of powerful brands like "Dulux" with a slew of launches across India backed by innovative new "customer solutions" aimed at the end user starved for services.

Then post a 4 year stint in building the "Lubricant Business" for Caltex (now Chevron), came the most decisive shift by joining the "telecom sector". With a stint of over 5 years in key roles as Chief Marketing Officer & Chief Officer – Customer Acquisition in Airtel, building scale and managing a 100% growth year on year easily proved to be among the most exciting times.

At Airtel, I launched the “Lifetime Prepaid “ product which heralded a paradigm shift in the industry and saw India delivering annually over 100 Million new additions – the largest in the world.

Post a 2 year stint as MD & CEO in a listed entity with operations in India & the US, where I got focused on P&L and building shareholder value, I moved to my current role. In my current role as CEO of ‘A Little World’ - a Mobile Banking and Mobile Payments (www.alittleworld.com) firm, we are looking to build and deliver a similar scale (100 Million customers) in Banking and Cashless Payments for the “Unbanked in Rural India” through the mobile platform. We currently manage over 6500 “Branchless Banks” covering 10,000 villages having over 3 Million customers for SBI and 24 other banks across 19 states of the country. These technology driven bank branches are being used to deliver basic banking services, via “biometric authentication” with a large part being used to deliver disbursements of government schemes like NREGA and SSP. We add 1000 new bank branches and 0.5 Mn customers on a monthly basis. This is an activity, at the “bottom of the pyramid”, in a manner which brings a huge change in people’s lives and hence is extremely humbling and a satisfying experience.

“At Airtel, I launched the Lifetime Prepaid product which heralded a paradigm shift in the industry ”

What do you think has been IIML’s contribution to your success?

The Institute’s Director, Prof Ishwar Dayal, taught me to strive for excellence in the face of very stiff challenges. Also being the 1st Batch of the Institute, we lived through the pleasures and pains of a start up organization. That learning has stood me in very good stead, while working in a “start up phase” for an organization.

How do you see the future of Micro Banking in India? What are the major challenges?

Banking is a natural progression of any economic activity. Micro banking which is aimed at “banking the unbanked” is an activity which today has come of age primarily for 2 reasons. First, the Government wants to disburse its benefit programs to beneficiaries only via “bank accounts” to ensure that the benefit reaches the correct person. Secondly, banks understand the power of “banking the unbanked” due to the opportunity that arises for services like domestic remittance and insurance. The challenges of delivering “Micro Banking” are all that comes while working in Rural India where we have an absence of infrastructure, power and literacy.

What opportunities do you foresee for IIM Lucknow's students and Alumni in sectors like Micro Banking ?

IIML students must quickly intern in this space and grasp the opportunity that exists in this sector – 400 million unbanked customers are out there, in a sector which is recession agnostic. There is a huge opportunity to build value and wealth while working at the bottom of the pyramid, and hence try and take up opportunities at such organisations to help understand the same. This will finally play out a similar story to the mobile uptake in the country.

How has been your experience as a student at IIM Lucknow? Any special memories related to institute, professors or friends which you would like to share?

Experience at the institute was hugely impressionable to say the least. It taught me to work and achieve in an unstructured environment (as ours was the first batch and the infrastructure was clearly developing).

Prof Dayal, and his pursuit of excellence, Prof Chakrobarty, and Prof Krishnakumar for the passion in the way they delivered their course contents, is something that has remained with me and is what I strive to achieve in my work today.

One incident that I would like to share is with Prof Dayal. Our course load was very heavy (10-12 hours at the least). I met him in my role as the Academic Secretary and complained that “all work and no play, makes Jack a dull boy”. He replied with a question. Which side does the sun rise in the morning ? I answered “East”. He asked “ Why ? “ I replied “that is a given!”. “So is the course load, so plan your play activities around it” was his answer. It is amazing that how once we accept a given we learn to plan around it.

Being a small first batch of 27, I am in touch with most and have some very fond memories of the times that we spend together, though the “bania clan” of Atul Gupta, Rahul Gupta, Sanjeev Gupta, Saurabh Gupta, Sanjay Mittal, Deepak Mathur are the ones that I meet the most often.

Having been a CEO, can you share some of the challenges you have faced in this role?

Driving a new sector has its thrills and challenges, especially while working at the “bottom of the pyramid”. Clearly there is a huge opportunity to build value there and it comes with its challenges, which are primarily: a) Building operational scale to be replicated at the village level b) Carrying all the stakeholders, Village Panchayat, Block Officers and Bank Officials and employees c) Finally, building a sustainable Business Model which pans across sectors of banking, services and products.

“Driving a new sector has its thrills and challenges, especially while working at the bottom of the pyramid”

Do you have any advice for the students currently on campus?

The institute provides valuable building blocks of learning, which will consistently be used to fall back upon. Those concepts need to be strengthened as much as possible via the summer internship and continuous dialogue with seniors/alumni. They must use the Alumni Network to get more clarity.

The other thing that they must do is to pursue a sport or and have interests outside of the area of work. So often it is this game/activity which helps to bond a conversation/relationship that then evokes enough interest to take things forward.

What steps do you think IIM Lucknow should take to bring it on par with the best B Schools of the world?

In any thing that we want to achieve we must have a plan with a definite set of initiatives that help achieve the plan. For a start we must define how we would like to “position IIM Lucknow”. Once we come to a conclusion on that, then everything that we do must continuously, help to build and reinforce that “positioning”. This done consistently will help it stand out and deliver, making it a “Top Dog” among the Business Schools across the world.

Finally, improved structured interactions between the alumni and the institute can take this cause much further.

Presented By
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