



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 **Prof. Kaushik Sengupta**, Associate Professor, Hofstra University. Prior to this he worked as Solutions Lead Consultant at i2 Technologies for over 5 years. Kaushik has a PhD in Operations Management and MS in Business from the Indiana University - Kelley School of Business. He majored his MBA in Operations and Finance from IIM Lucknow in 1991. He also holds a degree in Mechanical Engineering from the Jadavpur University.



In an interview with the Alumni Committee, Kaushik spoke about his career path post IIM L, some of his most memorable moments on campus and his advice for the budding managers. Following is an excerpt from the interview.

What has been your career path post IIM Lucknow?

My career path after IIML, I would say has probably been quite different from those of many others. I joined the Eicher group after graduation but by the time I completed the PGDM I had a fairly clear idea that I was going to pursue higher studies. So, that took me abroad to Indiana University in the USA for the Ph.D. exactly one year after completing the PGDM. It took the next 5 years to complete. A year before the completion of the doctorate, I started teaching at Michigan State University.

After the Ph.D., I joined Bucknell University as a tenure-track Assistant Professor. Around that time, I started getting interested in supply chain management as a research topic. The field of Operations Management was quickly evolving into broader supply chain issues as outsourcing increased and complex solutions were possible to develop because of the lowering of the bar for technology through faster computers and the internet. I was primarily interested in analyzing how the industry solutions for supply chain improvements were being developed and implemented at various companies. However, because of strict proprietary restrictions on the solutions being provided by the companies of the day, it was not possible to get much information regarding what the companies were doing without being on the inside of one of the companies.

Hence in 1998, I quit academics and started working for i2 Technologies which was an upcoming company in the supply chain space and had gained quite a good reputation within a short time. I spent the next five years at i2 first as a solutions consultant, then as a solutions manager and finally as a solutions team director.

Consulting in client companies was probably the best part of this since it gave me a broad exposure to a number of different companies within a very short period of time. However, my plan always was to get back to academics one day as I wanted to pursue a longer term career in research and teaching. So, in 2002, I joined Hofstra University and have been there since.

You chose to go for further studies after your PGDM from IIM Lucknow. What was your prime motivation to do so?

Early on in the PGP programme, especially the first two terms, I was a little lost in terms of my interests in a major. I did not find Accounting or Marketing that interesting and although I liked Finance better, I somehow had a feeling that I was not going to be building a career in Finance. When I took the Operations courses, especially the 2nd required OM course and the Materials Management course, I discovered that this function really was intriguing because of the complexities involved in running a company's operations and because most of the investment of any company resides in this function.

There were a number of areas within this function which addressed various aspects of running an organization efficiently. This interested me and I was curious to know further about the function from a conceptual and academic standpoint. It helped that two of the three PGPI OM courses were taught by (Late) Prof. S.P. Dutta who was visiting IIML from the University of Windsor that year. He was a very enthusiastic teacher and kind of was instrumental in attracting me to the area. I remember having several discussions with him in his office (especially during the Materials Management course) about possibilities of pursuing further studies. Because he was from a Canadian university, it helped to hear his views about the Ph.D.

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programmes there and in the U.S. My interest in the Operations major was further enhanced by the electives that I ended up taking in the 2nd year. Prof. Rajiv Srivastava joined IIML that year (1990) and he taught two new OM electives, Advanced OM and Manufacturing Systems Design. Because the OM major was small, it was a luxury to get these courses from Prof. Srivastava – I remember that the Ad OM class had about 12 students and the MSD class had about six! I got to discuss a lot of the concepts on a one-one basis with Prof. Srivastava. These together with a few other courses like the Quality Management class from Prof. Chakraborty and a subsequent CIS class from Prof. Srivastava really laid the groundwork for my subsequent Ph.D. in the area.

So I guess the primary motivation for pursuing higher studies came from the excellent professors and the variety of courses offered in the Operations area in the two years I was at IIML. The professors were excellent enough to attract me to the function, and the broad exposure I got to the function from these classes helped to shape my decision for the higher study.

Teaching does not seem to be on the mind of a fresh MBA grad these days. What are your thoughts on the same?

It is true that teaching as a profession is definitely not on the mind of a fresh MBA grad, and this line of thinking hasn't really changed much over the years. Having said that, I would also like to point out that a majority of the business faculty who have migrated from India and are currently teaching in various U.S. universities are IIM grads. So there are quite a few others like me who have chosen this as a profession. I would say that, as a fresh grad, if you are really intrigued by the intellectual complexities associated with a business function, and if you like the prospect of being on the other side of the classroom, than teaching may be the profession for you. The curiosity to analyze business problems and finding new solutions or new angles to existing solutions for the issues is obviously the key to any research.

The teaching profession is really a mix of research + teaching...you will need to like both and you have to do both to have a career in it. It is of course a legitimate choice for a career like any other – however, you really must want to do the Ph.D. before you choose to do it...4-5 years of one's life to the Ph.D. is long. How good are the prospects? I think that given the number of business schools that has mushroomed in India of late, there is a dire need of good professors. The demand for such professionals would therefore increase given the future growth of these business schools.

What do you think has been IIML's contribution to the career path you chose?

I don't think I would have become a business school faculty without the IIML education. The courses I ended up taking and the professors who taught these courses had enormous influence in making me choose the career path that I did. Most of the professors like Prof. Chakraborty, Prof. Srivastava and others had been mentors to me early in my career and I still maintain good relations with them by visiting them periodically.

Can you share some of your experiences as a student at IIM Lucknow?

We were a much smaller group then although we were the first batch to go from 30 students to 90 students. We were in the Aliganj campus (if you could call it a campus) and we were all in individual hostels around the area. Aliganj was literally at one end of the city at that time and it used to be hard sometimes to get an auto to come to Purania Chauraha especially after a late night movie show in Hazratgunj. Nights at the Sitapur Dhaba and at the coffee shops and restaurants in the Hazratgunj area were regular affairs.

Weekend parties, dancing to the beat from a new music system (which conked out the night of its first party), birthday parties, watching the World Cup 1990 football final in the night at the students' mess and then biking back to the hostel in pouring rain, cranking out a week of exams with little to no sleep, having kali-mirch chicken by the Charbagh train station, hot breakfasts with idlis and dosas on weekends at Mami's, hosting Manfest, rough rides on the back of a truck on an unpaved 3.4 road to see an empty field where the future campus would be...the memories are endless. It was a great 2 years which had shaped me in more ways than I thought.

Any special memories related to institute/professors which you would like to share?

The institute building was small with only two floors...even with that we managed to have classrooms, faculty offices, admin offices and the students' mess there. I was dubbed as Speed's protégé (Speed was (Late) Prof. S.P. Dutta's pet name from the students) because of my inclination towards OM as a major. He had a very animated way of teaching with a lot of exuberance and almost seemed like an orchestra lead with his long blackboard pointer.

I remember Prof. Jha during the Marketing case discussions – he would ask a question about the case and the class would be totally silent because nobody knew how exactly to respond to his query. His pet question then would be, "have we pushed the numbers?" Needless to say, many of us would not have done that...making (at least) some of us even more clueless about the case.

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Prof. Chakraborty's quizzes in his brown packets was just something you had to experience as a student – when he would give a quiz was totally unpredictable. We thought we could figure out by whether he would be carrying his brown packet or not – except that at some point during the course, he started bringing in the brown packet to class every day. Some days he would take the quiz out of the packet at the beginning of the class, so that was actually good because you got it out of the way and you could relax for the rest of the class.

But on other days he would just keep the packet on the table without of course giving us a clue as to whether we will have a quiz or not that day....you kept guessing until the end. One day, I remember he had given a quiz at the beginning so everybody was relaxed after taking it...he went through the class discussions and ten minutes from the end...pulled out one more quiz from his packet...that completely floored everybody.

Any advice to students currently on campus related to research as a career option after graduating from IIM Lucknow?

You have to be intellectually curious and have a desire to explore the conceptual, theoretical and analytical aspects of a business situation or problem. You also need to be comfortable doing a lot of reading (of academic papers), introspecting and you need to have the ability to link various areas such that research ideas can be generated. Every student at IIML has the latter skills since you have qualified to be at IIML through the CAT already. It is the former which would determine whether you want to pursue research and teaching as a career option.

This year's batch at IIML comes with a substantial amount of work-experience .What do you think of this trend?

I think this is great and I wonder why this was not done sooner. Students with varied work experience bring a wealth of information and varying views to the class discussions and I am sure this year's batch of students have benefited from this during the class discussions.

What are your thoughts on the current economic slowdown?

This current slowdown is different from previous ones because it has affected so many different sectors of the global economy. The other thing that has happened is that the downturn unraveled in these different sectors within a very short time so people didn't have the time to react to one incident before another set of incidents appeared. Many have been predicting that we will get out of this by the 2nd half of 2009, but I feel this will last longer, may be until the middle of 2010. From the U.S. perspective, the housing market has to first stabilize; second, consumers would have to feel more confident so that they start buying because the American consumer really drives the entire economy; third, companies would have to start hiring again. As you can see, all three are interlinked with one another since companies won't hire until consumers start spending again and consumers won't do that until they are assured of their jobs. There isn't a strict sequential set of events that would lead us to out of this slump making it more complex to figure out when this is going to end.

In the Indian context, this downturn is a new phenomenon for many. Come to think about it, a generation of working professionals in India (say from 22-35 year olds) have never experienced an economy going through a recession like this. Salaries have risen by leaps and bounds and people have gotten used to the good amenities of life and practically anything that is available elsewhere is available in India now. People need to realize that with the boom times comes bad times too and this is one of those cycles which is turning out to be really bad. People would just have to adjust their expectations to match the reality. Finance majors can probably expect not to have too many high paying jobs in banks for the foreseeable future. Adjusting to the reality is a must in these times.

This downturn has also provided a different kind of check on all of us. Many of the current students may think that once they got into an IIM through the grueling CAT, their life is made and everything including jobs would be offered to them on a platter.

This may not be true in general. Efforts need to be made by every individual student to see that he/she makes the best effort they can give. Graduating from an IIM gives you the brand recognition but how you utilize the brand would define who you are. Therefore, things like arrogance and unethical practices do not have a place in today's business world. We have seen recently several examples of the demise of people in high positions with this attitude of arrogance and unethical practices and you surely don't want to inculcate such an attitude.

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Good corporate behavior would go a long way in shaping up your career – if you do this, the money part will automatically come, but don't make the money part an end onto itself. If you look at the likes of the top executives and the companies that have fallen hard in recent times it was greed which

lead to unethical practices coupled with arrogance for a period of time over which the perpetrators may have thought they could get away with this....only to fall flat on their faces: you surely don't want to fall into such a trap.

What advice do you have for students who might want to look at USA as an option for further studies/research/job opportunities?

The current downturn has lead to significant unemployment, and therefore, finding a suitable corporate job there from India may be difficult as there are a great number of highly qualified professionals who are currently without a job. Opportunities for higher studies exist as universities need business faculty and therefore they need people who would need a Ph.D. for an academic career.

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There are not many direct research opportunities as there is no concept of a post-doctoral position in the business schools. If you intend to do the Ph.D., it is a lot easier today to research on suitable schools and programmes than used to be the case when I was applying to universities abroad in the pre-internet era. Of all the factors that constitute a good application, make sure you know what research the faculty in a school is currently pursuing – this is important from the standpoint of knowing what type of research you would probably end up doing for your thesis and will shape what you put in your statement of purpose. Similar to getting an excellent corporate job, admission to a good Ph.D. programme means a mutual fit between the interests of the applicant and the research expertise of the faculty in the specific school.