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Strategy Consulting In India with Jay Desai

JAY DESAI MBA'89

decided to pursue an MBA from the Atkinson School after completing a masters degree in molecular biology. If Desai had continued with his academic interest in biology, he might not have followed his heart back to India, where he felt there were fewer opportunities in the pure sciences.

"I interviewed with a few companies," Desai, founder and chief executive officer of Universal Consulting India Pvt. Ltd., said of his return home to a pre-liberalized India in 1989. "Recruiters always asked me, 'Why did you not stay and get a job in the U.S.?' 'You should not have come back.'"

But Desai went back with a sense of his own future in India.

"I felt that since I was an Indian, I should be living and

in Mumbai and, after five years, left to start up his own management consulting firm.

Desai had saved up just 50,000 Rupees, or about US\$1,000.

"That was not even enough to buy a laptop," he said. "I had to borrow money from my family to get that first computer."

"I had a view that there was a market for management consulting services for mid-sized companies," Desai said of those first few months. "I did what I wanted to do; I didn't worry about whether it would succeed or not."

"Seventeen years later, Universal Consulting is the largest home-grown strategy consulting firm in India with more than 60 staff, 270 clients, 700 cases conducted and offices in Mumbai and New Delhi," Desai said. The firm works with

contributing to India," Desai said. "I was aware that opportunities would be limited, but on the other hand, the social fabric of family and friends would be very strong." Management consulting was in its infancy, and the industry and the potential learning opportunities were attractive to Desai.

He immediately went to work for Andersen Consulting

multinational corporations and mid-to-large sized Indian companies in the life sciences, industrial products, capital goods, financial services and rural markets.

Desai said consulting is a profession that involves a lot of thinking, reading, analyzing and communicating.

"It's an extension of graduate school really," Desai said.



Desai also picked up a passion for teaching passed down by his professors at Willamette, especially Professor Mike Hand. This led Desai to make internal staff training a strong focus area in his firm.

"What struck me most about the atmosphere (at Willamette) was that it was a smaller school and there was more interaction with the professors — which was really good for me," Desai said.

Desai continues his academic pursuits, earning an Advanced Management Program (AMP) degree from the Harvard Business School. He is also on the verge of publishing a book on "accountability in India's public administration and governance systems."

"My research was triggered by the government's response

to the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks," Desai explains. "This has only served to enhance the argument for more accountability and integrity in India's public sector."

To Indian students studying in the western world, Desai's message is simple: "India is complicated and uncertain, but it is the future. I would urge them to come back to India, since the country requires all the talent it can get," Desai said. "Over the next 10 to 20 years, I don't think any other country can come close to providing the opportunities that a rapidly emerging India will." 📌

—*Timothy Akimoff*