

# Mark O'Donnell

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## Figuring It Out

When Mark O'Donnell and his brother, Tom, decided to launch their first business in 2007, they had one simple goal in mind: they wanted to rule the world. Emboldened by their youthful ignorance of traditionally-accepted limitations and by a storied lineage of world-famous jugglers, Guinness Book of World Records holders, and Irish Australian aboriginal roots, they were going after it. "Our wives called us Pinky and the Brain," Mark laughs now. "Our company, Validation Inc., was growing, but not at the breakneck speeds we wanted. Revenue of \$2.5 million after two years just didn't seem good enough. So we decided to really amp up our outreach, sending out postcards and emails relentlessly."

One postcard ended up on the desk of Michael Khavinson, who at the time was running a healthcare life sciences company with Kevin Martin. Their firm, CimQuest Vantage, operated in a similar yet complementary space as Validation Inc., so the four business leaders decided to sit down for lunch one day. Upon hearing about the young brothers' goal of world domination, Michael suggested that the surest way to get there was to develop an exit strategy and build a company worth selling. That sounded like a good enough idea to the O'Donnells, so the two companies decided to merge. With that, Azzur Group was formed in the summer of 2010.

Looking back, Mark recognizes that dogged pursuit of power and success as a sprint to fill a void. "When you don't know your unique ability and your God-given talent, nothing is ever enough," he reflects. "At that time, we didn't know why we were on this earth. We didn't know what our 'why' was, so ruling the world was what mattered to us. We wanted to compete and win. We were hurtling at full speed to find out what was next."

When the four partners sat down in the

summer of 2010 to define Azzur Group, they resolved to build an organization around who they were as people and how their dynamic naturally flowed. It usually starts with Mark and Michael dreaming up a crazy vision. Tom then tests the idea to see how it might be translated into reality, and Kevin takes the lead in sales. "The idea was to design a business that simplifies processes for our clients, allowing them to have one point of contact that facilitates the entire project," Mark explains.

First conceived as a compliance and consulting firm, Azzur Group has since evolved into a private equity firm of world-class life-science companies. With its name derived from the ancient Hebrew root meaning "the helper," it provides the capital, resources, and support small businesses and entrepreneurs need to achieve excellence in the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device industries. In 2012, they resolved to start utilizing mergers and acquisitions to supplement their growth and reach their critical mass. They launched a suite of businesses for the firm, and as they brought on ownership partners expected to uphold the business's brand, Mark and his team implemented the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS) to provide a platform for cohesion.

"We had discovered the system while meeting with the President's Small Business Advisor at the White House, where we crossed paths with a guy named Jonathan Smith, an EOS implementer," Mark remembers. "I read all I could on the system and then enrolled in EOS boot camp, where I was thrown into a room with eighty people all as passionate as I was about building businesses. It was like heaven. The experience was perfectly in line with my unique ability and what my passion is in life."

To test the system out, Azzur Group made a majority investment in a marketing firm. They



already had five client companies at that time, each operating on its own schedule of entrepreneurial development and chaos, so Mark set to work methodically implementing EOS across the individual organizations. The firm also brought on Jonathan Smith to act as the facilitator that would bring Azzur Group as a whole through the process. "It was an amazing experience being the implemented and implementer simultaneously," Mark says. "We've been growing ever since, and now we implement EOS not only for entrepreneurial organizations, but also for large Fortune 500 healthcare and life-sciences companies."

Since its formation, Azzur Group has grown 630% percent, landing it a spot on the Inc. 5000 list four years in a row and bringing in \$30 million in revenue for 2015. Mark's primary company focus within the group, Azzur Strategy Execution (ASE), now has 22 clients and is on pace to hit \$600,000 in revenue. "Whether I'm working with the leadership of a small business or a division within a large Fortune 500 company, I focus on the difference I'm making for each individual person," he says, of his work at ASE. "Am I making their lives better and helping them free themselves from what's holding them back? Are they leaving behind their past so they can see a clearer vision for their future? Are we crystallizing that future and showing them their role in executing that vision? We do the work to identify their unique ability and God-given talent—self-awareness that's absolutely critical to job satisfaction. Once you find those things, you never work a day in your life."

After working to clarify the vision of a company's leadership and getting everyone in the organization on the same page, ASE shifts its focus to execution. Taken together, Mark's work through this process facilitates success by providing leadership with new thinking and learning tools that transform the way they view the world. "There's nothing I love more than sitting around a room of leaders and having them go through a series of 'aha' moments as they suddenly see the light at the end of the tunnel," Mark says. "It lights me up to do this kind of work."

Today, Azzur Group is a powerhouse with Consulting, IT, Labs, Engineering, Technical Services, Strategic Execution, and Workforce verticals. Yet at its core, its success is derived from its fundamental commitment to discovering and

delivering. Instead of offering fixed services that risk being square pegs trying to fit into the round holes of their clients' needs, the company asked what the clients want. And every time a need is identified, the Azzur Group response is, "We can figure that out."

It's an audacity derived from the rugged individualism that has been a cornerstone of Mark's character ever since he and Tom were young boys, riding their bikes miles and miles from home to explore unknown terrain. Their father had been in the Air Force, while their mother was a nurse. Mark was born in 1978 at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where his parents lived for a year before moving to Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, to be near family. They stayed put for almost six years, and his father took on a series of odd jobs to try to make ends meet. "My father was extremely motivated, but I remember that times were tough," says Mark. "We had home foreclosures and cars repossessed. Thankfully, my dad found he had a knack for engineering disciplines. He started doing time studies at a lamp factory and discovered he could find valuable efficiencies in engineering workflows."

Mark's father landed a job as an engineer for Raytheon, which promised more financial stability in the long run but also more moving around. He was constantly relocated from project to project, so that by the time Mark was 23 years old, he had lived in over forty different places. Every nine months, like clockwork, the family would pick up and move to the next place, so they never really developed attachments to physical objects. "I think it helped us overall because we didn't have all the mind clutter that can accumulate when you hold on to things," Mark says. "We had more freedom to focus on the now, and on the future."

When Mark was in fifth grade, the family moved from Pennsylvania to South Carolina, where his father began working his way up the Raytheon ladder in earnest. He eventually became an industrial engineer charged with building a Caloric manufacturing facility. At the time, his mother was working as a nurse, and the kids were hopping from public school to public school based on their father's work location. "We'd spend three months at one school, then five months at another," Mark recounts. "I didn't finish a full year of school from fourth to seventh grade."

When Mark reached high school, he, Tom,

and their younger sister were homeschooled, which left a lot of time for the brothers to go off exploring on their own. They would hop on their bikes in the mornings and ride 30 or 40 miles away, figuring out any issues that came up and adventuring with a self-sufficiency rare for their age. “Even back in those days, it was my brother and me, taking on the world and just figuring it out,” Mark recalls. “We weren’t boxed in by the cultural norms you get exposed to through traditional school, so we thought it was completely normal to fend for yourself and figure things out through winging it. When I had to take a semester of calculus, which my mother knew nothing about, we bought a calculus book with money we earned through delivering newspapers and woodworking. We taught ourselves how to do the complicated math, and when we submitted the work to the evaluator at the end of the year, we found that we had done great.”

Through high school, Mark’s father was slated to work on the Savannah River nuclear facility in Georgia until the project was canceled, at which point he switched over to the healthcare life-sciences, where there was a high demand for engineers who could understand documentation. In that capacity, he worked on projects in Indiana, New Jersey, Philadelphia, and then Ireland. Mark was 18 at the time and had just finished his high school equivalent, but he was discouraged from going to college, as his parents thought it wasn’t needed. He opted to go to Ireland with his family, where they lived for a year. His father then returned to Pennsylvania to settle down at last, taking a job with Merck, a pharmaceutical company.

Later, as a 23-year old business student at Albright College, Mark went out to a concert one evening with his brother. The keyboardist and drummer in the band was a lovely young lady named Rachel, who was studying at Shippensburg University nearby. Shortly after graduating, the two got married, and Mark took a job with Johnson & Johnson. At that time, his goal was to excel at the company to the point that they would send him to law school. The fast-paced, chaotic culture of their biotech company, Centocor, was a perfect fit for him, and he loved every minute of his 60-hour workweeks. Then, as Johnson & Johnson began to wind down the subsidiary’s projects, Mark transitioned over to GlaxoSmithKline, a startup facility where he again

assumed the role of star performer and managed around a dozen contractors.

Then, Mark got a call from Tom, asking if he wanted to start their own business. It would be just like those days riding their bikes as kids – they would figure it out. With that, Validation Inc. was born. “We didn’t know the financial environment we were heading into at that time,” Mark says. “All we knew was that we could do the work better than anyone else. We were the perfect blend of ego and ignorance, knowing just enough that we could be successful but not so much that we recognized the risks enough to back away.”

Rachel was incredibly supportive of the leap, always willing to give Mark the freedom to pursue his ambitions and figure out how to make it work. Even when Johnson & Johnson tried to coax him back by offering him a considerable promotion and the chance to launch a new facility in Ireland, she understood the need to start a business of his own. “Rachel and I decided to design our life around how we wanted it to be, rather than letting it be dictated by what others wanted from us,” he says. “Starting Validation Inc wasn’t easy, and I didn’t get a paycheck for the first six months we were in business, but Rachel was always understanding and willing to take care of everything at home with our three kids, creating the space for me to do the things I needed to do with the business. In startup mode, things at work were chaos, so that made a huge difference. Also, I’m full speed ahead, whereas she reminds me to slow down and consider how my choices are affecting the team as a whole. Her presence in my life has been so incredibly helpful in all I’ve worked to accomplish.”

Today, Azzur Group has a tone of underdog victory to its success—the product of two young kids who jumped into the fray of entrepreneurship because they didn’t know any better. And, thanks to Tom’s ability to see the potential in all people, the firm is known for taking on employees that might be overlooked by other firms based on how they look on paper. “Watching our team members honored at the Inc. 5000 awards, we love that we’ve been able to give them the platform to do things they didn’t think were possible,” says Mark. “Bringing people in like this has been a great thing for me, as I used to be the rugged individualist way out front who was always the tip of the spear. My leadership style has evolved to be much more team-focused, and that’s

really paying off." Azzur Group is also committed to supporting the work of Chad Juros, the cancer survivor and budding magician who launched a foundation to bring magic shows to hospitals, Spread the Magic.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Mark quotes Aristotle in stressing the importance of knowing thyself. "The sooner you can identify your unique ability and God-given talent, the sooner you can focus on that and not be distracted," he says. "Beyond that, don't let people tell you that something can't be done. In knowing your own abilities and your own will, you know better than anyone what you can bring to the table. You have much more power over defining what's possible than many people are able to see, so believe in your vision. Set to work figuring it out, and you'll be well on your way."

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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