

# Daniel Cohen-Dumani

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## The Bridge to Better

In 1982, *Time* magazine gave its coveted “Person of the Year” award to the home computer, marking the first time in the publication’s history that the recognition was given to an inanimate object. But it would still be many years before the personal computer truly took hold, and critics wrote the machine off as a useless fad. Fourteen-year-old Daniel Cohen-Dumani, however, saw the potential.

It wasn’t common for Swiss parents to send their children to summer camp, and Daniel can’t be sure why his decided to sign him up for a three-week sleepaway program focused on computers. But it was a decision that forever shaped the trajectory of his life. “I learned how to program, and it was this brand new world,” he remembers today. “There were no classes in computers, and there was nothing to learn with. I loved that feeling of being at the very forefront—a place only technology can take you.”

Now the founder and CEO of Portal Solutions, an IT consulting firm that specializes in improving the way businesses work, Daniel has used his expertise as steel and his entrepreneurial spirit as trusses. His company bridges the gap between the status quo and the potential of a business, allowing clients to cross the divide and stand at the edge of technological advancement, where he has always felt most at home. “Our goal is to get them to a better place, which is reflective of my whole life philosophy,” Daniel says today. “I’ve always been a person that hates the status quo. I love the constant change of exploring new technologies and discovering how they can improve things. The world is constantly changing, and there’s always a way to do things better, so I’m in the business of helping people use change for the better.”

Daniel launched Portal Solutions in May of 2002, just after the tech bubble had burst. He had two children at the time, with a third on the way,

and had always considered the idea of starting his own business. Daniel was working as the CTO of On-Campus Marketing at the time, where he faced the challenge of getting the company’s 150 employees across three different locations to share information internally. He worked with his team to create an intranet—an internal website primarily used for posting company data. “The company was selling goods, and multiple employees needed to be able to see the transaction numbers simultaneously,” he explains. “This technology is commonplace now, but back in 2000, it was very novel. So we built something from scratch with a team of developers.”

The product served its purpose but was difficult to maintain. Around that time, Microsoft released SharePoint, a platform for uploading and sharing documents. Daniel decided to implement it, but the software was exceptionally complex, and Microsoft did not yet have the customer support infrastructure to provide assistance. Daniel saw the

opportunity to consult on his own, and he went for it. “I’ve always been a hands-on person,” he says. “I like to get out there and do things, so it happened pretty naturally. I found a client and got myself listed in the partner directory of people doing SharePoint. Businesses started calling me for help, and in no time I was working 60 hours a week.”

With the goal of creating a practice to improve the way organizations work with web-based technology that connects content, data, and people, Daniel began hiring contractors. “We still have the same mission today that we started with in 2002,” he says. “We try to stay focused on our core, which we do well, without straying too far from that. We’re in business to help change and revolutionize the way people collaborate. We help companies figure out better solutions through designing, solutions implementation, support, and



training.”

Despite this focus on a core mission, Daniel’s customers turn to the company for expertise in addressing a whole host of problems under the productivity IT umbrella. Often, they struggle with a disorganized or disoriented communication system, where documents are not stored properly and employees create partial fixes in a decentralized manner that don’t work with the overall system, ultimately doomed to be forgotten. “Many organizations come to us because they find that their collaboration culture is broken,” Daniel says. “Especially those organizations that are geographically dispersed or have people working from home. We like to start with a strategy that defines where we are and what the pain point is, and lays out where we want to be, clarifying the perfect end goal and how we’re going to get there. It can take months or years to get the organization to move in the right direction, but that’s how the transformation starts. We lay out a roadmap and then execute, phase after phase after phase.”

For some clients, like one non-profit of around a thousand people, the work can focus around the automation of business processes. The Portal Solutions team puts together a document management and retrieval system and also trains the client on rigorous use of a grant tracking system. “We’re a project-based company,” Daniel describes. “These projects typically take two or three of our people and last for a period of three to six months, though some of our customers rely on us to continue supporting their projects on an ongoing basis. That’s part of creating a unique solution for each of our customers based on their specific needs and strategy.”

Portal Solutions is now a team of 37 people focused primarily on serving the local commercial market in the DC area. The company acquired a small office in Boston in 2012, where they have a team of nine people. The company believes in the power of the Digital Workplace, confident that they can work effectively from anywhere. Best practices are chronicled in their blog, “Digital Workplace Today,” where they discuss the company’s commitment to flexibility and telecommuting.

Portal Solutions targets mostly mid-sized to large enterprises that need to improve productivity and efficiency, with numerous clients in the non-profit sector and in the professional services space like large government contractors,

consulting companies, and trade-based organizations in industries like healthcare and the life sciences. The company now has a footprint across sixteen states, reaching prospective customers through online marketing, white papers, ebooks, blogs, and podcasts. “While we focus on thought leadership, we don’t have a sales team,” Daniel explains. “We educate the marketplace, and people will come to us if they see value in what we convey. I think this approach is one reason we’re still a small company, but it’s important to us to ensure that we’re a good fit for our clients. Changing the way a business works is not easy, and we want to make sure we’re the right fit for a potential client before we take them on.”

Daniel always imagined he’d start his own business because, as a child, that’s all he knew. “My father owned his business with his father and two brothers for as long as I can remember,” Daniel says. “Growing up in a family of entrepreneurs and business owners, it kind of became second nature. They’d take us kids into work and we’d play at the office like it was our own house. Always somewhere in me, I had a dream of starting my own business when I grew up.”

Daniel’s parents were both born in Egypt, and were part of a large population of Jewish Egyptians that left the country in the wake of the 1952 Revolution. Both families were in the commodity trading business, and both left Egypt in 1956, when his father was sixteen and his mother was twelve. Switzerland, known for its stable political climate and its active commodity trading scene, was a natural fit for both families. His father, a hardworking and optimistic young man, went into business trading peanuts and married his mother, who was in college studying political affairs when she gave birth to twins—Daniel and his sister. Their brother was born four years later.

Daniel remembers his city, Lausanne, as a quiet, tight-knit community in a country roughly the size of Maryland, where he was never far from family. His childhood was spent playing soccer and keeping the rigorous study schedule demanded by Switzerland’s school system. Academics didn’t interest him much as a kid, and because he particularly struggled with Latin, he failed his ninth grade year—a common occurrence in Europe, where classes are repeated until the student achieves the average grade. “I had a great

math teacher, an old man who was about to retire, who saw that I was capable—I just didn't test well," Daniel says. "He took me under his wing and said, 'Okay, you're going to have to redo the year, but I'm going to give you the opportunity to help me teach because I don't want you to get bored.' So I taught math with him, which was a great experience. I developed a kind of love for teaching—something I'll probably pursue in the next phase of my career."

Daniel made his first buck as a DJ at age twelve, playing the parties of his parents' friends. And as the children grew up, Daniel's mother got involved in local politics, serving first on city council and then on state council. "She's incredibly fair, and even though politics can be a toxic environment, she's never said a bad word about anyone," Daniel says. His mother ultimately became the mayor of Lausanne and served in the Congress, while also running an association. Meanwhile, his father and uncles, who also modeled a strong work ethic, started automating their commodity trading business. They became so efficient that the bank couldn't keep pace with the payment processing and asked for their help. With that, Daniel's father created a software business in the late 1980s and early 90s, with the idea that Daniel would study computer science and take it over someday.

After developing his technological proficiency at the computer science camp, Daniel knew enough to take on a summer internship at Digital Equipment Corporation, a large US-based company with its European headquarters in Geneva, where one of Daniel's uncle held a leadership position. At age sixteen, he spent those three months living and working with his uncle in Geneva, absorbing all he could about what it meant to be in the tech business. "It was just as the personal computer was taking hold," Daniel recounts. "They cost between \$10 and \$15 thousand at the time, so nobody had them, but I got to play around with them, familiarizing myself with the very first versions of software we still use today." The following year, he interned with his father, where he gained more exposure to computers.

Upon graduating from high school, Daniel enrolled at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, where he was among the first graduates to major in computer science. In Europe, college is public and free, and most young

people attend school in the city where they grew up. Everyone with a high school degree can get in, but then selection narrows the classes down each year to only the best students. "College was hard," Daniel recounts. "I actually failed my first year, which is not uncommon because only 20 percent of the class passes. You get another chance if you fail, so I decided to focus on studying over partying, and I did well."

All through college, thanks to the urging of his parents, Daniel worked part-time with a small computer consulting company. "One thing I'm really grateful for is that my parents always pushed me to work outside of school—not just to earn a living, but more so that I could experience interesting things," he says. "That job through college got me really engaged and interested in how a small tech business operates. So while I was learning in class, I was also learning real-world valuable lessons about client interactions. It was an opportunity to put my skills into action, which really helped to define me and my future career."

When he graduated from college, Daniel was recruited by Andersen Consulting, where he worked from 1993 to 1997. During that time, he was sent to work on a project in Paris, where he met Lisa, a colleague from the firm's Washington, DC office. "I was having a great time there as an ex-pat, having just met my future wife," Daniel recounts. "I was living the life until I got a call from my father. He fired his two partners from his computer business and wanted me to come join him. It wasn't what I had planned—I wanted to stay with Andersen another five or six years, and I wanted to stay in Paris with Lisa. But he asked me to come, so I quit Andersen and went home."

Fortunately, Lisa was able to get relocated to an Andersen project in Switzerland, so she made the move. Daniel and Lisa married, and Daniel went into the computer business with his father. The family's trading business wasn't doing well at the time either, so his uncles joined the computer business as well. "Lisa loved Switzerland and thought we'd be living there forever, but my father got in a big fight with his brothers," Daniel says. "I saw that running a family business can be a nightmare, and I decided I was done with it."

The European economy was faltering in the mid-90s, and Daniel had always looked to America as the place to be for software, so he posted his resume online and began getting calls

from Washington, DC. He landed a job as the CIO for ExecuStay, a large corporate housing company in the area, so the newlyweds decided to make the move in 1997. “We thought we’d return to Switzerland after a couple years, but here we are, still in the DC area all these years later,” Daniel says. “We had our first child in 1998, and now have four kids—three girls and a boy.”

During his tenure at ExecuStay, the company was doing around \$25 million a year. It went public and was then acquired by Marriott in 1999, allowing Daniel to experience what it was like to be part of an even larger organization. It was a good experience, but the corporate management structure didn’t allow him to be as hands-on as he would have liked, so he left in 2001 to take a job with On-Campus Marketing, a \$30 million company headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland. He worked there for just under two years before launching Portal Solutions.

Realizing the dream of starting his own business meant working against the grain of his introverted nature, forcing himself to network and be more outgoing. But with Lisa’s support, he pushed forward. “Looking back, it’s crazy what we did,” he laughs. “We had a mortgage and two kids, with our third on the way. But she always believed in me and knew we’d be successful.” Daniel and Lisa return to Switzerland on a regular basis to visit family, and since their kids have gotten older, Lisa has expanded the visits into family trips across Europe. She got so skilled at organizing the adventures that her friends began asking for her help in planning their own vacations, to the point that she now operates her own home-based travel business.

Daniel’s company began making money six months after its launch, and everything went well until 2012, when he decided to acquire the company in Boston. Shortly after the acquisition, Portal Solutions’ core business began to falter—a delayed reaction to the economic downturn of 2008. “We don’t build mission-critical applications,” Daniel points out. “Companies can live without us if they really have to. So for the several years after the recession, companies were deciding to put off the priorities that we advised should be addressed. Potential customers were focused on keeping their heads above water, not making investments in refining their processes to become more productive. Right after we made our acquisition, we really started to feel the effects of

that, which were made worse by increasing competition.”

Looking back, though, Daniel recognizes his own inexperience as a factor in those off years. “When you start a business and you grow every year, you feel like it’s always going to be like that,” he recounts. “I had no one telling me, ‘heads up, you’re going to hit the wall one day!’ I thought we’d just keep growing by 20 percent each year. It really caught me by surprise.” Fortunately, Daniel had joined a CEO group, Vistage International, just before the acquisition. In listening and learning from the problems shared by the group, and in weathering his own storms, he learned the importance of planning for the worst while hoping for the best.

Daniel had never been a risk-averse person, but he transformed 180 degrees, virtually overnight. He became overly cautious for several years, and now tries to strike a healthy balance between the two approaches. “When you go through tough times, it’s hard not to be risk averse,” he says. “2011 was our best year, but then things changed in 2012, and I had a family to think of. But I’m working hard to get back to that optimistic person I was, with a more insightful perspective that’s ready for anything.”

Outside of Portal Solutions, Daniel has served many years as Vice-Chairman of the Board for the Tech Council of Maryland, while also volunteering with General Assembly, a for-profit university that teaches people how to work in tech startups. The organization teaches web design, data sciences, user interface, and other high-demand skills that are often left out of college curricula. The Cohen-Dumanis also support the Brain Tumor Trust Fund in honor of Lisa’s father, who passed away from the ailment in 2012.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Daniel warns against an entitlement mentality, and underscores the importance of mastering the art of common courtesy and cordial conversation so crucial for all relationships. Beyond that, his example demonstrates the importance of thinking several moves ahead and approaching life with an optimistic, positive sense of constructive competition. When it came time for his very first employee to move on from Portal Solutions, the man gave Daniel a chess board, reminiscent of more than just the games that were frequently played in the office. “Like that employee, the gift

meant a lot to me,” Daniel recounts. “It represents a lot of who I am. Chess is about logic, anticipation, strategy. It’s the idea that there’s always a path to victory, one way or another, and if you lose, you start over. I’m teaching my son how to play now, and it really resonates with him too.”

Now, as Portal Solutions moves forward, Daniel sees it as a place where his employees can learn new technologies and skills to use for the benefit of their clients. He promotes a culture of independence and personal accountability that revolves around flexibility and fairness, very much in the spirit of his European roots. With visionary leadership, he charts the course and entrusts his COO with the work of executing. “I love when I see my clients’ lightbulbs go off and they really understand that our job is to help them be a better business,” Daniel says. “Portal Solutions is a team of people who are incredibly passionate about what we do, and about what we empower our clients to do. We’re passionate about success.”

Most central to this idea is not the technology itself, but the people who use it—something that has come to surprise Daniel about his work over the years. “Working in tech, we’re necessarily at the edge of innovation, where things are constantly changing at a rapid pace,” he says. “In the past, we’d train our teams in something new and then have several years with that

technology, but now it seems things are turning over every six months. It can be very challenging for a small business with limited resources. But I’ve found that when you stay true to your core, it’s easier to ride the waves of change around you. And for us, that core is all about people—their pain points, their goals, their potential. Through technology, we build the bridge. But it’s people who ultimately walk the bridge, and people that we care about most.”

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