## Ashwani Mayur

## The Power of Perseverance

India has undergone sweeping changes over the past several decades that have brought signatures of modernity to its cities and economy. But when Ashwani Mayur leaves America to visit the place of his childhood, a small rural village ten miles from the closest town in the northern reaches of the country, the developed world remains hardly a whisper. Farmers still tend to the fields with the same antiquated types of tractors he learned to drive when he was eleven years old. When he was young, few left the village.

But Ash's father, a physics teacher at a college in the nearby town, wanted something more for his children. When his daughter entered eighth grade, she began leaving the town for the village to attend school. When Ash was old enough, he began doing the same. The children traveled first by rickshaw each day, and by bicycle once they were old enough. Others in the village gossiped about the choice, so out of the ordinary. But after the Mayur children made

education a priority, others in the village began sending their kids to town for schooling too.

But while education in the town was still a vast improvement over lessons taught in the village, processes for evaluation and testing were still lacking. Ash had been moved up several grades in elementary school because teachers thought he was smart, which meant he entered eleventh grade at fourteen years old. In India at that place and time, eleventh and twelfth grades were taught at the town's college, and there was no accountability or guidance to ensure students had proper study habits. In the college where his father had been a top achiever, and where his father now taught students, Ash failed a mathematics exam. "I still remember the look on his face when he approached me about it," Ash recalls today. "He arranged for me to be evaluated by a colleague, and it turned out I knew all the material. I didn't understand what the problem was."

The next year, in twelfth grade, Ash received an almost perfect score in the same subject. Sitting back in his chair, he realized for the first time that he was intelligent, after all. The issue, at its root, had been one of perseverance. "If you simply paid attention in class, you could be an average student," he recounts. "If you put in the extra effort and studied, you could excel. I understood that my success in life would be a

matter of how much hard work I was willing to put in."

Upon completion of his senior year, Ash was admitted to one of India's top engineering colleges—a distinct honor. His hands shook as he signed his registration. "I never dreamed I could do it," he says. "At that time, all parents in India hoped their kids would become either engineers or doctors. My father had gained admittance to a top engineering school himself, but he couldn't afford to go. It had always

been his dream for me to become an engineer. That moment meant a lot." Now the co-CEO of Cynet Systems, a staffing, recruiting, and placement firm based in Ashburn, Virginia, Ash has triumphed over both geographic expanses and professional hurdles with patience, persistence, and perseverance to achieve more than he or his family ever thought possible.

Originally launched in 2010, Cynet began to gain traction in 2012, and now focuses on staffing and placement in the realms of IT, engineering, and healthcare. Named by *Virginia Business Magazine* as a Fastest Growing Company of 2016, it works with systems integrators undertaking large projects for customers of their own—projects with set requirements that call for certain talent (program managers, projects managers, testers, developers, or other experts in a given technology, for instance) in a certain location



who will work for a given rate that fits the overall budget of the undertaking. Cynet has a team of fifteen account managers based in the US, who pass the requirements to its workforce of around a hundred recruiters operating in India. These recruiters comb databases of US workers to find candidates that fit the bill, and then make the initial contact. The account managers then follow up with the candidates, acting as a liaison between the individuals and the systems integrators to ensure all requirements are met. The workers are then supervised by the account managers onsite throughout the duration of the project.

Cynet also works directly with small government contractors, swiftly supplying a workforce when bids are won and resources must be scaled quickly to deliver. Its workers are sometimes hired on for permanent placement by the companies they serve, and Cynet also specializes in making critical placements at the executive level. The company has grown to \$32 million in annual revenues since its inception, and it is projected to do \$45 million this year. It supports large systems integrators across thirty states, providing staff needed on the various projects in play.

Given the nature of the work, Ash is constantly on the phone with employees across the nation—one aspect of his job he particularly appreciates. "When I spend that time on the phone with people, it's important to me that we develop that personal touch beyond the professional relationship," he says. "Some of our employees have worked with me for over ten years, thanks to that genuine connection. I love combining that constant interaction with the power of technology in serving our clients."

Ash officially joined the company in April of 2015 to serve as co-CEO alongside Nikhil Budhiraja, who has proven to be his perfect complement. "We have opposite strengths and weaknesses, which works very well," Ash explains. "When it comes to finding the perfect person for a job or delivering a resource, his mind is ideal. But when it comes to HR, legal, finance, or our subsidiary operations in India, those things fall in my wheelhouse."

The co-CEOs make it a point to meet every Sunday evening for around three hours to discuss areas for progress and to strategize their next moves. Because the daily routine of the company is so hectic, they barely have time to talk throughout the week, rendering the Sunday meetings invaluable. It was during one such meeting, for instance, that the co-CEOs observed the trending slowdown in IT, and decided it would be fruitful to pursue work in the healthcare space. "Once we created and perfected our recruitment engine in a given domain, we knew it would be optimal to replicate it across other domains," Ash explains. "Healthcare is the next frontier for us."

Poised at the edge of a new tomorrow, it's hard to believe that Ash started his life half a world away in a village that still feels caught in an earlier century. Growing up in Northern India, he lived in a modest home with his parents and older sister, as well as his father's younger brother, sister-in-law, and their three children. The kids went to school together in the neighboring town and then came home to study. The village installed its first telephone line when Ash was seventeen, and though they had electricity, blackouts often left the children studying by lamplight in the evenings.

Ash remembers the great lengths his father went to ensure his children received an education. "At that time, the general mindset was to finish your education as quickly as possible so you could start a job and get settled," he recalls. "Of course, my path didn't exactly pan out that way." When Ash graduated from engineering college in 1993 and landed his first job in New Delhi in a factory that built small compressor motors for air conditioners, he quickly got the feeling that it wasn't what I had envisioned for my future. "I decided I wanted to switch to IT, so I quit my job after six months and moved home so I could spend nine months preparing for the standardized exam that would grant me entry into that field," he says. "It was a terrible time if my life, studying twelve hours a day and doing nothing else. Then all the pressure culminated on the day of the test, which was only given once a year. I cracked under the pressure and failed."

Dejected, Ash returned to New Delhi to live with friends and apply for jobs. It took him six months to land an electrical engineering job—the very kind he had hoped to leave behind. But he wasn't ready to admit defeat, and while the obvious door to IT remained closed, Ash found a window into the sector via a small company that agreed to take him on as free labor. For the next eight months, Ash worked his day job from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM and spent the hours of 6:00 PM to

2:00 AM—as well as weekends—working at the IT shop, learning as much as he could. Finally, in 1997, he landed an interview with one of the largest IT companies in India, and after clearing the technical test, he sat down with the HR department. "I was four years out of college applying for an entry-level job," Ash says. "They asked if I'd have a problem working alongside people younger than me. I told them I could have chosen to do something else those past four years, but I was truly committed to IT."

With that, two and a half years after Ash initially set down the road to switch career fields, he landed his first IT job. It had been an incredibly trying period in his life—one through which he cannot recall finding any occasion to laugh. But the strength of his persistence outlasted the strength of his sorrow—a quality he attributes to his father. "My father lost his mother when he was eight, and his brother was only four," Ash recounts. "He never had a mother, so he was responsible. There was a lot of struggle, but he remained committed, whether it was studying or working the fields or caring for his brother. I never saw him start something that he didn't finish, even if it took hours or days or months to get it right."

The perseverance laced in his DNA compelled him to ask his project manager for any extra work that needed doing. For the next year, Ash often worked sixteen-hour days, doing all he could do to make up for the years he had lost. "Now, I think back on that time of my life and remember to always be humble," he says. "Things can go wrong at any time, so you always want to have new targets in your life—things you're striving for. I've always been able to achieve what I've wanted to achieve in life, but sometimes it takes a longer than I think it will. So I've learned to work even harder than I think I'll need to work."

Ash worked in that capacity for a year and a half and married Reetu, a young woman working toward her masters in English literature. The two discussed the possibility of emigrating to the United States, a land of new opportunity. "I think somewhere inside, I knew I hadn't yet reached my potential," Ash explains. "I felt there was something left for me to prove, and a higher level for me to achieve. America was the place to do it."

Thanks to his electrical engineering background, Ash was given the opportunity of a lifetime when a company offered to bring him to

the United States as a software developer on an H-1B work visa in 1998. He went to work doing IT for staffing and consulting on a project in Florida, and Reetu joined him after several months. When the contract ended a year later, he picked up a new project in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the couple was blessed with a baby son. When that project terminated, he was put on a contract in Sacramento. There, the couple was blessed with a daughter, and Ash obtained his green card, which allowed him to work independently. "The timing wasn't great," Ash reflects. "That was in the early 2000s, just as the IT boom was ending and 9/11 struck. Every IT company was laying people off. But I had been a contractor for a startup in California for almost a year and a half, and they offered me a full-time job."

That lasted for six months, until the company was forced to let half its employees go. Ash didn't see it coming, but he immediately jumped into solution mode, setting up interviews with different clients. "There were hardly any jobs," he recalls. "I was thinking, what should I do? I knew I had a better chance of finding a contracting position than a full-time position, so I focused my energies there. In just under two months, I found a contract at Capital One in Richmond."

Ash had ten days to pack up his life in Sacramento and make the cross-country drive to Richmond—an item on his bucket list he had always meant to cross off at some point in his lifetime. "I knew I wanted to drive across the country—I just didn't know it was going to happen that way," he laughs. "But it was a great journey and a great experience. And after that drive, every drive looks short. It changed my perspective and how I look at things."

Ash handled the Capital One contract for a year and then took a contract with Fannie Mae in DC. It took a month to find an apartment, so he would make the 2.5 hour commute from Richmond to Herndon and back every day. One day, he happened to stay the night at a friend's place and met his roommate, who had a day job but was also running a small company. "In that moment, something clicked in my mind," he says. "I decided I wanted to start my own business. I knew IT consulting and staffing inside and out, and I had seen those companies grow from small startups to successful businesses. I asked him where he registered, how he did it, and what CPA

he used. The very next day, I called that CPA and said I wanted to open a company."

With that, Ash became his own business in 2003, instructing his clients to bill the company instead of him, personally. "That was a life-changing moment for me because, anytime I had thought about my life and what I wanted to be doing twenty or thirty years down the road, I always imagined having a management position in some company," he explains. "I never imagined I could be an owner, yet there I was."

Despite the profound shift in mindset, life stayed more or less the same over the next eight months, until Ash came across a manager who was looking to fill a specific technological need. Ash was able to provide the solution, opening up new doors for him and officially branding the company as Apposite Solutions in 2004.

Over the next four years, he found a partner, and the two developed a close friendship as they grew the IT company to 110 employees and \$10 million in revenue. "I didn't have a business degree, and none of my family had ever been in business, so I knew we had to figure it out ourselves," Ash reflects. "We felt that success was about having great processes in place, and we figured big companies had those processes, but there was no easy way to access that knowledge. So we did our best and implemented what seemed good to us, one process after another."

When Apposite was acquired by a company out of Georgia in 2009, the same year Ash received his citizenship, it was more like a stamp of validation for the efforts the partners had undertaken over the years. Their processes didn't have fancy names, but they got the job done competitively and effectively, and were among the best. Ash continued to work for the acquiring company for several more years. He then transitioned over to Cynet, where they set to work implementing Apposite's successful processes and avoiding the mistakes they had made in the past. "When you're a small business, you want to do everything yourself," Ash points out. "You want to be HR, sales, and everything else. But when you grow, you need to sit down and consolidate everything, identifying the leaks in the system and what processes are effective. We did a good job of that at Cynet, ensuring we were offering the absolute best solutions to our clients."

Now, Ash leads Cynet with a spirit of collaboration and a focus on empowering others.

People and Process have been the cornerstone of the company's success, and Ash has invested heavily in building up his team. He grants employees full authority to carry out tasks as they see fit, and asks only that they be transparent and direct in instances of snags or mistakes. "Communication is very important," he says. "I don't mind if mistakes are made; I just want us to resolve them as quickly as possible and learn from them." The sentiment is an echo of his mother, who was always incredibly patient and inspired Ash never to lose his temper or overreact.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ash underscores the importance of surrounding yourself with people who have qualities you aspire to adapt. "When you can look down at others, it's easy to be happy," he says. "But if you want to grow, you need to be looking up. So find a circle of others you can look up to. Whenever I meet people, I remember that I'm still a student, and there are so many ways to grow as a person. If I like a quality in someone else, I try to capture that and implement it in my own life." It's a piece of advice that stems back to his days as a kid in school, when lack of exposure left him unaware of what he was truly capable of.

In coming to America and in being as engaged as possible as a parent, Ash hopes his own children are never held back by such lack of awareness. He credits Reetu for her steadfast support and unwavering commitment as a mother through their early childhoods, always gracefully occupying the kids in the next room when Ash needed time alone to master a mind-numbing new technology for work. "Through the ups and downs, she always supported me," Ash reflects gratefully. "She has an artistic hand that benefits everything she touches. And she took care of the kids all through their early years, making sure they had everything they needed."

When Ash's son was in sixth grade, however, Ash saw a unique opportunity to give him something he might not get otherwise. The boy had been playing basketball since he was in second grade, and he was the standing center for his school's traveling team. Having observed the kids, coaches, and parents closely for the past several years, Ash encouraged him to take the ball, dribble, and shoot. His son objected, saying his coach wouldn't like it. "He asked what I knew about it, since I had never played basketball

before," Ash recounts. "But the next year, he came to me one day and said, 'Dad, what you said last winter makes sense."

Now, every time father and son drive home together after a practice or a game, the boy asks Ash what he did wrong and where he can improve. And Ash's daughter, a young basketball player herself, is also starting to warm up to the idea that her father has some insightful wisdom to share. "I love basketball because it's become this avenue for bonding with my kids," he says. "Those debriefs have become part of the process, assessing how to get better and better. And talk of technique invariably gives way, later on, to talk about life, friendships, school, and anything else going on with them. Those bonding moments with family incredibly important, especially immigrants - and not just as a parent, but also as a person."

For Ash, it is this love for genuine relationships that has translated into good business. "I have learned that people give people business," he explains. "People really go into business together not because of the actual business, but because of the individuals that make up a business. The process exists only to support the business, and people are at the heart of every transaction. Both in my family and my work, these authentic relationships have led to trust, camaraderie, and connections. When you leave your home country to come to America, you have so much to gain and are so aspirational, but you also leave a lot behind. That's why, when my parents visit us every summer, we focus so much on nurturing the relationship they have with my kids. We may live far away, but like anything in life, we can succeed if we work hard."

Whether making a foray into a new career

field, creating a life for yourself in a new country, solving a problem professionally, or building a relationship with a family member, Ash's story is a telling tale of the power of perseverance-a resilient virtue. It's about an awakening, a realization of the breadth of his potential, and the power that comes in knowing it. Perseverance engenders resilience, which had carried him through the troubled times: years of trying, long hours of hard work, and moving cross-country or across continents. Regardless of the circumstances and challenges, it's about never giving up. It's about continuing to trust in himself and his goals and striving to do better with each step—a magic formula to be repeated indefinitely, even after the last basket is made, the game is won, and the lights go dark on the court at the end of the day. Because there will always be another game, and another way to improve.

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## - By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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 and Gordon's Blog.

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