

Ben Edson

Close to Something Bigger

In his modern and pristine DC office, Ben Edson keeps an old black-and-white photograph of scruffy, unkempt children lined up in front of a truck and caravan in Argentina. Ben was one of those kids, and the truck, caravan, and campground beyond were what he called home. “For four years, we traveled around preaching the Gospel. We put on shows, were homeschooled, and didn’t have much beyond our faith and each other,” he recalls. “It was a hard life, with cold showers, no indoor plumbing, and laborious chores, but it was certainly a coming of age that developed a lot of character.”

Allen and Katherine Edson, Ben’s parents, had met in Israel. He came from a Jewish background, and she was an atheist, but together, they were born again Christians. Wanting new names to symbolize their new faith, they became Philip and Ester Quenchnot, shortening the surname to simply Q. Committed to preaching the gospel all over the world, they started in Iran, where their first child was born, and then moved to Italy, where Ben was born.

The Qs moved to Greece shortly thereafter, where they had another son, and then to France, where they had several more children. They weren’t funded by any organization or church, but rather lived by the grace of God and others. At five years old, Ben helped raise money by selling Christian pamphlets on the streets of France. He and his brother would ask for donations, and when they handed the funds over to their father, they were allowed to keep ten percent. “One of my earliest recollections is standing outside the local shopping center, receiving a 10-franc coin,” he recalls today. “I put it in my eye and winked with it, and my father was so proud. I remember that sense of monetary worth and achievement, which helped me understand the value of money and develop an air of responsibility at an early age.”



Now the founder and CEO of VariQ Corporation, a technology services company with core competencies in cyber security, software development, and IT infrastructure, Ben’s path has diverged from the religious, purist, and simple life of his upbringing. Yet the values of his childhood are sown into the fabric of his life today, both personally and professionally. “As an adult I’ve developed my own belief system, but this invariably comes from the values I grew up with,” he says. “We’re surrounded by influences on a daily basis, and we build our values based on whether we absorb, reject, or modify those influences. Personally, I’m very positive-minded and tend to see value in all I touch, so I do a lot of absorbing rather than rejecting. I find that mistrust limits potential—a philosophy that underpins much of VariQ’s success and our ability to broaden possibilities while still making sound decisions.”

The truth in this sentiment is memorialized in the very name of his company, which draws the Q from his surname growing up. Ben didn’t learn until later in life what the letter stood for, or what the word meant. “Quenchnot was taken from a Bible verse in I Thessalonians—‘Quench not the Spirit,’” he explains. “Also, from the time I was little, people remarked at the various things I was interested in, or my very enterprising nature, yielding the ‘Vari’ in VariQ. In a sense, it means embracing new experiences while maintaining family inclusion as a strongly held value.

Ben and his team specialize in the design, integration, and operation of high-end systems for large enterprises. The company’s excellence and integrity have landed it a spot on the Inc. 5000 list for five years running, and its 75 percent compound growth rate through that timeframe earned it the 25th ranking in Washington DC’s Fast 50 Companies list for 2014. Today, VariQ has 170

employees and another 130 full-time subcontractors, up from only 28 total employees in early 2012 and only two employees in 2008. For the five years prior, it was just Ben. “I still feel that we’re just a startup and we’re close to something big,” he remarks. “It’s the same feeling I had when I was five years old. It’s the motivation that drives me to take on new challenges.”

Ben officially launched VariQ in 2003, but the company’s roots extend back to the day he decided to leave the missionary organization. He didn’t feel spiritually called to evangelize, nor did he feel the pure and selfless drive to help humanity, and he was wary of the marked poverty that had defined his young life. He was, first and foremost, a doer—driven to go out in the world and actively pursue his limits or lack thereof. “I had a sense that, in the business world, I’d be able to sustainably drive my own future, and the future of others,” he remembers. “When you lead an organization to success, you get to elevate an entire ecosystem.”

VariQ’s technological excellence is a reflection of Ben’s lifelong fascination with technology. Though he grew up in a modest environment, his father sometimes splurged on electronics, and Ben taught himself to touch type on his father’s electric typewriter when he was eight. When his father got an Apple IIc computer, Ben fought for time on it with the nine siblings he had at the time (his family would later grow to 15 children).

Some of his most profound memories, however, revolve around moments that cast the human condition into sharp focus. As an eight-year-old in Argentina, he observed how, no matter how poor they were, adults had to have coffee. With time, he came to understand how subtle currents of addiction can shape lives. “We lived off of donations and food, eating what was given to us,” he remembers. “But this thing called coffee was a must-have. For a period of time, nobody could afford any, but someone had donated 50 kilos of wheat in a bag. I remember watching in horror as some of the adults charcoaled the wheat kernels and then filtered it through a sock just so it would seem like coffee. The same wheat was also cooked for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I knew I didn’t want to be that way in life, so attached to things that I would go to such extremes. This mindset created a strong sense of independence in me, which allows me to operate regardless of

external factors.”

Ben’s defiant, independent nature gave him the confidence to venture forth on his own at age 14, when he left home to attend boarding school in Buenos Aires. By that time his parents had divorced, and his mother had moved to northern Argentina. The school was a self-sustaining ministry-driven establishment. Scholastics were not a focus for my age group—rather, students learned trades like construction, yard care, childcare, kitchen skills, and farming. When Ben turned 16, his responsible and reliable nature earned him the lead role at the farm, where he manually milked cows, tended to the livestock, and plowed fields with horse and plow. That same year he was given a thank-you letter from a manager he worked with, spelling out the superior’s thoughts on Ben’s future success. “When someone trusts in you, you tend to want to prove them right,” Ben reflects. “Having the opportunity to shoulder responsibility early, and then having a mentor articulate his confidence in me in writing, was really transformative. Having someone believe in you is a truly powerful thing, and I still have that letter.”

Aside from trade skills, the school also focused on deep-dive studies into Biblical teachings, where students performed conceptual analyses into ideas of character and ethics. “We had an entire training on the nuances of negative thinking,” Ben explains. “We explored topical areas like trustworthiness, honesty, productivity, caring of the weak, and the importance of team. Our time was extremely regimented, down to when you went to sleep, when you woke up, and how long you showered. I cared less for some ideas, and more for others, like adapting the good habits of punctuality and the ability to understand and work with people of all different temperaments.”

After learning and developing a great deal, Ben decided to end his stay at the school at age seventeen to move into a service center that produced Christian literature and media materials sold in homes throughout the country. There, he had the opportunity to work on production and IT for the first time, and also immediately took over the operation’s finances. In this capacity, he realized that the home was \$3,000 in debt—a figure the likes of which he could hardly fathom at the time. “I didn’t know how to handle it,” he remarks. “In my family, there was no such thing as

debt. We always lived within our means, and I was faced with a huge responsibility I didn't know how to cope with. I had a mental breakdown over the situation—the only one I've ever experienced. I was depressed and disengaged for two months, though I ultimately adapted. To this day, VariQ doesn't carry any debt, has no investors, and keeps the management ecosystem streamlined and as worry-free as possible. I've always considered money to be something you respect, and something to manage responsibly."

When he turned 18, Ben and his older brother decided to see what the United States held for them. "It was a hard choice for us because we were raised believing the U.S. wasn't a mission field," he explains. "It wasn't a place where lost souls existed, so there was no reason to go." With \$20 dollars between the two of them, the young men flew to Miami with a duct-taped suitcase. An uncle paid for them to fly to California and then to Minnesota, where their grandparents were. Ben set his sights on obtaining a social security card, a driver's license, a bank account, and a birth certificate, the cornerstones of a rooted American life. Having previously finished only an 8th grade equivalent education from his homeschooling, he tested and earned his GED when he was 18, but college wasn't a focus at the time—in fact, it discouraged and considered not relevant to ministry. In Minnesota, he and his brother opened up the Yellow Pages and landed three different minimum wage jobs—one on a potpourri assembly line, another at a plastics company, and another delivering coupon books. Fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, Ben worked toward his dream of being able to afford a laptop, while his brother hoped to save enough to return to Peru. After a month and a half, Ben had saved \$3,000—the same figure that had seemed so insurmountable a year earlier.

His brother did indeed return to Peru, while Ben decided to move to Washington, DC to work on computers. He began honing his IT skills and soon landed a job at a service center in Dallas that was affiliated with the Christian organization he grew up in. There, all members received a \$15 monthly allowance. Ben, however, made extra money each month by working a part-time job at an event called First Saturday. There, people bought, sold, and assembled computers, giving Ben the opportunity to learn all about hardware and software while augmenting his income further

by buying and selling computer parts, laptops and formatted disks. "Through that period, I learned that business is a simple concept," he reflects. "You get something for one price, figure out what margin or markup is needed, resell it, and keep the difference."

At 21, Ben decided to move out to California, where he was invited to be the business area manager for a group of Christian homes. In addition to managing the finances for the community, he handled the IT work, helping homes optimize or tweak their programs. Based on this experience, he set his sights on forming a traveling IT group with two of his brothers and his girlfriend. They envisioned traveling around Latin America to help out at various mission centers, resolving to collectively raise around \$7,000 in three months to cover the cost of the trip. Ben and his brothers decided they'd earn the cash on commercial fishing ventures in Alaska, where they spent three months on the high seas as factory processors. Working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, they didn't have much time left over to spend any of their hard-earned funds, allowing them to save up a sizeable sum.

In the end, the trip to Latin America fell through, and Ben returned to Alaska for a second fishing trip to save more money. He then moved to San Antonio, where his life adventures had only just begun. He launched a successful eBay business and then hired a brother to help with operations, freeing up his time for more studying and leisurely pursuits like windsurfing. He quickly realized, however, that active participation and vision by a venture's owner is crucial to overall success. He also suspected he didn't yet have the experience to know how to grow an organization that could sustain the business and earn him his goal of \$100,000 a year. He decided to take an aptitude test with the Navy, which showed he was exceptionally capable in virtually any area. He wanted to go into nuclear engineering, a six-year program with an academy in Maryland. It required a year of college credits, so Ben enrolled in community college, all the while picking up IT certifications and studying at a bookstore where staff didn't bother readers and sample tests were readily available.

During that time, one of Ben's sisters introduced him to someone at Symantec, a large security firm whose clear tracks to success intrigued Ben. He landed a position in the Security

Operations Center, where he took a nighttime shift. He moved into the firm's consulting arm a year later, and by the following year, he was training senior security engineers and traveling the country as an IT integrator working on product implementation and configuration. During that time, he completed his bachelor's degree online, and once he hit a ceiling at the company, he posted his resume on Monster.com. He was contacted by a headhunter, who placed him in a bid that landed him in the U.S. Senate in June of 2003. "I was charged with designing and managing the existing antivirus system used on two systems. I redesigned the solution for 7,000 systems, which could support the entire Senate's 137 offices and committees," he explains. "At the time, each office had their own systems administrator and haphazard antivirus setup. I presented my solution and ideas and was told I was doomed to fail because no one wins over 137 offices in an organization that adopts technology voluntarily. It was like, welcome to government."

Setting aside the short projects and quick gratification he had enjoyed in the commercial world, Ben set to work, and within six months had secured volunteer adoption of a new enterprise IT system by 60 percent of the Senate. A year later, it would be 100 percent. "It was an entirely new concept to these offices, so I decided to build something that worked and could prove the value of the idea," he says. "Coming from the security deep-dive that was the Symantec experience, I knew how to solve events in real time."

Feeling more confined than inspired by his employing company, Ben approached his Senate customers, who all indicated that they were happy to work with him directly. Rather than move forward as a government employee or a prime contractor, he decided to become a subcontractor of one of the six companies that already held a contract. Once he signed his subcontract, VariQ was officially born.

Under VariQ, Ben continued to build a solid IT security program for the Senate—an endeavor that took five years to build out. Despite his best efforts, he felt somewhat pigeonholed within that environment and beyond. "People always want to know what you do, not what can you do," he remarks. "They're interested in seeing experience in a particular area instead of future capability."

In 2007, Ben and a colleague pitched an

idea to integrate security services under a single vendor. They titled the presentation "IT Security Strategic Vision" and pitched it to the CIO, who liked the idea. Rather than directing the work to Ben's company, however, the Senate put out a cybersecurity procurement that a small business of two individuals could never win. Ben teamed with Lockheed Martin, and his colleague partnered with another large business, but neither won the contract, which was instead awarded to the lowest priced offer. "I had put so much personal effort into that initiative that it was hard not to be disillusioned," he says. "I had been entrenched in that organization for five years and had connected a lot of dots, with 137 organizations interfacing with me on a daily basis because they were all tied into the system I had deployed. It was a hard loss to swallow."

Despite the defeat, Ben didn't let the new company's momentum wane. VariQ was retained by the new awardee, and Ben backfilled his position with his second employee. Lessons he had learned from working with Lockheed throughout the bid were enough to teach him the basics of contract bids. With more time to focus on business development, Ben started seeing rapid growth. In 2012, VariQ landed its first prime contract, an opportunity with the IRS that led them to be nominated by the agency for a Prime Small Business Contractor of the Year Award for 2015. "Moving from subcontractor to prime contractor was a key milestone for us, and now, we're 90 percent prime contractor," says Ben.

Ben has always been an entrepreneur and leader, willing to blaze the trail into new territories where others haven't yet ventured. And in that uninhabited space, he has built and operated structures in accordance with his ideals. Employees, managers, partner companies, and customers treat one another with mutual respect and support. He believes in leading by example and through action, addressing problems in real time rather than putting them off for later. He's also built an ecosystem that is structured while keeping hierarchy at a minimum. Employees are encouraged to engage directly with one another regardless of title, thus facilitating the free flow of information and communication between all facets of the company. "It's the only way you can get a sense for the pulse of an organization," he says. "And it's the best way to create an ecosystem where people can connect in meaningful ways."

Ben's home life is designed with the same care to meaning and energetic, positive interaction—something he and his wife, Miu Lin, have worked to build together. Her parents migrated from Hong Kong when she was 13 and secured jobs as kitchen workers, modeling hard work and perseverance that equipped her with the life skills to excel in school and college. An equally hardworking software developer, she has supported Ben in his pursuit to continually reach for that next big thing, from an advanced degree from Johns Hopkins to new initiatives at VariQ. Her career is just as important to her as Ben's is to him, and with four children all under the age of nine, sustaining two professional schedules simultaneously has been no small feat. "She's a great mom who cares deeply about the upbringing and wellbeing of our kids," Ben says. "What I do today is aimed at building a world class company and a close-knit and happy family that lasts a lifetime."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ben underscores the importance of being honest with yourself about who you are. "Your life choices should be driven by what drives you, whether it's financial success, saving the world, or something else," he says. "Where do you want to be in the future, and how can you make little decisions along the way to keep yourself on that path? Flexibility is also key,

because sometimes you can get where you need to go just by being productive and letting things naturally flow forward. I never thought I'd be the CEO of a 300-person company, but looking back, all the little things I did along the way led me here. I'm so grateful that my path has been personally meaningful and financially productive, while having a positive impact on the people touched by the ecosystem we've created. And I'm grateful that it always feels like there's something bigger just beyond the next bend of life."

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