

Mehrdad Negahban

All About Communication

The world remembers Howard Hughes as an eccentric entrepreneur who eventually descended into madness—a legacy tempered by his undying commitment to the pursuit of his visions, however improbable or derided. Extreme though his story may have been, Mehrdad Negahban, CTO and co-founder of beamSmart, sees a flicker of that kind of entrepreneurial obsession in all true innovators. “To be honest, I think all entrepreneurs have an element of that extremeness to them because of the pain and suffering they go through and the sacrifices they have to make,” he explains. “It’s amazing. At the end of the day, most entrepreneurs realize there is a high level of risk involved in what they do. Like Hughes, they often go to the point of destroying everything, including their lives and their finances, to make something happen.” Along with his partner, Allen Kay, Mehrdad has spent years pursuing his own vision of a smarter, simpler, more secure mobile experience, and today, beamSmart is ready to make that vision a reality.

The idea that would become beamSmart gestated and evolved over the course of the last decade. Around 2001, Mehrdad was already aware that hand-held devices would soon marry cellular technology with the capabilities of a computer. At that time, he envisioned a phone loaded with sensors which he refers to as “the remote control of everyone’s life.” Along with internet and GPS capabilities, this phone would open doors and anticipate anything you needed, connecting you with local resources and offering you deals. At the time, however, broadband wireless was simply not developed enough to accommodate such a concept. With the advent of Cloud Technology, however, Mehrdad and Allen Kay began to tweak their original concept and work out how best to connect the right information

with the people who need it.

“Cloud technology is a source of infinite information and knowledge,” Mehrdad explains. “It’s this unlimited database that beamSmart aims to simplify, process and deliver.” With this goal in mind, the company has built a platform on which clients can build applications, and those applications in turn connect users swiftly and accurately to the information they seek. Connecting job seekers with available jobs, mobile workers with management tools, and even people in emergency situations with appropriate assistance are all within beamSmart’s purview.

While the concept may sound similar to, say, a site like Facebook or LinkedIn, their approach to information and their use of “machine learning” to personalize the mobile experience is what vastly differentiates them from other businesses. Social network services use machine learning to profile users, assessing them for demographics and preferences and then using that profile to deliver marketing content. beamSmart takes a different and more secure approach, asking users to drop their information and knowledge into the cloud, and then using that information to assist the user. “The whole purpose of this kind of platform is to make people smarter and safer,” says Negahban. “Our motto is, ‘We offer personalized mobility and cloud communication to simplify your life.’”

Currently, the company is in pre-sale, a step Mehrdad took in order to gain validation from the market before bringing on an external management team. Several projects are in the pipeline, including a contract with UNESCO for an application that will serve youth in developing countries, and another helping the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) to build a digitally safe campus. Through the application, local youth are able to locate resources nearby and



prepare themselves for the job market. It connects potential employers, government workers, mentors and youth in a smart database. Another application concerns the evolution of 9-1-1. "The next generation of emergency response will instantly connect users to the nearest Public Safety Answering Point, and has the potential to cut response time from minutes down to seconds," Mehrdad explains. "The future is all about personalized connectivity, and beamSmart is making it happen."

Mehrdad has spent years working to realize this vision, and that drive, he believes, comes from within. "If you are influenced by outside forces, at some point you will give up," he says. "The pressure of building a company is so hard and painful for you and your family. There must be something within you that keeps you going. Everything may be against you, but if you can hang in there and stay true to your mission, at some point, things will begin to fall into place. People will begin to follow your direction. That's the sign of a leader." That inner drive and desire to do something different—to make something for one's self rather than for an employer—is what led Mehrdad to leave a perfectly comfortable, well-regarded and well-paying position to pursue entrepreneurship.

The road to that watershed decision was long and winding. Born in Tehran, Mehrdad was fascinated by mathematics as a boy and dreamed of becoming a physicist. He lived with his father, an accountant for the then-Shah, and mother, a teacher, as well as his older brother and older sister, until he left Iran in 1974. At 16 years old, he began working toward his bachelor's degree at the University of Maryland, and, in a mere 2 and a half years of coursework, completed a double major in math and electronics. Even having taken off an interim year, he was only 20 years old when he began pursuing a Master's Degree at UCLA. In California, he became further fascinated with the world of electronics and completed all the work, as well as a dissertation for a Ph.D. in the subject from the University of California, Irvine. Like many Iranian ex-patriots, he had come to the states intending to return to his home country with an America degree to improve conditions at home. But in 1979, the Iranian Revolution changed those plans, and it was instead his family who relocated and followed him to the states.

Although his parents had been well-off in

Iran, Mehrdad had to finance much of his own education after the fall of the Shah, and did so with assistantships and tutoring jobs. By 1981, he had his first full-time job, got his green card, and obtained U.S. residency. Over the next few years, he found great success in the electronics industry, obtaining patents, speaking at conferences, publishing work, and pioneering the integration of digital and analog technology.

It was an exciting time to work in the quickly evolving tech world, and Mehrdad earned his share of prestige in the field, but after almost 17 years in the industry, he found that his success wasn't enough. "I was one of the best low-power integrated circuit designers," he recalls. "My publications and patents are proof of that. One day, venture capitalists approached me and said they would finance me to build hearing aids, but I rejected that offer. In retrospect that may have been a mistake, but it was always my dream to start my own company. I was working, publishing, and making good money, but to me, that wasn't satisfaction. I wanted to build something of my own. I want to do something for me." With that, in 1997, Mehrdad launched his first independent venture, Valence Semiconductor.

The company went through two phases. The first, between 1997 and 1999, boasted profits and success. "We built a solid communication company and were working on fundamental technologies," he remembers. "We had very good partners and exceptional customers." Then, in 1999, Mehrdad evolved the business into a second company, for which significant funds needed to be raised. Unfortunately, like so many other start-ups at the time, 9/11 proved to be an economic catastrophe from which the business could not recover. The tech bubble burst, and although he and his team struggled through until 2003, the company ultimately succumbed to the fatal blow.

Although 9/11 certainly could not have been anticipated, Mehrdad is quick to point out his own mistakes—mistakes he now views as valuable lessons to be carried forward. "If I had had an experienced management team pre-9/11 to tell me, 'This is a bubble, and you are a strong company, so take advantage of the financing that's available and raise money so you can survive tough times,' I think we would have survived. We had solid technology, and the market was perfect. We just lacked experience—something we have gained since then."

Today, Mehrdad does not call himself the CEO of beamSmart for that very reason. He is eager to entrust that position to a proven commodity. “To be fair to myself and the company, we’ve got to bring someone in that operates the company and has the proven experience for this business,” he emphasizes. “I know my vision is right, and I know we have the right product for the right market, so we then turned our focus on bringing in a seasoned management team. I won’t make the same mistake twice. I believe that, in the business world, some are blessed with the gift of setting vision, while others are operators. Running a business is like driving a car—you need both a gas pedal and brake. The trick to success is balancing those two components and encouraging mutual respect.”

The notion of respect is a fundamental building block of Mehrdad’s philosophy and belief system. His spirituality, a central focus of his life, focuses on a sense of interconnectedness and love, and he attempts to exemplify this spirituality through his choices and contributions to the world. “To me, love is the clean-burning fuel within you that drives you,” he explains. “When I say love, I don’t just mean loving a person, but also loving your society. It’s the energy that’s around us and the force that’s within us. Love is the fuel that compels us forward, and I feel that people without love or passion, whether they know it or not, don’t have any purpose in life.” It’s the same premise that underlies the concept of beamSmart—it’s all about connection.

With this philosophy in mind, Mehrdad does not focus on material success so much as the kinds of success that live beyond death. “There are many, many rich people nobody is going to respect,” he points out. “But there are many, many spiritual people who will leave their stamp. Whether it’s Louis Armstrong who creates beautiful music, or Martin Luther King who sacrificed his life for freedom, or Albert Einstein, all of these people had some level of spirituality. It’s a big part of living, prompting us to think about why we’re a part of the world, how we can contribute to making it better.” Along with Einstein, whom Mehrdad admires as much for his

philosophical musings as for his scientific mind, Mehrdad was also strongly influenced by Rumi, the renowned 13th century Persian poet, and John F. Kennedy.

Naturally, this spirituality and emphasis on love has led Mehrdad to contribute significant time to his community, volunteering with youth 20 hours a week for more than ten years. He is also thrilled to imagine the potential for humanitarian impact his developing applications carry, yet despite all his successes and contributions to the tech world, he doesn’t hesitate when asked what he is proudest of: “My kids,” he affirms. “They have followed in my footsteps to achieve their own success, and it is an honor to see them be a force for positive change in the world.”

To young people entering the business world today, Mehrdad’s advice is simple. “Go where your passion is, and follow your vision,” he affirms. “Passion is something you can really believe in. It’s something you can go all in on. It’s something you can dedicate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, of your life to, if need be.” Like so many dedicated entrepreneurs before him, Mehrdad has spent years doing just that—years that not only guarantee beamSmart’s success, but also promote a better future for everyone.

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