Kaizen: You are a successful businessman—yet as an undergraduate you majored in Philosophy and English Literature. That might seem a surprising background. Has your undergraduate education been relevant to your success in business?

Singh-Molares: Yes, absolutely. Philosophy in particular. English certainly gave me the ability to express myself succinctly and technically. But philosophy taught me how to think and taught me to appreciate that there are many sides to an argument, but that you have to make some judgment about what you think is the correct judgment. It has to be well-supported, it has to be well researched, well thought-out, but it should be grounded in common sense. And that's why I, like you, am a big fan of the Greeks, Plato in particular, and Aristotle as well. So, it's been very helpful.

Kaizen: You talk about making sound business judgments. In management or strategy meetings, do you find philosophy's method of argumentative give-and-take useful?

Singh-Molares: Yes, the Socratic method is brilliant. It continues to be a good way to disarm people, and not just in business, but in various dialogues. Which is to say, "I do appreciate your argument but let's take it a step further, let's dig beneath the surface and see what's really there—to see if what you think is really there.' And that's been very useful.

Kaizen: You mentioned Plato and Aristotle. Are there other philosophers or literary authors who have been influential on your business thinking?

Singh-Molares: This has been so long now that I need to think back, but certainly the Greeks were key. I am a big fan of Schopenhauer.

Kaizen: Why Schopenhauer?

Singh-Molares: I think because the nexus between East and West is easy through Schopenhauer, even though his appraisals of Eastern philosophy and Eastern thought were a little preliminary when he was writing in the nineteenth century. But I liked what I read there. I have to say, though, that I keep going back to the Greeks because the professors who made the most impact on me and the courses I took that made the most impact on me were about the Greeks.

Kaizen: Many students who are undergrads are wrestling with their career choices and are thinking in terms of practical education. They want, in many cases, to have a business career. For them, the importance of liberal arts education seems a little abstract. Is there advice that you could give to students who are wrestling with this choice between a narrower professional track and broad liberal arts education?

Singh-Molares: I think a well-rounded generalist is the best equipped. Something that I've said often is that common sense is the most uncommon value you can find in business. In Microsoft you have a lot of people who have a very narrow focus who don't see the bigger picture. A liberal arts education makes you a well-rounded generalist and allows you the option to stand back and take a look at all sides and see a much broader picture.

Kaizen: And if you end up in a field that requires technical education or technical career skills, do you acquire the technical knowledge on the job?

Singh-Molares: Yes. I came into Microsoft with my Philosophy and

Continued on Page 2
Singh-Molares: Right. It will give you perspective. This is something that I always say to all of my kids: you cannot change the thing in and of itself, but you can always change your perspective on it. And the ability to shift perspectives is invaluable, because you can turn every challenge into an opportunity. I think it’s just the Renaissance ideal: the broader your vision the better you are able to deal with all of the challenges that are thrown at you.

Singh-Molares: I would say a developer obviously needs to take four years worth of computer science courses and mathematics and logic and programming—very narrowly tailored but also give that person a philosophy course, a very broad philosophy course, and a very broad history course, and English literature. And I know it’s not the proverbial well-rounded individual, but that person will have the ability to step back and say: ‘I’m not going to dedicate 100 hours to writing these lines of code, because if I look at the product overall and where it fits, that’s not a good use of my time.’ And in order to have that, you really need other points of reference outside of your narrow field. So, I would say, certainly do both.

Singh-Molares: And philosophy and literature make you take different perspectives. Singh-Molares: It makes you appreciate different perspectives. You don’t necessarily have to agree, but it’s much easier to dismiss someone if you understand what they’re saying.

Singh-Molares: Both your college years and early career were in the early days of the Internet, so you’re not the world’s biggest cultural adaptation and rewriting the code for various languages. Microsoft was just starting to realize the importance of international markets on a bigger thing in and of itself, but it’s always the lot of translation expertise and management expertise—with translations—to manage that mass of information. So, we outsourced the work to the vendors.

Singh-Molares: That’s an interesting story. I’m a translator. My mother’s from Spain; my mother taught me Spanish. I grew up in Belgium, so French is the real language that I’m formally trained in. And English is the language I learned when I came here at age eleven. I translated in the early days of the Internet—various books and various authors. The translation agency that I worked for after I decided not to pursue a Ph.D. at Harvard because I got married and started having children, said: ‘Well, why don’t you come in and work for us? Why don’t you run the translations?’ I ended up taking over the French and German-translating department. My wife at the time was from Anchorage, Alaska and her mother had cancer and she wanted to come back to the West Coast. So she came in one day and said, ‘I have heard of this company Microsoft.’ This is 1990. And I said, ‘No, I haven’t.’ because I was with my Mac, like most of the staff. And my wife said, ‘They’re really up-and-coming.’ So she faxed them my résumé. We didn’t hear anything for six months. Nothing—not a word. Then suddenly I got a call from a recruiter, saying, ‘Oh, we’re really interested in your résumé.’ They did a couple of phone screenings that week, they invited me the following week—this is how aggressive they were—to come here. In fact, I stayed just a week away from here—and did my interviews—a day’s worth of hazing. That’s interesting to recount because it wasn’t easy. Ten separate interviews back-to-back, one hour each, basically, to gauge how tough you are, how able you are to react to various situations. And two weeks later they had relocated my entire family from Boston to here.

Singh-Molares: And what did they hire you in as? What were your early positions at Microsoft?

Singh-Molares: They hired me—they wanted someone to run the industry to manage the industry. So, translation, localization, what we at Microsoft called ‘localization,’ which is translation but also cultural adaptation and rewriting the code for various languages. Microsoft was just starting to realize the importance of international markets on a bigger thing in and of itself, but it’s always the lot of translation expertise and management expertise—with translations—to manage that mass of information. So, we outsourced the work to the vendors.

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News from the CEE

Student Presentation Prize Winners

Richard Walters
Runner-up
Andrew Tuttle
Runner-up
Almir Caussévic
Runner-up
Scott Danielson
Runner-up

Erik Torres — First Prize

SINGH-MOLARES, CONTINUED

Singh-Molares: Well, he had a lot of help. This was a culture of very aggressive young people—when I joined Microsoft in 1991, I was 29 and that was the average age of all the people in the company; Bill Gates was three or four years older. We all were very driven, very committed, a very aggressive culture. That was part of what you were signing up for when you signed up for Microsoft—a pretty brutal pace and demands on your intellect and demands on your capacity to discern a good argument from a bad one.

Katzen: I have read that Gates encourages debate and argument among those he works with good to be convinced and change his mind—unlike some CEOs who prefer to surround themselves with “yes-men.” Is that true?

Singh-Molares: To his great credit he always encouraged vigorous debate, and he would be the first one to challenge you on any point that he felt was worth challenging. He could be pretty tough to convince, but he could be convinced. If your argument was good enough and it prevailed, then he would accept it. And not only would he accept it, he would empower you to run with it.

Katzen: Were there special ethical challenges working in a high-stakes, high-pressure organization? Did the corporate culture encourage achievement and competence or were there regular temptations to take inappropriate shortcuts?

Singh-Molares: Sure. Because you have a lot of very aggressive people who are elbowing each other to come out the front. The great thing about Microsoft in those days—the mid-90s—was that the playground was big enough that a lot of us could play. That’s not to say that there weren’t office politics, that there wasn’t back-stabbing, that there wasn’t careerism of all kinds. That was part of it too.

Katzen: When those situations happened, how were they dealt with? In effect, how did they not spread and infect the whole corporation?

Singh-Molares: Even though we were reasonably flat from a management standpoint, it was a very hierarchical structure. So if you were a manager, your manager’s manager would make a decision, and that’s how you would live with, and you would orient yourself and go there. It was not a democracy—you put your best efforts, you put your best arguments; sometimes you won, sometimes you lost. When you lost the argument you kept going and implemented whatever was needed implementing.

Katzen: But weren’t there opportunities for those who had, say, lost an argument or who didn’t have a good case to make to back-end other people or find circumlocutory routes to get what they wanted anyway?

Singh-Molares: Did those individuals typically succeed or fail?

Singh-Molares: Sure. There were attempts, but there wasn’t a lot of patience for that because the goal was always, “Let’s get these products out to market as quickly as possible, let’s increase our sales.” It was very results-driven, and results speak volumes. So if someone did a back-handed maneuver and it turned out to be the right thing to do, then they were heroes. But if they did a back-handed maneuver after a decision had been made and it turned out to be the wrong thing, then they wouldn’t last long in the company. There was a lot of cassandras at Microsoft. We used to count

Microsoft lifetimes in terms of stock vesting, which was four and a half years. Because a lot of people burned out after four or five years and they left.

Katzen: You mentioned there was a hierarchical element. Part of the manager’s job is to assess the arguments, weed out the weak ones, stop the office politics, and so forth. But it’s also part of what people are creative and driven. Were there any basic management techniques used by managers to keep the creative spark going and focused in the right direction? The financial incentives that you mentioned before were important ones, but people also work for other reasons. Were managers attentive to those other issues?

Singh-Molares: Yes, they were. Microsoft is lots of different companies at different stages, and in those days if you won the argument and were empowered, you were given a lot of latitude to implement your objectives. And other people in the organization understood that—you had been blessed and anointed by Bill Gates to pursue a particular activity—people didn’t really stand in your way, because that wasn’t tolerable; there wasn’t much patience for it.

Katzen: You mentioned the four-and-a-half-year issue; you were there for twelve years at that point—when you decided to leave. What brought that decision about?

Singh-Molares: The company that I left was very different than the company that I joined.

Katzen: The business model that we use is the freelance model. That’s why we don’t have large offices. And it’s very much by design. After managing vendors for Microsoft for ten or twelve years, we see at the largest translation company in the world—Lionbridge—had 5,000 employees and forty offices, big office in Germany, big office in France, and so on. And that infrastructure is not necessary. Because this market is mostly a market of freelancers—translators like to work on their own schedules. So we eliminated that infrastructure, and replaced it with the internet, which by now had become quite secure if used properly. Ten years ago that was very difficult to do because the internet wasn’t far enough evolved. These days it’s very easy to do: we have very fast connections worldwide, we have great security protocols, we can assign project managers for any project from anywhere in the world where the clients want them. So communications costs are low or non-existent. We use VOIP Skype for most of our international communications; that works wonderfully. And so we built a business model which can reduce our costs and therefore we’re more competitive. We appeal also to that target group of freelancers because they can work for us for a project for three months, and then they can go and trek the world for six months and come back. And we’ll still be there. You can’t do that if you’re nine to five.

Katzen: The things that I loved about the Microsoft that I joined were: aggressive, very entrepreneurial, very driven, empowering individuals, no patience for red tape, no patience for obstacles—for mediocre.

Singh-Molares: But there weren’t careerism of all kinds. That was part of what you were there for. There weren’t office politics, that there wasn’t back-stabbing, that there wasn’t careerism of all kinds. That was part of it too.

Singh-Molares: But there weren’t opportunities for those who had, say, lost an argument or who didn’t have a good case to make to back-end other people or find circumlocutory routes to get what they wanted anyway?

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Katzen: Even though I was comfortable, I had a good salary, I had made good money, I was working from home Monday through Friday, telecommuting, it was a little too comfortable."
Throughout the centuries there were men who took first steps ... 

The beauty of being a small entrepreneur and running your own company is that you get to do what you want to do.

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SINGH-MOLARES, CONTINUED

children, so this was a concern that touched us very closely, very personally. And the challenge there was that when we started the foundation we wanted to save at least one life, and I think we’ve saved far more than one. It’s basic education about preeclampsia that needs to happen—e.g., if you have a headache and you’re seven months pregnant, it’s not okay for the doctor to just give you a couple of aspirin and send you home. He or she needs to look deeper than that, at blood pressure, and there are a number of tests.

Kaizen: So the foundation’s purpose is educational, to get women who are pregnant aware of certain symptoms so they might press a little harder when they’re dealing with their physicians?

Singh-Molares: Yes, but that’s not all we’re doing. We funded medical research, so we have Tom Easterling, who’s a well-known expert in the field of preeclampsia. We did a lot of research and supporting—we’d give grants to various doctors around the world.

Kaizen: You have an extremely busy life. You work hard and have all these other activities and a very full family life and you’re comfortable financially. So it’s a natural question: Why work so hard when, presumably, you could opt for a less complicated and less stressful work life?

Singh-Molares: I’d say keep reinventing yourself. Certainly that’s what I’ve done, even though I do translation, localization, international services professionally, there’s lots of other skills that I’ve built up. I love music, I love art, I love literature, I’d love to write a book, I love academia, and that’s been kind of stagnant for twenty years, which is why I’m doing this, and I have four others.

In the Next Issue: Ed Snider, CEO of Comcast-Spectacor and owner of the Philadelphia 76ers, Flyers and Phantoms, on Sports and Entrepreneurship

Mr. Singh-Molares in Bellevue

other universities on my roster before the end of the year, surprisingly. So keep expanding, keep broadening your horizons and you’ll be fine. If you get stuck in a rut, if you get to the stage where I was at Microsoft after twelve years, where you go, “Okay, this is very comfortable, but I’m not growing personally,” then it’s time to change. Then it’s time to say goodbye. Which is what I did.

This interview was conducted for Kaizen by Stephen Hicks. To learn more about Anil Singh-Molares and EchoMundi, please visit www.EchoMundi.com. Kaizen’s full interview with Singh-Molares will soon be posted on the Center’s website at www.EthicsandEntrepreneurship.org.