



SANJAY UPPAL
President & COO,
OnMobile

The three attributes that are really important are learning interesting stuff, having fun while doing so and trusting the people you work with. Learn, fun, trust—works for me

All terrain mobility

CYCLING up the steep terrains in and around Bangalore, Sanjay Uppal forgets all about the rest. Feeling the strain in his legs, to him, is meditation. "For me, relaxing is not about going to the Himalayas. Instead, I find my spirit while biking through tough conditions," says the man, who is presently the president & COO, OnMobile, which is the first Indian telecom value added services (VAS) provider to go public.

In the United States, where he spent more than 20 years of his life, cycling was not a difficult thing to do. The Bay Area, where he lived, offered plenty of opportunities to engage himself, but back in India it was not easy. But he soon found a set of like-minded people with whom he could ride away. "Finding the right landscape, though, was much easier: I found the terrains just outside of Bangalore much to my liking."

Now, before you think he is Lance Armstrong, let's take a bit of a U-turn here. Sanjay has a bachelor of technology degree in electrical engineering from IIT, Bombay, and always exhibited a penchant for gadgets and technology. As an IIT student, he always had a group of kindred souls around him. "All my friends loved to put gadgets together. I remember the ham radio and other stuff that we made with pride. Those were fun days, and no one did those things for any benefit. The spirit of innovation was kindled back then."

After his IIT days, Sanjay proceeded to do his MS in electrical & computer engineering from University of Wisconsin, and then did his MS in Management of Technology from Stanford. Sanjay was growing in prowess, and he realised that he had to stay back in the US to build his career.

"When I got my first job at Hewlett-Packard (HP), I could not believe that I was getting paid for the fun I was having. That is what you get when your hobbies and work meld into one. Whenever I have kept to taking on fun projects or exciting technology, it has worked, and when not, it has stopped working for me. The other steppingstone, I feel, was going back to school at Stanford to study Management of Technology. HP placed its trust in me by paying for my education via a fellowship—a debt

DeCODE Darlington Jose Hector



that I hopefully repaid by working there for the first 12 years of my career."

Sanjay had also floated a start-up, Caymas Technologies, and was also involved with Citrix Systems, besides HP. So when Sanjay was appointed as president and COO of OnMobile, in December 2008, the OnMobile management knew he was absolutely the right man for the job with his immense technology expertise.

Sanjay's cup of innovation is overflowing, and it's not easy to choose from a variety of tricks in his bag. But he decides to count, and out came the experiences. "Deploying the world's first internet over cable product with Time-Warner in the 90s, was a thrilling experience. We were camped out at the house of a retired lady in the dead of winter in Elmira NY, trying to get our cable system to work. It would go down at night and recover in the morning. When we got it working, the lady was so grateful—felt like a million years!"

"Being part of the team at Webvan that solved the last mile problem of delivering anything (including perishable groceries) to any consumer within half hour of their choosing—well ahead of its time. People could place orders from bar code scanners, wireless tablets in the kitchen, and of course, PCs. Very memorable."

"Getting the trust of the Justice Department in the US to allow us to use the technology we had built for getting their agents to access confidential information, was another milestone. And here at OnMobile, getting consumers to store their personal data in systems made by us and deployed into international carriers like Airtel, Orange, T-Mo-

bile, has been another achievement." Sanjay believes it's important to have a lot of fun while innovating. "The three attributes that are really important are learning interesting stuff, having fun while doing so and trusting the people you work with. Learn, fun, trust—works for me."

"I recall an incident in one cold February in Helsinki, Finland. I was pitching our Internet solution to the local TV company (Helsinki TV). The day wore on as I was presenting and I thought I was losing the audience. In the evening, as was the custom we retired to the sauna which was on the edge of a frozen lake in a remote area north of the city. I thought the day was a complete waste, taciturn customers, no business. Then suddenly a few of them got down into their bare skin, ran out of the sauna into the biting cold and jumped into the frozen lake, took a few dips and ran back into the sauna. One of them looked expectantly at me. I thought, what the heck, took off my clothes, ran into the lake jumped in, practically froze and ran back into the sauna. That was it, the ice was broken, trust was established and we got the deal!"

"You have to put yourself in a position of discomfort to learn. Corollary is that if you are too comfortable, then the learning has likely stopped! It is all about the people in the end, your employees, your customers and also stockholders. At one of our AGM's, I learned that an old lady had put a portion of her retirement savings into OnMobile—that is a sobering thought that you bear the responsibility for guiding this trust that has been placed in you. Also not to take the specifics of what I am doing too seriously, making technology in this realm is a kick, but it is not saving lives, it is adding to the convenience and entertainment of people."

Contrary to the trend during his student days, youngsters of today want to be in India. "When I was at IIT, majority of the students had wanted to go to the US to build their careers. But not now. I was there at IIT recently, interacting with the students. It was amazing how things have changed. Most of the students wanted to stay back in India, as they felt the opportunities and challenges were far greater here. I hope at least a few of them go abroad, as a global outlook is important."