Serial Tech Entrepreneur Sachin Rekhi: Relationships Build Careers

A few years back when Sachin Rekhi was working for Microsoft, one of his management mentors taught him the value of walking the halls. “She used to tell me that I had these great ideas, but that at a company like Microsoft the ideas are worthless unless you can socialize them with your team and convince them of their value,” he says. “She helped me realize how to spend time building relationships through small and simple tactics.” So every morning, Rekhi would walk the halls to say hello to two or three people – a way, he adds, “to keep those relationships warm.”

As a young technology professional, Rekhi, 28, learned that strong business relationships were as critical to the success of his career as the skills he had developed. With that idea in mind, he and his wife, Ada Chen, founded Connected in 2010, a contact management service to help people manage their relationship networks. They sold Connected to LinkedIn, an online network of professionals, in October 2011, and today Rekhi is the principal product manager at LinkedIn running the Connected team, which also includes Chen as the head of user growth.

Before founding Connected, Rekhi fostered many business relationships. He was the co-founder of Anywhere.FM, a cloud music service that he started after leaving Microsoft and sold to imeem, a music and video sharing site, in 2007. After working with imeem for a few years, he was asked to join Trinity Ventures, a high-profile venture capital firm in Silicon Valley, as the entrepreneur-in-residence, where he was given resources, time and help to figure out his next start-up idea.

Rekhi, a 2005 University of Pennsylvania graduate who studied both computer science and finance, spoke with Knowledge@Wharton High School about maximizing the potential of business relationships.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Why are relationships so important in business?

Rekhi: In the business world, so much that happens is because of the teams that you are working with and the relationships you are developing. Individuals don’t accomplish much in business; it is usually through the work of a team. In entrepreneurship [as in] any company, if a team gels well together and complements each other in terms of skills, it becomes an accelerator of the individual people within that relationship. The business relationships you have and maintain will help you get your next job, get key customers and hire the people you need to be successful in your company. All of these activities are more about the people you know and the relationships you’re able to maintain than anything else.

One of the key nuances about this is that often people are very focused on their strong ties — their friends, their colleagues, their family. Research shows that in terms of business relationships, the weak ties are the most important. These are the people who have been a part of your life at some point, but that you are not proactively talking to every week or every month. Maybe it’s somebody you worked with at your previous company whom you are no longer working with. Keeping that weak tie warm is really helpful to your business success.

KWHS: What is relationship management?

Rekhi: Relationship management is all about the tactics and best practices you employ to proactively manage your relationships in your life. You can do it in a personal setting or a professional setting, but most people are doing it in both. The key thing about relationship management is the management piece. A lot of people use Facebook and LinkedIn to stay up with what is happening with their friends, but that’s not the same as proactively managing those relationships.

KWHS: How does social networking help us connect with more people, and how does it hurt that goal?

Rekhi: Social networking is by far the most exciting thing in terms of helping professionals manage the vast number of relationships they need. By having tools like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, you can now stay up to date on what is happening in people’s lives much faster and much better than before. It’s amazing that I can go to LinkedIn and see that one of my college friends has switched jobs, or I’ll go to Facebook to see when one of my friends is in my city. Having that kind of information is amazing because you don’t have to call your friends up; you can get all that information online.

At the same time, that also creates a lot of chaos. There’s just too much information to keep up with nowadays. We all have thousands of friends on Facebook and LinkedIn, and it becomes difficult to keep up with everything that is going on. We need a set of tools to help us prioritize the time and effort that we spend on these to proactively manage our relationships. Right now, when you go to Facebook, you read your feed, but that doesn’t help you focus on the people who are most important to you. You are losing touch with the people who aren’t posting as frequently. Part of our goal with Connected was to build a set of tools that helps you more proactively manage your relationships on these services; to figure out who is most important to you out of all the friends you are engaging with, and spend your time focusing on those relationships. For example, here is a set of people I want to make sure I talk to every quarter or at least once a year, and then telling you when there has been a gap of a year since you have had any communication with them. It helps you get back in touch with people whom you have lost touch with.

KWHS: How have relationships helped advance your career?

Rekhi: After I finished at imeem, I spent some time with a variety of venture capitalists to talk about opportunities I wanted to pursue. I became very close to Gus Tai at Trinity Ventures on both a personal and professional level. I would talk to him about my ideas, and he would give me feedback. He is the one who offered me the entrepreneur-in-residence opportunity at Trinity Ventures. That close relationship I had developed six months prior with Gus is what made it possible for me to have that role at Trinity and to launch Connected. Now fast forward to 2011, when LinkedIn purchased Connected. This happened because of a relationship that Ada had through her former employer, Mochi Media [in San Francisco]. The vice president of business development at Mochi Media knew some folks at LinkedIn and he’s the one who gave a positive intro to Ada and me to reach out to LinkedIn. Ada had left Mochi Media to start Connected with me, but she did it in such a way that everyone had a very positive reaction to her leaving. She maintained great relationships with everyone there.

KWHS: So there is something to be said for keeping past relationships strong and positive.

Rekhi: Definitely. When you look at some of the most successful teams inside a company, they are usually composed of groups of people who have worked together in previous companies. Even here at LinkedIn, our CEO is from Yahoo and has brought a lot of his senior executives from Yahoo to join us. He knows he works well with those guys. I have this practice called a draft pick. In the sporting analogy, you always have your draft picks of the people you want to put on your team. Anytime I have a job or a role, I always think about the people who are my draft picks. If I were to start a company, who are the people on the team I’m currently working with that I would love to have work with me again? I actually tag these people as draft picks within Connected, and these are the people I know I need to stay in touch with throughout my career. I have everyone from people I was study buddies with in college to people I worked with at Microsoft, imeem and Everywhere.FM. I focus my relationship management efforts on them to make sure we stay in touch.

KWHS: What are a few ways that people keep their relationships warm?

Rekhi: Spend five minutes every morning reaching out to one person in your network who you don’t normally interact with on a daily basis. Post on their Facebook wall, say happy birthday, congratulate them on recent events in their life, or just say hi. A simple gesture goes a long way to keep a relationship warm.

KWHS: Were you entrepreneurial in high school?

Rekhi: In middle school and at Pittsford Sutherland High School near Rochester, N.Y., I started my first software company called Gumball Software. I made this little product called Vocabulary Master. You had all these spelling tests and you had to know the definitions of words. I made this software program that gave you the definition of a word and asked you what the word was. I actually made it available to a bunch of my friends. I recruited some of my classmates to help me sell it for $5 to other students. I was less focused [back then] on building a business, but instead focused on building products that were useful for my classmates.

KWHS: What advice do you have for high school students about networking and forging valuable relationships?

Rekhi: The big thing is to not let the current relationships you are focused on make you forget the past relationships that are important to you. When you first go to college, it’s really easy to focus on all the exciting new relationships you are making with your new college friends. You can forget about the great high school relationships you had. Every time you move into a new phase of life, it’s really important to reflect and find ways to stay connected to the people who have been important to you, both personally and professionally. You never know when these relationships will be useful to you in the business world.