

Is there a place for information technology in emerging markets?

CEO says yes and proves it

Article by Development Resources, inc.



Photo courtesy: <http://verveonline.com/>

Rikin Gandhi, CEO of Digital Green, is transforming the way technology advances global development efforts in India, Africa, and beyond.

At only 33 years old, Rikin is revolutionizing the way technology is used in remote parts of the world in an effort to improve human well-being. We recently checked in with Rikin to learn more about his organization, Digital Green, his path to success, and his ambitions for the future.

What did you want to be when you 'grew up'?

At some point between the ages of 3 and 6, I decided that I wanted to be an astronaut and I carried that forward for a long time. I was actually about to join the U.S. Air Force before moving to India in 2006. I was all set to join but a new venture some friends were working on called me to India and I didn't want to pass it up.

What was your first full-time job?

I was a software engineer at Oracle in California working on search technology. I had a few patents published in the area of linguistics.

Was Digital Green your first entrepreneurial venture?

Just before getting started on Digital Green, I came out to India to work on a bio-diesel venture with some friends. Unfortunately, it was apparent that the venture wasn't going to work out. The government of India was still heavily subsidizing oil and it wasn't a viable business model. However, this is what got me interested in farming communities in India. I observed that a very small number of farmers were actually doing well and helping their families come out of poverty. It made me want to explore why this happened in the first place and whether it was possible to help more farmers and their families improve their circumstances.

Where did the idea for Digital Green come from?

I was in Bangalore when the bio-diesel venture fizzled out so I joined Microsoft Research in India working with a group called "Technology for Emerging Markets". It was an innovative but also academic place where we wanted to explore the question:

Is there a role for technology in the developing world, especially as it relates to the agriculture development? Originally it was just a research question, not an entrepreneurial venture. The project spanned roughly 2 years including 6 months of immersion with an NGO working in communities that were using technology and others that were not. During this time, we tested the use of video, MP3 players, and other types of technology, as well as observed traditional training approaches to understand farmer receptivity to different methods. This was followed by 15 months of controlled testing for a new, video-based approach to training farmers on agricultural techniques that could boost their productivity and access to markets. Where traditional extension can cost roughly \$33 per farmer, the video-based approach developed by Digital Green gets that down to \$3 per farmer.

So how did the spinoff from Microsoft Research occur?

Normally you have two choices: develop a commercially viable product from a project, which was not applicable in our case; or move on to the next thing. Well, we chose door number three. After seeking a lot of counsel, we became the first nonprofit spinoff of Microsoft Research.

Tell me about that initial spinoff phase. How did you gain support?

We were very fortunate with timing. Bill Gates was just moving out of his full-time role leading Microsoft to focus more time on the Foundation. We shared our work with him and gained a generous bridge grant that allowed us to test this approach in different environments and we expanded into four regions in India. From there, we gained support from the government of India, which had started the National Rural Livelihood Mission focused on getting 70 million people out of poverty. Digital Green has also received significant support from USAID, DFID, Google, and the Ford Foundation, among others. We have also expanded into new geographies including Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania, and Afghanistan.

How was the transition from an entrepreneurial venture to the enterprise that Digital Green is today?

The initial team of 15 came together pretty quickly and we were distributed amongst partner offices with different NGOs across India. This was useful at first because it gave us a community-level perspective and taught us how to carry out work on the field. After a year, we decided to centralize efforts because we felt like Digital Green didn't have a cohesive identity being spread around plus it gave our partner NGOs more ownership. During this time, we developed specialization internally, instituted better

processes and procedures, and established quality control mechanisms. We continue to keep these topics 'open' so that we are constantly improving as an organization.

Has Digital Green changed from your initial notion of what it would be?

Yes and no. Fundamentally, it is very similar to what we set out to do at Microsoft Research, which was helping local people produce videos, share them with their communities, and evaluate the impact of the program.

Technology changes quickly so we have gone from using TVs and DVDs to using pico projectors that can be used in areas with less electricity. Our quality assurance piece has certainly gotten much better over time thanks to several interesting partnerships.

What kind of partnerships?

A lot! Some highlights include Vodafone who we work with to send 1-2 minute reinforcement audio clips as automated voice calls to remind farmers about the practices that they watch on video. We are also using mobile technology to collect and triangulate feedback. We are in discussions with Facebook to see how streaming Digital Green's video content via cell phone might be supported by their Internet.org campaign.

What is the toughest decision you have had to make since founding Digital Green?

We were asked to scale up very early on by the government. They

were willing to provide substantial funding but I didn't feel that we had developed the right infrastructure to support that kind of growth. We held back and I think it has made us stronger and better able to deliver quality work and measure impact.

What do you hope to have accomplished five years from now?

I'd like to maintain a real openness in our approach, from open source software to SOPs to training modules. I want Digital Green to always be innovating, experimenting, and improving. My hope is that other organizations in other geographies and industries can utilize some of our systems and resources to improve the world around them. I also hope to develop a virtual training institute where Digital Green would bring training to frontline workers directly, as well as to partner organizations, using the videos that have already been produced at a grassroots-level. We want others to learn how to facilitate learning the way Digital Green does and implement best practices on a global scale.

Do you consider yourself a social entrepreneur?

Well. I don't know. It's a foggy term but I guess in the abstract sense, yes. My roots are in research and technology but I grew into this mission very organically.

What are your top three guiding principles as a leader?

1. Focus on partnerships, especially when you don't have expertise in an area.
2. Maintain an open, as well as research and exploration focused culture.
3. Don't lose sight of the mission and be humble in all that you do.

What advice do you have for someone with a social-minded entrepreneurial idea?

Make sure your solution is applicable to real people. Immerse yourself with people and know who you are developing a solution for, as well as how the solution will help. Leveraging technology is a great way to amplify social-oriented activities that are already taking place and making an impact. I suggest doing some market research, identifying the right pain point or the bottleneck, and then developing a solution that helps with efficiency and effectiveness.

It is also important to capture feedback to understand the end-user and continuously improve in a targeted way. For example, Digital Green is capturing usage data and feedback from each individual that interacts with our approach. This helps inform and target the production and distribution of videos based on needs and interests. You have to be honest with yourself about what works and what doesn't, and make sure you have a culture that can support this type of learning

and reflection. I think our research-based beginnings have fostered that type of culture, which is critical for social entrepreneurship.

What do you hope to accomplish by the time you retire?

Honestly, I just want to know that I have not stopped experimenting and learning. I'm sure that I won't fully understand myself but I want to know that I am contributing to the meaningful development of human beings including myself.



Since 2008, Digital Green has:

- Reached nearly 7,500 villages across India, Ethiopia, and Ghana
- Produced more than 3,500 videos in over 28 languages
- Improved the lives of more than 640,000 community members in India and Sub-Saharan Africa (70% of them women)
- Increased the cost-effectiveness of development efforts tenfold

Digital Green aims to reach 1 million households over 11,000 villages in India and other parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, enabling communities they reach to live with dignity by the end of 2016. For more information, please visit: <http://www.digitalgreen.org/>

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