

AlumSpeaks

In conversation with Mr. Ashutosh Khanna

SIMSR Alum Batch 1986-88

Senior Client Partner - Korn Ferry



Q. How does it feel coming back to SIMSR? Tell us about some of your memories at SIMSR.

A. I am quite excited, full of anticipation about how things have changed, looking forward to see it all and wondering why I did not make this trip earlier. There are some real great memories. We were a fantastic group of people and lot of us are still in touch! We have our own WhatsApp group of about 30 people. A lot of those friendships have endured! It's fantastic to reach out for help to each other and it doesn't always mean professional help. Some of the friendships you form when you are a student are the ones that actually last long and those friendships are very pure. There is no commercial benefit in any of them. I really cherish some of those friendships.

Q. What do you consider are the key takeaways from the two years you spent with SIMSR?

A. The biggest one was that learning wasn't always in the classroom. It was in the projects that professors set out for us and in some form, it was the practical training you got doing those projects. It was huge! It includes going and finding those projects. I don't think companies had any structured formal way or were all that open those days for assigning projects to management students. We had to go and scout for our projects. I would imagine it's a lot more structured now. Honing your sales development skills in itself was terrific! Going back and submitting those reports and the joy when the company actually implemented some of them. I remember Nestle implementing cerelac in sachets because of a report one did. It was fantastic and very gratifying at that stage. In our time as well, most of the professors were from the industry which was superb because we actually got practical learning as well. That was invaluable while we studied the Kotler and others, the things that haven't changed yet I believe!

Q. What do you think has remained the same about you throughout the years? What do you think has changed?

A. Wow! Well, I have put on about 7 kilos, that's changed! I have lost my hair, that's changed! (Laughs)

But I think what hasn't changed is probably the ability to not take oneself too seriously! You can just laugh at yourself because all of us do make mistakes and will continue to make mistakes! So you can't take them so seriously. I still like to learn a lot. You never know where the learning comes from. So if you can manage to keep your sense of observation keen, you would be okay on that!

Q. What have been the turning points in your life?

A. Personally, I think marriage and kids are two big landmarks! Those make you re-evaluate how you want to lead your life. Professionally, I am now in my third career and I don't see any option for young guys as well to actually have less than three careers. Whatever you learn, whatever industry you be in, will eventually not remain the same. It will probably die off or it will reinvent itself in a way you wouldn't know! I don't think you can chart a linear growth path any longer. You just have to reskill yourself. There are jobs in the Industries that no longer exist, that were focal jobs around 15-20 years back! So, you just have to keep learning in life! No Institute can teach you or prepare you for this. Whatever you learn there will take you to your first job, but later it's all up to you.

Q. With a great professional path, what things are most important to you at this stage and why?

A. The critical part is to continue to enjoy what you are doing. If you are not enjoying what you are doing then it's time to move on. You can't wake up in the morning and say that you don't feel like going to office. If that's happening, it's genuinely time to move on and re-evaluate what you are doing.

Q. Korn Ferry is the preeminent global people and organizational advisory firm. Congratulations for your role as a Senior Client Partner! How are you finding your new role and responsibilities? How has been your experience being associated with this firm for more than 7 years?

A. It's a very significant change internally. It's a very valued place for me because it was a very hard process to go through that promotion in the firm. So I value it a lot. Life doesn't really change much as far as your clients and candidates are concerned. It's not that I have sprouted new wisdom because of my new designation, or some new gyan that I wasn't being able to give one month back. I think the role in firm building becomes a bit more significant. You just have to focus on doing a lot more work for the firm than for your practice.

Q. Korn Ferry has been ranked as the No.1 executive search firm worldwide since 1990, which is a great timeline of achievement! What according to you are the factors that differentiate the organization in delivering such great results?

A. I would like to look at it in the form that most clients and chairmen on board look. The Board would have three questions basically - WHAT, HOW and WHO. The WHAT which gets answered by the McKinsey & Company etc. The HOW gets answered by the KPMGs,

Ernst & Young etc. We, answer the WHO. A lot of times the WHO changes the WHAT or the HOW. That's the challenge sometimes. The ability to be that trusted advisor to clients is what differentiates us. This differentiator comes from the consultative approach that's backed not just by judgment but actual empirical evidence that is research based. Very few organizations actually have the robustness of the research like what we do. A firm does well when their evidence gets right and the data points get right.

Q. With today's dynamic environment and advancement, what according to you are the challenges that organizations face to build professional talent that builds up leadership?

A. Organizations need to realize that the war for talent is now over and talent has won! I think most CEOs have a challenge of defining a vision, staying true to it and selling that vision internally. If you can do that, it should be okay. It seems to be pretty simple when you look at it but really tough when you want to implement that. I think organizations that have done that have probably succeeded much better than organizations that have fumbled at it. I am not debating strategy. Strategy is great, but you know, more or less every organization will get 8/10 on strategy. Chances are very slim that you will get your strategy all wrong. What you may get wrong 9/10 times is the implementation of the strategy and that is what escapes. Strategy indicates what the organization is going to do but then they don't do it that well. The celebration goes on getting the strategy right but the willingness to implement that strategy doesn't go that well.

Q. What was the turning point during your decision making process for the new BCCI CEO? What challenges did you face while making the decision?

A. Actually it was quite an easy search. Everybody wanted to be in that position and do the job. (Laughs) Some were hesitant as well due to the nature of the work. There was no turning point; however, the challenge was to find the right person for the kind of job. Running such a complex organization is just one criterion out of many. I think our value addition lies in helping clients come to a judgment on who will work better. From a cultural fitment perspective, we got the right guy. Just a resume hiring is not the smartest thing to do. You have to find whether the person will work well in the organization. The things that get valued and get implemented in any organisation depend a lot on the culture of the organization and people do adapt to that culture. In Rahul, we found all of this.

Q. What is your advice to SIMSR students?

A. The faculty tries their best to impart what is best for you. The critical piece is about what you want to take out of it. So, if you want to take an Industry orientation or you want to see the application from what you are learning, where can you probably apply it and moreover you should know what your focus is. You are all smart people and will figure it out. You are the millennial generation entering the workforce and the organizations that you all are going to enter are not used to lot of what you all bring to the table; perhaps because most organizations and senior people in organizations are not that used to being questioned so much and they really don't know how to deal with it. It's very natural to be so at this age. You will question and you must question. Keep that restlessness for the rest of your lives and you will do well.



Q. What is your advice to our prospering Alumni?

A. Just enjoy the journey! Don't worry about the destination.

Q. Any suggestions you would like to give to the Alumni committee to increase the association that our Alumni have with their Alma Mater?

A. I would love to see our college merchandise on sale! That will be great!

Interviewed and drafted by ALCOM Members -

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