

Small Business Spotlight:

Naitik Mehta | CEO and Co-founder Nextbillion.org, Est. 2016

Life Story

In 2015, Emily Carr University of Art and Design student Naitik was in his first internship at Microsoft Corp. when he had a chance encounter with Kartik Sawhney. Naitik learned that Kartik, 100% visually impaired since birth, had been denied the chance to take the Indian Institute of Technology's entrance exam because of his disability – eventually, he attended Stanford University on a full scholarship. While Naitik didn't have any direct experience with disabilities, he learned through conversations that Kartik's story wasn't unique.

There are 1.3 billion people worldwide with disabilities and they are twice as likely to be unemployed due to barriers and stigma. In 2016, Naitik and Kartik launched Nextbillion.org with two other co-founders, Siddhant and Bijan.

The Vancouver-based social enterprise is the only online community for students with disabilities interested in tech, to receive access to personal mentors and employment opportunities, bridging the gap to enable organizations to diversify and be truly inclusive. By focusing on these factors, they curate and foster personal, successful mentorships.

What was the motivation behind starting your own business?

It ties back to my own story as well. I've always been interested in design; I skipped high school to launch my own design studio, which was my first company. I really got into launching ideas and bringing them to life. When I was eligible to apply for university, I got a scholarship to attend the world's best design school in the US – California College of Arts, but my visa was denied for the 7th time on grounds of being a 'potential immigrant.' I know what it feels like to be denied an opportunity that you deserve and qualify for. Not having equal opportunities based on society's assumptions about others was a strong catalyst for starting this social enterprise.

How has mentorship or networking played a role in where you are today?

We can all have a big vision, but without mentorship I think we would be a lot slower to realize it. To me, having mentors is like having access to a living and talking library of knowledge – and that is incredibly powerful.



What has been your greatest reward to date as a social enterprise supporting people with disabilities?

Listening to success stories and seeing students hit their career goals using Nextbillion.org has been my greatest reward to date. Mentors have literally changed my life and when I see the same impact on others; that is one of the most fulfilling experiences for me.

What advice would you give to other aspiring young entrepreneurs from your experience?

My biggest piece of advice is to find and have a really good, important or pervasive problem to solve. It will give you a guiding light to know what you're going after.

Your motto is?

If the world ran out of money, would you still show up to work tomorrow?

Where is your favourite B.C. destination?

I live by the Vancouver Seawall, I love taking a walk by the water, but I also love going to Deep Cove to try donuts. It's an hour and 40 minutes each way by bus but I will make the trip just to have a donut and come back.

Bottom Line

- Over the last year the company has mentored over 100 students with disabilities across the U.S.A and Canada – the goal this year is to support 500 students and scale up to 2,000 in 2019 with a long term goal of 10,000 students
- Solely run by Naitik and one volunteer, the core team will be staffed up over the next six months
- 2017 Internet Society Top 25 Under 25
- Receiving applications from 32 countries so far, Nextbillion.org looks to take their service to a global scale

[Read the full interview](#)