

HALF TIME

WITH
S T RUBANESWARAN,
CEO OF
KNOWLEDGECOM

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE TRAVEL DESTINATION? WHAT ABOUT A DREAM TRAVEL DESTINATION?

Locally my favourite travel destination would be Sabah – I love the beaches there. For me, the dream travel destination would be Monte Carlo.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR FREE TIME? DO YOU HAVE A HOBBY?

I play Badminton, do some hiking and am attempting to be a professional gamer.

WHAT CARS DO YOU CURRENTLY OWN, OR HOPE TO OWN IN THE FUTURE?

I currently own a BMW 5-series.

WHAT ARE YOUR EXISTING AND FAVOURITE ELECTRONIC GADGETS? WHY ARE THOSE GADGETS YOUR FAVOURITE?

Currently it would be my PS4 console. I've been a fan of Sony PlayStations since I was young and I doubt that is going to change.

WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE AUTHORS AND BOOKS?

The Greatest Salesman in the World by Augustine 'Og' Mandino

WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE MALAYSIAN PERSONALITIES?

Tony Fernandez

WHAT MUSIC DO YOU ENJOY?

I'm into the mojo type of music now, fusionised with many types of instruments.

HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR TIME WITH YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS?

When I'm at home with my wife and daughter we spend time together by going for movies and events. We spend most of our time together just doing things. With my friends, we would be going out for drinks, badminton, hiking and the like.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE FINE-DINING RESTAURANT?

The last restaurant I went to was to Manja, KL. Great place.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE DRINK?

Water. Just water, preferably warm.



DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE FASHION LABEL?

No, I tailor all my suits, shirts and pants.

DO YOU HAVE A PREFERRED AIRLINE WHEN YOU TRAVEL ABROAD?

Emirates and MAS.

DO YOU HAVE A PREFERRED WATCH BRAND?

I'm more of a smart watch fan now.

Written by Samantha Joseph Photography by Chu YC

The story of ST Rubaneswaran and KnowledgeCom Corporation is one that's been covered enough times in the Malaysian entrepreneurial space as to become almost a legend. At 26, Ruban took over the reigns of a failing company – a company that was over a million ringgit in debt – and turned it into one of the most recognisable names in corporate training before selling it off to the public-listed financial management solution firm Censof in 2012.

So let's take a look at the man himself first. There's the trademark lock of white hair at his forehead (he assures me it's real). He likes his whisky and looks good in a three-piece suit, aided by his enjoyment of hiking and badminton. He's done enough shoots and interviews to be at ease when posing and being asked difficult questions like 'What do you do in your free time?' and 'Which Malaysian entrepreneur do you look up to?'

Still, I'm curious about the 26-year-old who walked into a stakeholder meeting and gave them a proposal so good that they agreed to make him the CEO and the run of the company. What made him think it was a good idea in the first place?

"Good things don't come easy," he says after a bit of consideration. "I figured let's do something different. I was young then, I had time on my side." The easy thing to do would be to walk away and find a new job once he found out the company was closing. But he believed that KnowledgeCom, even in its beleaguered state, had a number of traits that made it potentially worthwhile to take a gamble on. "Although the brand was small, we had a consistent clientele and had built a name," he explains. "And we also knew that what we were training people in – technology – would never go out of date. I drew up a two-page proposal using that as a base. I need to give credit to my shareholders, because they actually trusted me."

But what was in that proposal? "I think they liked what I told them. I saw there was still hope. I gave them a whole speech," he says with a laugh.

What really drove Ruban's choice, though, was his age. "Even if I failed, I would still have time to recover. My fallback plan was my age. At least I tried something. I told myself, I wouldn't be taking the risk if I was 35 or 40. Yeah, you could do it later like Tony Fernandez. But the risk factors are so high and how many success stories in that vein are there?"

LEAN MACHINE

One of his most effective tactics in those first days was to keep the team as lean as possible by outsourcing. "We had so much debt, we had so many creditors after us," he recalls. "Because of all that we had to manage what we had and grow it from there. We couldn't afford high-paying staff in the company, like an experienced finance manager. We outsourced the finance department so we didn't get just one accountant, we get a whole company of accountants."

These and other 'guerrilla management' strategies are what helped the company maintain a stable basis from which to grow. After three and a half years, most of KnowledgeCom's debts were cleared and they managed to turn a profit of RM1 million. "That's when I dropped a bombshell to the bosses and told them I was going to sell the company," he grins. "I was becoming more complacent. If you're an SME owner, you tend to just remain at a certain level. I didn't know what was next. When that creeps in, most businesses won't survive the next five or ten years. Because you don't change, you don't improve yourself." His solution was to change things up by bringing in a shareholder. After careful evaluation, Censof bought in, making KnowledgeCom a subsidiary of the listed company. With that change from SME to public-listed subsidiary came many changes for Ruban.

"You can't be in the SME mindset any longer," he observes. "You have so many governance aspects to consider, policies, reporting structures, your board of directors. The whole thing changes. The first six months was a nightmare. You can't just do things the way you want them because now you have to go through so many layers of approval first. But after the first six months, we got the hang of it." He was fortunate enough to receive guidance from the executive directors on the Censof board on the ins and outs of in-house policies and other things. "I'd go into meetings without even knowing how to read the financial reporting. But when I ask them, they would stop the meeting and explain."



Over the years I've seen multiple ways of doing things, managing things, and for that I am thankful

Having a mother company also changed the way Ruban managed KnowledgeCom. "Before, I was very hands-on – like any SME owner I needed to be involved in everything. Even when installing software on the computer I had to be there," he laughs. Now he manages from above – his focus is now on delegating, strategising and planning, and trusting that his employees will get things done. "I did my MBA along the way, but things like this you can't ever get from school. The whole experience moulded me to think differently." At 34, he says, he's had the best of many worlds: managed a loss-making company and turning it around; managed an SME company; sold an SME company; and managed a listed company's subsidiary. "Over the years I've seen multiple ways of doing things, managing things and for that I am thankful."

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Surprisingly, Ruban's greatest achievement has nothing to do with his business. Instead it's his trip up Mount Kinabalu. "I've always had a fear of heights. So I thought what better way to overcome that fear than by climbing a mountain," he says. He went with several friends, and they trained intensively for two months before the climb. And then they went up the mountain. "And that was the most challenging thing I've ever done. We hiked a total of 21 hours up and down, it was raining, there was an earthquake in the morning before going off. The worst thing was, to reach the actual peak you have to climb a mountain on a mountain, called Low's Peak."

After witnessing fellow climbers pass out, suffer from mountain sickness and 'puke down the mountain range', he learned to truly appreciate life. "At one point I was walking alone. The thing about mountains is that you have to walk at your own pace. While going up to the peak, that's when the fear of heights hit me. I froze. Mentally I'm tired, physically I'm at my limit, emotionally I'm down. I slipped three times and I was at a mental tipping

point. Should I just give up and go down, or just push through? I told myself, let's just do this. Something just took over, I reached the peak, stood on the ridge, saw the whole of Kota Kinabalu."

Perseverance and unexpected solutions to obstacles seems to be a trademark with Ruban. He admits that he never saw himself becoming an entrepreneur when he was younger, but acknowledges that he always saw himself doing things the way he thought they should be done. "I never liked having people tell me what I can or cannot do. Deep down I always wanted to do something on my own. That's why when the opportunity came at the age of 26, I just took it."

The company recently launched Centres of Excellence Training to provide proper skills training in seven states for Industry 4.0, a term referring to automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies, a fairly new arena for Malaysia. As for Ruban himself, the precarious trek up Mount Kinabalu has done nothing to dim his newfound love of mountain hiking. "I'm looking at climbing Mount Rinjani next," he says with a grin. "Every year I plan to do one mountain. Hopefully by 40, I'll reach Mount Everest."