

'E-commerce leadership has maturing to do'

Back in the US after his Flipkart stint, Punit Soni is settling into his new life. He talks about Indian e-commerce, his need to be in the thick of business and his Bengaluru house that was a bit like the one in Hum Aapke Hain Koun....!

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When ex-Google executive Punit Soni joined Flipkart last year, it made big news. Soni moved to Bengaluru from California and was the Chief Product Officer in the ecommerce company. However, with the reshuffle of profiles in the Flipkart management, rumours of Soni's departure started doing the rounds. Two months ago, he quit.

Back in the San Francisco Bay area, where he lived for almost two decades, Soni talks about his India stint and what he learnt from it.

You said earlier that last year was a rollercoaster ride for you personally and professionally. Tell us about it.

My family loved it in India. We travelled a lot. My four-year-old son was exposed to a lot of cool stuff. I used to joke with people that we had a house in Bangalore just like in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...*! Very nice staircases and stuff like that. Growing up, we saw these movies where people would be running down these staircases. The house would be always full of people and there were parties going on, music, etc. So, in India, there is lot of warmth and con-

leave their job. My advice to everybody is that you have made the leap there, just stick it out and do something else. I am an anomaly. I am probably the only one who packed up and came back.

The feedback is usually two-fold. The leadership in larger internet companies in India hasn't had a lot of management experience. **They are great hustlers and have done a good job of building companies up to a point.** But the ability required to scale the company up is very different. When you have people coming from well established Bay area companies, they are used to a particular kind of management set-up, autonomy, interaction model and they just don't get that (here). The leadership, therefore, has some maturing to do to when hiring and keeping such people. **On the other hand, people from the Valley, including me, maybe are a little naïve (in the expectations of working in India).** We should have an understanding of what the cultural differences could be.

Another reason most people leave is because all these companies (in India) are on fire and they are expecting that these guys will come in and, within a few months, there will be magic that will douse the fire. There is a lack of patience that hurts many people. This is another feedback I have heard.

When did you figure that what you wanted to do did not align with what the Bansals wanted to do?

Typically in private founder-led companies, you have to ask yourself what do you think the company means and if that aligns with the philosophy of the leader. If it does then you forge ahead. If it doesn't, you either commit and do it or move on. That process is difficult but you go through that. It wasn't like there was an epiphany one day. Over the course of the year, the feeling was gradually becoming obvious that the way I operate and the work I want to do may not completely align with the way the company is going.

"These companies on fire expect guys to come in and douse the fire. There is a lack of patience that hurts many people"

Were you disappointed?

I have always been upfront about a couple of things. I follow my instinct in what I want to do. The last four gigs I have done have all been really hard. When I was in Google, I was asked to run the mobile apps group at a time when mobile was the second class citizen in the company. Backend was where all the action was, nobody really cared about mobile. After that, I worked with social, which is not in the DNA of the company. We were trying to build Google+. After that, I was asked to be product head for Motorola, which was in the doldrums. I then went all the way to India to work at

Flipkart, which was trying to transition from being an operational company to a product and tech company. All these are different roles that involved cultural and thought process changes and they were hard. I derive satisfaction from trying something really hard.

In a social media post, you wrote how our role models are screwed up and don't have work-life balance. Were you talking specifically about the tech world?

When it comes to product-led companies, I don't really see too many role models by volume in India.

Here (in the Valley), there are 1,000 people to look up to.

Work-life balance is a different story. Startups can be crazy but in certain cases, they can go berserk. You tend to start late in India and then you keep going very late. The problem with that is, anybody who has a family never gets to see his kid.

Also, what happens is people get burnt out and so the churn rate in India is very high. To me, it's talent management. If I

have spent time getting somebody, trained them and want them to



Soni concurs with Warren Buffett's statement: "Take a year to think through things and make a decision in one day and you will feel the impact for the lifetime"

You said you were an anomaly. Why did you leave? Why not stay and create something here?

I asked these questions to myself. One (reason) is that I need to work in a place that's at the absolute cutting edge of technology. The opportunity to do that in India is much harder. The kind of problems that I want to solve, the kind of people I need to solve that problem are much easier to find here. My hope is that whatever I end up doing, if I am doing it with amazing people, it will increase my chances of success and perhaps that success might have a better impact on whatever I want to do in India, even if I didn't start there.

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Punit Soni

grow, I want to make sure they are sane and stay in it for the long haul. I am not some kind of evangelical guru taking care of these people, I am taking care of my business. That conversation needs to happen a lot more.

You have invested in a few startups. Why not be an investor instead of now trying your hand as an entrepreneur?

I am a player. I am not a coach. I am not ready to be a coach yet. I am a big fan of Warren Buffett's saying, "Take a year to think through things and make a decision in one day and you will feel the impact for the lifetime." Maybe in a few months I will be ready to talk about it.

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