

Spotlight On:

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 do you pair students with mentors?

Nextbillion.org works with students to understand their story, help them define their next best career goal, develop an action plan, and pair them with mentors to achieve it. The mentees are part of a community and help one another. When a student applies to Nextbillion.org they share their personal story and disability – not only their challenges but also their aspirations. A lot of times having a disability is viewed as a negative but it often has its strengths. Our mentors all volunteer to be part of the community to give back through their own stories, career experiences and guidance.

- Who is your mentor?

I feel like I have had access to mentors through my family who I have inherently learned from. My mom ran her own salon for 10 years and my two aunts have also been mentors to me. They both worked in the tech industry and realized that "this kid loves computers" so let's show him what he can do. That's

when I was introduced to creative ways to use the computer. Apart from family, Leila Janah and Arlan Hamilton are two role models I closely follow.

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

I was fortunate enough to have access to mentors early on, which really helped me understand the value of mentorship. In school, my mentors gave me perspective that went beyond aiming for good grades, and instead focusing on things that I really enjoy doing. 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 do you see as your greatest accomplishment to date?

While it's nice to be recognized with external awards, what I'm most proud about is that I have taken a leap of faith to go all in on Nextbillion.org — and seeing it change other students' lives is the empowering part of it. I could be living a more 'comfortable' life working at tech companies, but I'm doing this because I want others to have opportunities too.

- What has been your biggest lesson learned about being your own boss?

The number one lesson for me has been to really focus on what will actually help grow the business and measuring and tracking that. We've been through a few different business models and sometimes we didn't clearly measure the impact of what we were doing. Now, every week, we have one metric that we measure to track the health of the business and is our #1 priority — the number of students with disabilities that we are supporting. When you are running a small business, there are always a million things to do and it's easy to lose focus or get distracted.

- 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 unique challenges have you faced as a youth entrepreneur and how have you overcome them?

The biggest challenge is that as a small team, we are stepping into a space that is typically operated by large non-profits or government entities. Going after a big vision, we often get looked down upon just because we're a small business or I'm a young entrepreneur coming into an established industry. We want to build the largest community of students with disabilities because we feel that there has not been enough done yet. In overcoming this challenge, I don't think we have an exact answer, but we address it by being confident, having a logical approach, showing consistent progress and impact.

- 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. Often, entrepreneurs come up with an idea first only to realize that there is no one using it or that it doesn't solve their problem. Instead, if you find a problem you can always have a million ideas to try and solve it. As long as you have validated there is a problem, you've personally experienced it or you have done your homework that other people are experiencing it, you know there will be people to try your idea out. 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 by bus but I will make a one way trip just to have a donut and come back.

The 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.org looks to take their service to a global scale