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"For us, growth needs to be inclusive, it needs to be sustainable, and it needs to be profitable."

A Conversation with Sameer Raina, CEO

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you introduce yourself and your organization?

Sameer Raina: My name is Sameer Raina, and I'm the CEO of DDD [Digital Divide Data]. I came across DDD about eight and a half years ago. Before that, I spent about 20 years in BPO [business process outsourcing], and I worked a bit on the startup side. I grew up in India, and I spent a lot of time working in Asia, but I've been in the US for about 15 years.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What attracted you to an organization that had both the BPO and the social enterprise model, as opposed to just staying in the private sector?

Sameer Raina: The fact that we can build scalable, profitable businesses while doing good is a unique formula that more organizations should be trying. I see this as an opportunity for me to put my learnings into scaling businesses and building businesses across the world. DDD is a very unique enterprise in that we are building scale, we are doing good, we are profitable, and we are inclusive. At the same time, we are creating a lot of social impact.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It seems like you have enabled DDD to both scale and achieve sustainability over the last two years to become a profitable business, in part by changing a lot of the model structures in terms of focus. How did you make decisions around that? If someone were trying to do what you're doing, how would they know when to change their approach?

Sameer Raina: We look at things first from a commercial lens. What is the right thing to do for our customers? Then, we work backwards with respect to what is right for our employees, and ask, What is the right thing to do for our associates? Then we say, What is the equilibrium between the two? We are not for everybody. We like to think of it in terms of a holistic value chain. If our customers want good commercial outcomes, but at the same time, they want to have a societal benefit, then we are the right organization to partner with. We do everything in a certain way. We have a certain set of beliefs that we are quite vocal about, and based on that, we self-select the customers we work with.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the beliefs that you're vocal about?

Sameer Raina: For us, growth needs to be inclusive, it needs to be sustainable, and it needs to be profitable. Inclusivity is the most important part for us. We don't want to be just another outsourcing organization. It starts with inclusivity, goes towards sustainability, and then profitability. By inclusivity, we mean that the outcome of growth needs to be self-improvement, skill development, career earning potential, learning potential, and all those types of things. That comes first for us. Our reason for being is to do good for our associates, to lift them out of poverty and take them from their current state to a future where they're making many multiples of the money that they're making today. It's a livelihood structure and framework. We start there, and then we say, How do we build a sustainable, profitable business around this? That's what we are very vocal about.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you know a customer's a good fit for you?

Sameer Raina: We talk about the fact that we are a social enterprise and an impact organization, and the fact that we will deliver commercial outcomes at commercial prices. What makes us different and unique is that the money we make goes mostly towards social upliftment and social programs. Many customers like the fact that these days, companies are looking at things like social cost of their supply chain. It resonates more with people compared to, say, five years ago, when having responsible social supply chains with a net positive to society wasn't big on people's agenda.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It was under your helm that the model changed from digitization to AI. Can you explain that change and its repercussions? That’s quite a feat for an organization based on outsourcing.

Sameer Raina: The AI revolution was somewhat easy for us to pick. It checked a lot of our boxes in the sense that these are technologies and skill sets that we have been building out for a while. This is where the future is going. For our associates, we felt that this is the right skill stack to build on. Then we said, What are we doing today that can be transferable to creating training data sets and helping clients build out AI and ML [machine learning] applications? We also hired the right people who were able to help us transition into an AI-first company. It's been about a three-year journey so far, and we've come a long way.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you know this was the right next step?

Sameer Raina: When we think of growth, we think about what we want to do that would train our associates on where the future of work is going. Learning about the AI skill stack– things like ChatGPT, or doing labeling and annotation for all sorts of dataset creation– was critical to us. We start with the end, with the question, Where is the future of work going? What are the skill stacks that are needed for that feature of work? Then work backwards to say, What can we train our people on today that will be useful in five years or ten years from now?

It's similar to how, 20 years ago, people said, You've got to learn Microsoft Office, or You've got to learn collaborative tools like Slack to work in any regular job. In five to ten years, what skills are going to be marketable? What would improve people's chances of employability? Then we build a commercial model around it. There's a demand and supply match that you have to do. That's how we've thought about growth. Where does the growth need to make sense for us and for our people? If the growth is there, but it does not apply to our workforce, then we are unlikely to target it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Every company in the world is struggling to understand how to get up to speed on AI. What have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the transition, and do you have any advice for people making the transition?

Sameer Raina: The challenge we are facing is primarily people's resistance to change. That's classic. People are scared to change. They're scared of things that they don't know. They're not sure where it's going to go and why it would help them. We are spending a lot of time trying to build an AI-first culture.

An AI-first culture is basically that we will focus on building AI-native skill sets, which means that on day one in the organization, you would be using ChatGPT. It would be integrated into your Microsoft platform or Google platform. We'd give you training, coaching support, and then we would use all of these tools. Our big task is figuring out how to make this immersive to the point that it's not treated as something different or special, and make it a part of our day-to-day vocabulary, just like Microsoft Office or any other tool. We think it's about going to be a three- to five-year journey, starting with the management team, then getting them to train the others. We see that the bigger resistance to change often comes from the senior management.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When someone asks you why you are spending all this time doing this work, what do you say? Beyond doing good, why have you taken this path, instead of say, creating a startup and giving a bunch to charity?

Sameer Raina: I've done my share of startups, so it's out of my system now. We've done two startups. We were successful; we got lucky. The reason I got attracted to a social enterprise was that, in my early 40s, I'd done all these things, and there was a fair amount of career burnout happening. I wondered if there was something more interesting I could do. The primary motivation wasn't the amount of money I would make or the financial goals that a lot of us chase in our 20s and 30s. I was looking for something more interesting, something through which I could have a lot more impact.

DDD came along at the right time. I'd done some startup investing. After a while, I realized that I wasn't particularly good at it, and that it's the fastest way to lose your money. Initially, I started consulting with DDD to help them figure out growth and so on. Then, over time, I took up a full-time role.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I suspect a lot of people ask why you're doing social enterprise work in Laos, Cambodia, and Kenya, and not in India when you're from India. How do you respond to that?

Sameer Raina: I've done most of my professional work outside of India. I grew up in India. I did my chartered accountancy from India, then I spent a lot of my career in Asia. My default setting is the Global South, and I'm comfortable in Kenya, Cambodia, India, any of those countries. Given that the biggest need around development is in the Global South, I've been more focused on how to do good in places we're currently operating in. By the time I joined DDD, we were already operating in those three countries. Rather than add a fourth country, I decided to scale those three current operations first, and to understand how we can leverage AI to do good there.

We do some work in India, but it hasn't been our primary focus. We'll get to India at some point. We have a lot of Indian colleagues, people from India who we've hired to work in Cambodia, Laos, and Kenya, so there is an Indian connection.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's been your biggest surprise you've encountered in the last decade? What has caught you off guard?

Sameer Raina: The pace of change is super-fast right now. About two years ago, we were talking about generative AI, then ChatGPT blew up, and now it's agentic AI. At both the personal and professional level, the speed of change in technology and the speed of change in AI is impacting everybody, and while I'm not sure if it's good or bad, it's caught us by surprise. We need to be agile, nimble, and creative as an organization. We need to be comfortable with the pace of change that's happening in technology. I think for us, that's the biggest insight. The question is, how do you build an organization that can ride that wave of change at the same rate at which the market is changing?

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Outside of technology, what have been some of your biggest challenges on the social enterprise side?

Sameer Raina: Being a social enterprise, one of our challenges is always balancing the commercial side with the social side. We've built a board with amazing members who give a lot of perspective on what to lean on, what should be a commercial decision, and what should be a social decision. What I like about the board is, you have equal weight from people who want to push the commercial part, and people who are more keen on the social impact. The reminder to always go back to our north star is crucial for us. Otherwise, why are we here?

Our formula is that you have to build a scalable enterprise to be able to do social good. It's a means to an end. If your enterprise is not profitable and sustainable, you will not be in a position to do social good, because you won't have the money to do social good. We think of it from that perspective. At the same time, the more social good you do, the bigger the organization you need, because you need people to go through the training and you need scholarships.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about the next 25 years, outside of the technology, what are you looking forward to, and what are you hoping that you could do better?

Sameer Raina: For us, it's about how we can broaden the tent to be more inclusive, not just for our own associates, but also thinking about the multiplier effects beyond our associates. Technology and the work that we do in the business model are a means to an end. The more inclusive we are, the more ROI [return on investment] we can project for our work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you think about a quintessential success story, would you say one of yours is your relationship with the board, or your relationship with a senior manager?

Sameer Raina: We take a lot of pride in our alumni who come back to us two years, three years, four years later. A few months ago, I got a text from one of our online tenures, randomly saying, Thanks for all the training. I'm in this job, I'm making this amount of money. That is, essentially, what it's about. We focus a lot on those things.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Zooming out, do you think DDD has had a significant impact on technology in the countries where you work, or on politics in those countries? How are you able to ascertain that kind of impact?

Sameer Raina: Yes. We work in very early-stage ecosystems, especially in Cambodia and Laos. Kenya is a lot further along. When we talk to government officials in Cambodia and Laos, they're often surprised by the level of sophistication of the AI work that we are doing, and it gets everybody really excited. Some of our focus is on nation capacity building. For AI, it’s how to train people to build training data sets for AI applications. We could approach the Cambodian government or the Laotian government and say, We can run this program for you in your technical institutions because we have the know-how, we have the skill sets, and we've done this at scale. We would love to partner with you.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you currently doing that?

Sameer Raina: We are having some initial, serious conversations with the Cambodian government. We are trying to build a model where we are able to get the maximum impact, but at the same time, make sure we are able to deliver quality. We think we can establish a good partnership with them, that we can train people on these five, six, or seven things, or they could send people to our organization to spend three months, or six months, or nine months training. It's exciting for us because we haven't traditionally thought that way. It's something new, and we're still trying to process what it means.

Where does our role start? Where does it stop? What do we sign up for? What type of responsibilities or deliverables do we want? Is this a distraction from what we do? We feel that the opportunity to participate in nation capacity building is a worthwhile endeavor to explore a lot more seriously.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What is your relationship with senior managers and your management team like?

Sameer Raina: Our management team is global. One of the unique challenges is trying to build and scale what is, for the most part, a virtual team. 95% of our workforce is not in the US. It becomes about how you bring everybody along, especially considering the pace of change and what you want them to do. We are focusing on a lot of face-to-face interaction, on making that investment, making that time commitment. We are all in the same room. These types of get-togethers in New York are important because we get to see people who ordinarily we would not see face-to-face.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many senior managers or how many managers do you have right now at that level?

Sameer Raina: Our senior management is basically the country heads, the functional heads, our chief operating officer, and the sales head. It's 10 to 12 people who we consider our think tank in terms of what we want to do. Two of us are in New Jersey, but everybody else is somewhere else.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's interesting that the solution you found for keeping people engaged in a virtual world is to make sure that they come together face-to-face.

Sameer Raina: It's a totally different experience. We all moan and groan about making these trips, but in the end, everybody is excited. They're refreshed. You're talking to somebody every day, but it's a different thing to meet in person. We do off-sites twice a year for a couple of days. Initially, we used to do it in every office. We would all go to some off-site location in Cambodia and invite some of the local management team to join us for a couple of days.

This time we're doing it in Virginia. Last year, we acquired a company in Virginia called Liberty Source. They focus on creating social impact with veterans and military spouses in the US. We were actually the founders of Liberty Source, then we grew the company, sold it, and bought it back two years later. We know the company very well because we founded the organization. Our thinking around buying the organization was on the commercial side, as our clients need a US footprint for delivery and production.

We were able to do a combination of US and non-US things. Since we were super familiar with the organization, we felt like this was bringing them back into the fold. Our first offsite this year is going to be at Liberty Source.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you feel about this very hostile administration, in terms of the decreased funding for USAID and international development? Have you been touched by any of that?

Sameer Raina: Not directly as such because we were never getting funding from them, but we've seen a slowdown with some of our customers that were dependent on that funding, especially programs being done in Africa. We've seen some projects that were dependent on funding from USAID or some other multilateral institution being put on hold, or being canceled. I think there is an indirect impact. Funding for universities in the US is a big one for us because that's where a lot of our business comes from. It's been impacted by general nervousness, as well as funds being cut. Materially, it has not directly impacted our numbers, but we are nervous about it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much for your time and insights.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*