WILL DEFERRED PLACEMENTS BOOST ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

Deferred placements provide a ‘safety net’ to students who might otherwise hesitate to take the entrepreneurial plunge after opting out of well-paying corporate job offers.

BY PAROMITA GOSWAMI

Sitting in his University cafe, Tannaya furiously typed away staring at his laptop at 2 am on a chilling December morning. Well, if you came at 2 pm in a sweltering May afternoon, you would still find him at his spot. This third year student of Computer Science and Engineering is not finishing his college assignments with such vigorous fervor. He spends most of his waking hours (which by the way is an average of 20 hours a day) trying to remotely manage the office of his start-up inFeedo, 90 km away from his residential University. The idea for the start-up started in their humble hostel room in a casual late-night conversation with his roomie, Varun, on feedback by students. After a year, inFeedo had in its kitty $3,000 and angel investment, the support of Tannaya’s ex-Googler director dad’s network and a dedicated team of 10 techies.

Another senior in the college, Sriharideep (Sri), started his social media marketing start-up, but could not continue it after graduation. Sri’s family did not have the kind of social capital that Tannaya’s had, nor was his government employee dad gung-ho about investing his personal savings in Sri’s start-up. While the proverbial entrepreneurial bug is still gnawing away in the silent recesses Sri’s heart, he would have to finish his MS in US, save money, and then sprint after his dreams.
The question then is, can there be a systemic shift in the way career or placement services in B-schools operate, so that the entrepreneurial ecosystem gets a boost in India? IIT Bombay, Madras, Kharagpur, Kanpur and Delhi; XLRI, IIM Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Bangalore, Indore as well as the newbies in Udaipur have started offering 'deferred placements' to its graduating students.

This means that the students could opt to work in their start-ups for two-three years, and if it is not successful, they could be part of the placement process of their schools two/three years later. The underlying principle is that 'deferred placements' provide a 'safety net' to students, who might otherwise hesitate to take the entrepreneurial plunge after opting out of safe, cushy, well-paying corporate job offers. If not anything else, it definitely would help calm paranoid parents.

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They would be heart broken if the apple-of-their-eyes and a lifetime's solid investment in bragging rights lit the sacrificial pyre of parental dreams.

But would it really provide a safety cushion? It is not that the corporates are offering students a job after two/three years. It is only the school offering placement assistance if their entrepreneurial bids fail after two/three years' operations. Would corporates be positively enthusiastic about folks who failed in their bids, and are no longer fresh-off-the-oven, with no 'achievements' to show off?

The other relevant question is: does a true-blue entrepreneur really need a safety-net? How can one be a Bill Gates or a Mark Zuckerberg without the risk-taking daredevilry charm? Isn't even the thought of a safety-cushion blasphemous, as impossible as egg-of-a-horse, or as they say in Bangla 'shona-r
The new world of
B-SCHOOLS

pathor batti" (gold goblet made of stone)?

Well then, one has to take a deeper look beyond the fairy-tale stories of the Gates and Zuckerbergs of the world. Typically a successful entrepreneur has an average of three failed ventures behind him. Failure isn’t necessarily an uncharismatic ignoble thing. It might just be preparing your intellect and attitude for laying that golden egg (not a golden horse egg though).

Cut back to circa 2002. Aakash, a BCom from St. Xavier’s College Kolkata, decides to do an MBA from the then-new kid-of-the-block ISB Hyderabad, earn a year’s experience at NIIT USA and then join his family business (galti karein aur sikhein). More importantly, it gives him a perspective and outlook that he would never have if he did not get the experience in a global company. That would give him the necessary confidence, poise and experience to take his family business beyond Baba and Tau ji’s era to the new world out there.

Coming back to 2015, Pranav takes up a deferred admissions offer to ISB in 2017/18, and is debating whether to accept the job offer at a start-up or join Teach India Foundation. His entrepreneur dad encourages him to also try Yale/Harvard/MIT/Stanford deferred admissions programme. That way he gains work-ex without the worry of getting admission into a good business programme after learning the tricks of the ‘real’ world. His dad believes that one needs to have the guts to dream big, bigger, and go beyond boundaries in one’s dreams.

Ganesh Natarajan, CEO of Zensar Technologies, and chairman of Nasscom Foundation, sounded positively enthusiastic and hopeful about the entrepreneurial ecosystem in India, rating it only after west coast of US and Israel. He talked about different resources available to those with entrepreneurial ambitions, including 10,000 start-ups initiative of Nasscom http://10000startups.com/, Start-up Saturday http://startupsaturday.headstart.in/, Indian Angel Network http://indianangelnetwork.com/ with Chennai Angels, Mumbai Angels and the 370 start-ups they have already funded. The astute people person that he is, one can’t but be hopeful when he says that it’s the second and third-tier cities with its lower middle-class that is going to lead the change in India as ‘the fluently English-speaking generation is a sure-shot recipe for job-hopping and instability in organisations’. He went on to say that the rich metro kids with parental money-engines are all flying away to the fertile pastures of green buckland US, without trying the Himalayan IIT entrance challenge. It’s the small city aspirants who would lead the change.

No wonder then that Umesh, a twenty-something Kanpur lad with a secure HCL job offer, is convinced that he would be able to take care of his family of two sisters and retired dad if his entrepreneurial bid takes off before he graduates from B-school. No, Umesh does not speak fluent English. And also believes that his parents truly trust and respect his judgement.

If the Umesh-s, Tamaya-s, Varun-s, Aakash-s and Pranav-s of the world can only rest parental fears, judgements and concerns, with or without deferred placements, can any one stop India from unleashing its youth power? Only if we let the young ones dream, make mistakes, learn from it, and go for it again, can the birds fly out of the nest to the wide sky out there. Realising their dreams, and parental aspirations.

And if they fail, as Ganesh assures, there is no dearth of astute corporates to see the true worth of their experience. And pay handsomely for their talent, till they take off on their next entrepreneurial bid. After all it takes three to tango (talent, courage to take risks and ability to learn from mistakes).