

When One+One Equals Eleven

Their e-learning programme makes maths easy for students. But, it's their chemistry, which fetches this couple the full marks.

By Shreyasi Singh



For the first five years none of the schools that worked with Nirmala Sankaran (L) and Harsh Rajan worked with knew that they were related in any way.

Nirmala Sankaran and Harsh Rajan knew they were essentially jumping off a cliff when they first started talking about quitting their high-paying corporate jobs with Citibank and Credit Suisse First Boston in London to turn entrepreneurs. So, they decided to test whether they really “had it in them” to take big risks. Harsh went first, bungee-jumping 110 metres off a bridge in Zimbabwe. “It was amazing, but mad,” he laughs. But it made sense, since starting a business was essentially similar—thrilling, terrifying and sometimes, even addictively unsafe. “We skydived over Victoria Falls in tandem the next day to test our resolve. It seems to have worked.”

It indeed did. Back from their holiday, Nirmala, an IIM-Bangalore alumnus, and Harsh, a chartered accountant, made a plunge of another sorts—giving in their resignations and co-founding an online maths tutoring company. The simple aim of the new venture, HeyMath, was to dispel the fear of numbers.

Using animations and graphics, Hey- Math helps students learn mathematical concepts visually. “We want to explain not just why, but also show how a maths concept works,” says 45-year-old Nirmala, who had earlier developed new products for Citigroup’s Global Cash Management and Trade Services.

Today, HeyMath is used by more than 100,000 students in 50-plus countries. An annual

subscription to the HeyMath enrichment e-learning programme typically costs US\$100. Students in India can buy them online for around Rs 1,200 per grade.

Lessons devised by the company have made it into the curricula of more than 150 schools in India, Singapore, South Africa and the United States. “These numbers are expected to double this year,” says Harsh, confident that both India and South Africa promise exponential growth. In Singapore, a leading hub for e-learning, HeyMath has had a significant impact—a study last year showed that more than 60 per cent of its best performing students were clued into Hey- Math while preparing for their O Levels.

In what its founders describe as a “big, big high”, HeyMath has even been likened to Google by Thomas Friedman in his book *The World Is Flat*. And it has won accolades for being one of the most innovative software companies in India, earning an invitation by Intel Corporation to join its “Classmate PC” programme.

When they started out in 2000, Nirmala and Harsh signed up for an academic collaboration with the University of Cambridge as part of its Millennium Mathematics Project to devise lessons and learn the art of effectively leveraging technology. The duo had about £200,000 in seed fund, cobbled together from their personal savings, months of hectic research under the belt, and a fully-powered team between them—though friends and colleagues did warn against diving in together.

“Your spouse is someone you can trust unconditionally. It just made sense to jump in together, and have both our very different skills at hand to set up shop,” says Harsh.

“I love developing products. And that’s what I did straightaway at HeyMath. The idea of conceiving a curriculum and finding out how we would use technology really excited me,” says Nirmala, who had worked with numbers as a commerce student at SRCC, Delhi, an IIM graduate and a PhD student at New York University. “Even now, I obsess about the product. It’s become second nature.”

While she develops the product line, Harsh looks at the business side of things like making sure they are funded, liquid, and that they are constantly exploring different markets and opportunities for growth. Of course, they both admit, the equation wasn’t always perfect. “In the first three years, there was a tremendous overlap,” begins Harsh. “We did many things by trial and error, and by driving the other person up the wall,” he confesses.

According to them, a common ideology to both work and conflict is a must. “You need to have a mechanism to resolve conflict. It works, if you are true to it. If Harsh’s decision on something is an X and mine is a Y, we actually sit and write down the pros and cons. You have to over communicate,” says Nirmala.

Though the couple worked out of London for over a year initially and travelled constantly to India to set up the back-end in Chennai, it made logical sense to move back for good. HeyMath is now based out of a 12,000-square-foot office in Chennai. Seventyfive people, mainly content developers and graphics designers, work from what Harsh calls a “collegiate, Google-esque” office with a “no politics” work culture and a free snack bar.

It hasn’t all been a wonder ride, though. There have been times when the maths didn’t add up. “We went through a really rough patch in 2004. We closed the year with US\$175. That’s not a situation to be in for any entrepreneur,” says Harsh. It’s not a memory that seems relevant today. In 2009-10, HeyMath totalled up Rs 25 crore in revenue. “We should double that this year,” claims Harsh.

So, has it been hard to separate the professional and the personal lives into mutually exclusive sets? Nirmala says that's not something she even attempts to do. "I don't believe in the concept of work-life balance. I have three children—HeyMath is the first— and my moral radar swings between all of them," she adds.

"I involve both my children in the company. I often use them as first customers; and, that has helped them become stakeholders in the company," she says of her daughters, Mandira, 13 and Anoushka, 7. They both share a birth date, December 17. "Now, do the math on that one, if you can," challenges Harsh. Come to think of it, the couple have always had their numbers right.

 [EMAIL THIS ARTICLE](#)  [PRINT THIS PAGE](#)

ARCHIVES: [Sep Issue](#) [Sep Snapshot](#) [Oct Issue](#) [Oct Snapshot](#) [Nov Issue](#) [Feb Issue](#) [Mar Issue](#) [Apr Issue](#)

This e-magazine is brought to you by **9.9 Mediaworx Pvt Ltd**, K-40 Connaught Circus, Delhi-110 001.

Email: inc.india@9dot9.in | Designed by: [wrkondreamz](#)

To unsubscribe [click here](#)