TRAILBLAZERS TALK

Ravi Kumar S.,
President, Infosys,
in conversation with
Mukul Pandya, Editor-in-Chief
& Executive Director of
Knowledge@Wharton

Link to conversation: http://bit.ly/2Z59hNG
**Ravi Kumar S. (RK):** Hello everyone. My name is Ravi Kumar and I am a President at Infosys. Welcome to the next version of Trailblazers. Today I have a guest with me on this chapter, Mukul Pandya who is the Chair of the Knowledge@Wharton. Mukul drives Knowledge@Wharton, which is similar to the Harvard Business Review, the Sloan Business Review, but is also different in many ways. It’s an online version that started in 1999, ideated, conceptualized and executed by Mukul himself. Since then he’s been very passionate about Knowledge@Wharton.

Knowledge@Wharton is in many ways a democratic version of taking knowledge to enterprises in a very federated, democratic way. It’s freely available to anybody who subscribes to it and has about three million subscribers worldwide. It curates knowledge from different aspects of the Wharton ecosystem and also consolidates knowledge from different aspects of the value chain. They have a very interesting version called Knowledge of Wharton for High Schools which gives its subscribers an extended reach into high schools. We’ll talk about it.

Thank you, Mukul, for coming here. We have a beautiful backdrop of Manhattan which has actually just cleared up as we started this conversation.

**Mukul Pandya (MP):** Thank you. It’s a great pleasure to be here, thank you.

**RK:** Mukul, you know, I was so fascinated by the fact that you almost started this in 1999 when the knowledge economy was not born. In many ways, we’re living in a knowledge economy. Every large enterprise wants to be a knowledge enterprise and what best than talk about Knowledge@Wharton and the culture which large enterprises must inculcate to be a knowledge enterprise. Tell us what you think is the culture of being a knowledge enterprise.

**MP:** Sure. So, first of all, let me thank you very much for the honor of being here. As you said, Knowledge@Wharton was launched in 1999. So this happens to be our 20th anniversary and it was celebrated in May.

**RK:** Congratulations on that!

**MP:** Thank you. It’s such an honor, you know, to be here and talking to you about it. The one thing I would just clarify is that it was my idea for about five minutes and after that there’s a whole team of colleagues and very, very bright people both on the faculty as well as on the Knowledge@Wharton team and around the Wharton ecosystem who really have made it what it is. So it’s really a collective effort rather than anything else.

So, great question about what really drives Knowledge@Wharton and some of the cultural aspects of it. I was thinking about it when you were asking and I realized that we never set out to think about if this is what we want to do, if this is the kind of culture we need. We were trying to solve a very simple question which is not unique to Wharton. I think every business school faces it and to some degree every academic institution faces it and that is that every business school is an engine for knowledge creation. At Wharton, for example, there are academic departments, there are research centers, and there are more than 240 faculty members who do research because the career progression in academia is driven by research and the output of this research is working on papers that are highly specialized, written by professors for other professors and meant to be published in academic journals of record. This creates a very interesting paradox that there is a whole lot of knowledge creation going on and it’s about business but it’s not available in a form that is usable by business people. It’s not available very easily to be consumable by businesses and so in effect it’s almost like having a goldmine of intellectual capital which is not being mined. Not only is it not being mined, it’s also not being minted and circulated in a way that can generate value and so, the challenge we faced is, how do you take this intellectual capital of this one of the top business schools in the world and share this knowledge with people who want to learn, especially the business community. The way in which historically other schools have done it is to print journals.

**RK:** They started with print journals and then went online.
MP: Correct.

RK: You went the other way round.

MP: We were trying to figure out how we can create and do the opposite. How can we use the Web as a knowledge creation engine and take this knowledge and share it for free with everyone who wants to learn. So the first aspect that was required to do this was an insatiable hunger for knowledge, and I guess the other term for it would be curiosity. So where does knowledge reside in the school? It resides in the research papers that are being put out, it resides in the books that faculty write, it resides in the conferences that are held, it resides in the visitors, the CEOs of businesses, and government leaders, who come to campus to speak to the students. But the most important source of knowledge that they have is the tacit knowledge that resides in the minds of the faculty. So if there is a major news development, even if they haven’t articulated this knowledge in a formal way, you can ask them what does this new business development mean? And they will tell you. The ability to capture and tap into all these different forms of knowledge is what drove Knowledge@Wharton. So if I were to highlight the four things that were critical to do this, one was curiosity, the second is a culture of collaboration, because it would only work if everybody in the institution participated in this effort, and the third is very important to my heart, that is, giving it for free to everyone who wants to learn. There is an element of compassion towards the world and towards learners who may never have the chance to come to Wharton but who can still learn from it. The last feature, I would say, is as you put this knowledge out, one of the most important, interesting things that happens is that it’s not just Wharton telling the world this is our expertise, but it is the world telling Wharton that this is more relevant from all the things you publish. This is what matters to us - having the humility to keep learning from our readers. So these are the few useful aspects of the culture.

RK: That’s terrific actually.

MP: It was three Cs and an H. It’s Curiosity, Collaboration, Compassion, and Humility.

RK: Absolutely. I think these four aspects almost define a knowledge enterprise in the digital age. Very aptly you’ve articulated how these four things form the pillars of how new-age, digitally native companies work. Curiosity is so important. In fact, I keep calling this the age of problem finding versus problem solving.

MP: Right.

RK: Knowledge@Wharton, which has been born online, has more bit-sized information and that’s your starting point to arouse curiosity and then you go into details unlike the print version which goes into details first and then goes the other way round. The second aspect is that the formats of consumption have changed significantly. In fact, I did notice that Knowledge@Wharton ranks on the top podcasts. You do a radio program every day and you’ve kind of changed the way knowledge is consumed. Tell us a little bit about that.

MP: Sure, so it’s been a very interesting period of evolution. My background is print journalism and so for me just writing long-form articles was just what I was trained to do. But on the Web I realized that you have the ability to offer content at different levels of depth to people and they can then self-select whether it’s relevant to them or not. And this was built into the original structure of Knowledge@Wharton - so let’s say if there was a professor who wrote an article or a highly specialized research paper on how companies use derivatives. At the top level, we would just have a short paragraph summary with a catchy headline about what that research found. If you were interested, you could click on it and then you can read an article in plain English, written by a business journalist based on an interview with the professor about why that research matters to a business executive who may have just five minutes to focus on it. If you’re interested in learning about that more deeply, you can click on a button and you can open up a PDF of the research paper so you get the entire 200 pages full of footnotes, equations, etc. The fourth level of depth that you could go to is related Web links for other research on that topic. In the world of print this is almost impossible to do, but on the Web it’s just a few clicks.
RK: Do you engage with the readers as well so that you could cross tabulate views and know about what the world is thinking about the topic versus what you’re thinking about it?

MP: You hit the nail on the head, because for me as a journalist who came out of the print world, this was one of the most fascinating aspects of online journalism because in the print world you can publish an article in a print magazine and the only feedback you have about whether an article was read or not is sort of the aggregate circulation numbers whether they were going up or not. What happens over time is that the editor’s interest becomes a proxy for the readers’ interest and there is a kind of arrogance that develops, that is, if I, the editor, is interested then obviously my readers will be interested. There’s absolutely no way of testing that assumption. But online if you publish something, thinking this is going to be the top story of the seven that we published today, you know you’re going to be proved right or wrong precisely, quickly, and brutally. This is what is fascinating because it’s not so much about Wharton telling the world this is what we know, but the world telling Wharton this is what’s relevant to what we know. And this has grown even more dramatically since we started podcast. So we at Knowledge@Wharton launched podcasts in 2006.

RK: What kind of podcasts were these?

MP: They were essentially of two kinds.

RK: You would have been one of the first to do it if you’ve done it in 2006.

MP: I don’t know, maybe within the business school world we were probably among the first to do it but it doesn’t matter, does it? The reason we did it was that we thought there will be some value if we had seen a CEO on campus for somebody to actually not just read what the CEO said, but actually hear that person’s voice and hear even the emotional intonation because it’s a different way of learning. The other thing we would do is we had an audio version of every article available on this site. If somebody wanted to read Knowledge@Wharton they could do that. If they wanted to listen to it they could do that too. This has gotten ramped up dramatically about five years ago when Wharton’s started a business review channel on SiriusXm Channel 132 called the Business Radio, powered by the Wharton School. The Knowledge@Wharton team produces 25 percent of the content for that channel. We have a daily radio show called Knowledge@Wharton radio in which we talk to 30 to 40 business experts every week on topics relating to current business issues. We talk to book authors about new books that have come out and then many of these are repurposed into podcasts and distributed globally. So in some ways this is the golden age for people who want to learn [absolutely] and it’s very, interesting to see how this whole aspect has evolved.

RK: Just teeing up on my next question which is related to what you just said. You know we’re also getting into this age of lifelong learning and what fascinated me as I was talking to you is about Knowledge@Wharton for high schools. My personal belief is in the digital age schools, k-12 schools have to be focused around teaching you how to learn or learn to learn and learn to unlearn and the rest of your life you learn because you’re a lifelong learner and the k-12 schools have enabled you to be a lifelong learner. The fact that you are engaged with these high schools, that you’re doing summer camps with them and exposing them to the knowledge ecosystem of Wharton, just fascinate me about how that’s so much forward thinking about where the world is going.

MP: Well, again I wish I could take credit for the idea but it was not my idea. To give you a little back story of how the high school idea came about. It was our fifth anniversary. We had just launched Knowledge@Wharton in Spanish in 2003 in Madrid and we were working on launching Knowledge@Wharton in Chinese in Shanghai in March of 2005.
RK: So you have it in Spanish, Chinese…

MP: Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, and English. We also briefly had an Arabic version and an Israeli version but all these have now been consolidated into a single global site. But in those days I was sort of riding high at all these visions of the world conquest - which new countries, in which new languages, shall we go next. We have an advisory board and one of our corporate partners from GE Capital, Terry Suppers, who was listening to me quietly, asked, why are you thinking about growth only in terms of new countries and new languages? Have you ever thought of doing Knowledge@Wharton for high school students? When I heard that I just touched my heart because I felt if we can introduce children at a young age to the basics of financial literacy to how to think like an entrepreneur, develop their leadership capabilities, we could do something really good for the world. It took a certain amount of time to get the resources to do it. We were on the verge of launching the high school version in 2009 but then as you remember the financial crisis of 2008 came along and we lost all our funding. We did not give up on the idea. We launched it in March of 2011 and Knowledge@Wharton high school has just grown unbelievably in the last eight years. As you mentioned, we have a portal that reaches about a quarter million high school teachers and high school students. We have an investment competition - a stock which is very unique. In fact I am very grateful to Infosys for supporting this competition by hosting our regional finals in India.

RK: I remember that, yes.

MP: We also have training programs with campuses and we do summer camps. We started with 30 students a few years ago and then last year we had close to 300 students. So it’s grown dramatically. In fact, the whole high school program has grown so dramatically that I can’t manage it as a part-time job anymore. So the high school program is moving out of Knowledge@Wharton starting July 1 and will be part of the Wharton global initiatives under its own executive director. I’m just so grateful that we were able to curate or lay the foundation for this program and make it into something big that is now ready to fly on its own. So this is just one aspect of lifelong learning.

RK: What else do you think is important for lifelong learning?

MP: Well, one of my colleagues at Wharton, Adam Grant says that in the past, competitive advantage was determined by how much you knew and today competitive advantage is determined by how much you know how to learn. I think he’s absolutely right. I think that if you go back to the basic idea of remaining curious, it’s very similar to what Satya Nadella often says, don’t be a know-it-all, be a learn-it-all enterprise. And this is pretty much the idea of lifelong learning. So you might start in high school, you might continue through college, you might do well in your professional services, but you never really stop learning. The way in which the world is going with so many changes, the technology and all that, this mindset is going to be very critical to having a fulfilling life and a fulfilling career.

RK: I have one last question. I don’t want to put you in a spot.

MP: No, put me in a spot.

RK: I want to ask you, how can the 230,000 employees, we roughly have 229,000 employees at Infosys, benefit out of Knowledge@Wharton? We have a platform called Lex. It’s a learning platform. Literally every employee at Infosys subscribes to it. I’ll be delighted to know if we could weave it into a framework so that every employee at Infosys has it on an app. We have the Infosys Knowledge Institute which in a small way we started six months ago with the same aspiration of making this a democratized knowledge enterprise. Tell us a little bit about how we could partner on that.
MP: Well, what you're asking is music to my ears because the whole purpose of Knowledge@Wharton is to share knowledge for free with everyone who wants to learn. If you would like us to work with you and your team to get Knowledge@Wharton on to Lex, or if you just want to send me a spreadsheet of the 229,000 email addresses, I will sign them up next week and they will start receiving articles on topics like AI, topics of the most popular articles this week are on. For example, why you need a people oriented focus on AI. There is an article on how you can use conflict in a healthy way to improve the performance of a team. There are articles on all kinds of topics that people can learn from. I'll tell you one small story about why this matters so much, not just for Infosys but for everybody who wants to learn. It was the first birthday of Knowledge@Wharton. It was May of 2000 and we had about 33,000 users at that point. So, in the email blast that we send out whenever a new edition is published, I had a small note to readers in which I said thank you to everyone who has learned from Knowledge@Wharton and has given us an opportunity to serve them. In response to that I got an e-card. It was not signed so I don't know who that came from, but it had an African mask on the front cover so I think it was someone from Africa who had sent it to me and inside there was just a single sentence that said, “Thank you for the opportunity to learn.” That sentence I have carried in my heart for all these years because this is why Knowledge@Wharton exists. There are so many people in the world who need to learn but who don't have the ability to do that. And if we can take knowledge from one of the top institutions and share it with them and they can use it to transform their lives, that's what we are all about. It would be an honor to work with you to see how we can help everyone at Infosys to keep learning from Knowledge@Wharton.

RK: Mukul, thank you so much for that offer. We will certainly get our teams to work with you and hopefully we could launch it within Infosys pretty soon. Thank you for passionately working on knowledge and learning and making this a democratized purpose. I’m so excited about what we’re doing and thank you for actually making this such a noble cause.

MP: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about it. I can go on talking for hours, but I will be probably running out of time.

RK: Sure, thank you so much for listening to this chapter of Trailblazers. Look forward to the next one. Thank you, Mukul for participating in this one from our New York office.

MP: Thank you very much.