International Alumni

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Early under-achiever becomes CEO by 30, now runs large multinational

Few people who knew Sawan Kapoor when he was in high school would have guessed that he would someday be a very successful businessman, let alone earn the title of chief executive officer of an international business by the age of 30.

A 2001 graduate of Western Michigan University’s Haworth College of Business, Kapoor is now the CEO of India’s largest decorative lighting company, Kapoor Lighting, which has interests in manufacturing, exports, projects for the hotel, corporate and architect/interior design industry, product distribution through dealerships and a thriving trans-India retail footprint.

But he hasn’t always been so successful. Kapoor admits he was a mediocre, rebellious high school student—one who missed his first chance to graduate—part of which he attributes to misguided attitudes he developed while growing up in a well-to-do family, despite the best intentions of everyone around him.

“I had access to more money and good fortune than I deserved,” Kapoor said. “In my final year of high school at a prestigious school in New Delhi, I failed three of five classes and had to repeat the year. I wasn’t focused, and it wasn’t easy for my parents to get me into a new school. Looking back, it was one of the best things that happened to me. I lost a year, but I gained the spirit of results-oriented, hard work that is still part of me today.”

Once Kapoor made it through high school, and inspired by places he had visited with his family, he got the idea that he should study abroad for college. When he told his father he wanted to apply to colleges in the United States, his father said, “No way! I can solve your problems in India, but I can’t fly to the U.S. every time you have a problem.”
At WMU, I made friends with a large and internationally diverse community. This included students, teachers, and the people working on campus. I was able to get focused, and the people I associated with on campus were all “doers,” not just “talkers.” That kind of company drove me to excel in everything I was doing.” Sawan Kapoor, class of 2001"
So, they compromised. Kapoor enrolled in WMU’s then new twinning program at Christ College, completing his first two years of college in Bangalore, before enrolling at WMU to finish a bachelor’s degree. He arrived in Kalamazoo in August 1999 in the first cohort of 21 students to go through the program. One of the largest hurdles Kapoor had to overcome was managing daily life without the constant assistance of parents and servants—he left a life of comfort in India and now had to make his own bed. And, he was homesick.

“I moved into Davis Hall and a wonderful thing happened to me—I met my roommate, Fredrik Kaldeus, who was from Sweden, and we became very good friends,” Kapoor said. “I made friends with a large and internationally diverse community. This included students, teachers, and the people working on campus. I was able to get focused, and the people I associated with on campus were all “doers,” not just “talkers.” That kind of company drove me to excel in everything I was doing.”

A trip back to India at Christmas allowed Kapoor to see that life had moved on just fine without him and that caving in to homesickness as an excuse to be unmotivated was a waste of time. With less than two years left to complete his bachelor’s degree, he realized he must step up his efforts to gain experiences that would help him enter the business world. He decided to major in food and consumer package goods marketing, but by the time he returned to campus, it was too late to submit the required paperwork. Dr. Frank Gambino, the director of the program, learned about Kapoor’s interest in the major and made him an offer: “If you are truly interested I can call the Provost and get you in,” Gambino told him.

“Dr. Gambino was the best teacher I have ever come across,” Kapoor said. “He really connects with his students, caring deeply about them and his work. He had created a program that enjoyed 100-percent career placements and offered many paid internship opportunities, with a strong focus on making connections to the real world and the industry. He taught us subject matter that I could use from Day 1 on the job. I was on fire when I got back to Kalamazoo. I threw myself into my studies and began preparing for a career wholeheartedly. I didn’t rest.”

Results of this new-found focus included completing four internships, a study abroad program in Scotland, U.K., making the dean’s list every semester, and taking on a leadership position in the Sigma Phi Omega business fraternity. Nearing graduation in early fall 2001, Kapoor received seven job offers and was very optimistic about his post-graduation employment prospects.

Then, 9/11 happened.

“I was sitting in the Davis Hall cafeteria having breakfast and watching TV when I saw the planes crash into the World Trade Center,” he said. “Something horrible had happened, but I did not grasp the magnitude of the moment. The aftermath that followed, watching reporters at Ground Zero interviewing disoriented people and the surge of emotion for the sheer human loss, the hurt pride and dignity of America—it was numbing and very difficult to endure, and I was only watching it on TV. I went to the Bernhard Center later that day and President Floyd (WMU) came up to me and asked how I was doing; he was very courteous and polite and I appreciated the gesture.”

Every job offer was rescinded, Kapoor believes, because he was an international student with brown skin and would need immigration sponsorship to work in the U.S. “I started to think I would have to go home,” he said.

Gambino stepped in again, helping Kapoor secure an interview with Daymon Worldwide Inc., a company that is responsible for private label retail products for more than 150 retailers in 22 countries. In December of 2001, Daymon offered him a sponsored position. “It was a great feeling to graduate the next day with a job in hand,” Kapoor said. “Daymon Worldwide was an excellent place to work. The hands-on nature of getting stuff done became my DNA, as it was a core value at the company.”

Kapoor enjoyed five productive years with the company and the opportunity to move around the U.S., working in Rochester, New York, Grand Rapids, Mich., and San Francisco, Calif. He quickly moved from a business analyst role to managerial roles with progressive responsibilities. He racked up several notable accomplishments, including building the Safeway “O” Organics
program, which generated $40 million in year one from 152 items, and a premium line of food products for Meijer, a Michigan-based grocery/department store chain—products sold even today.

“Launched in 2005, the Meijer Gold brand of ultra-premium products was the finest in terms of taste in the entire store and provided an unexpected surprise to the customer while ensuring superior profits for the retailer,” he said. “I remember touring Spain, France, Germany and the United Kingdom looking for the finest products with a sense of tradition that would delight the Meijer guest. And, of course, it was lots of fun traveling to Europe for a young executive.”

In California, Kapoor worked in the Safeway Stores corporate office managing all business aspects of alcoholic beverages, among other categories. With the American wine country of Napa and Sonoma just half an hour away, learning more about wine became a passion. He was inspired to transition from food-based corporations to the wine business, leaving Daymon in 2006 to join Palm Bay International, a New York-based company.

His first Palm Bay role was to create financial and cultural change in what was a 30-year-old, quarter-billion-dollar company struggling to remain profitable. He quickly rose to vice president of enterprise planning and business development, where he was directly responsible for managing a budget in excess of $260 million, all purchasing, supply chain, human resources, information technology, business process design, enterprise reporting, and global business development. When Kapoor was just 30 years old, he was named CEO of Palm Bay’s new import and distribution business, Sutton and Maxwell, where he planned, developed, executed, and ran a new direct-to-retail beverage alcohol import and distribution business for company principals. Within two years, Sutton and Maxwell was operating in 11 states and generating $23 million in sales revenue at a staggering net margin of 28-percent.

“The great thing at Palm Bay was that all the challenges were very workable because they were all people-related challenges,” he said. “I credit campus life and the interactions I experienced at WMU for helping me meet those challenges. It was at WMU that I learned American culture, sensibilities and values. My education propelled me from a $40,000 salary to seven figures in 10 short years. I was living my American dream.”

Though Kapoor had become very comfortable living and working in the U.S., once his first child was born in 2009 he considered moving back to India. He and his wife decided it would be important for their children to grow up near close relatives, so they packed up and moved back to New Delhi. “While the weave of my fabric was American, the threads were from my motherland, India, and I knew it would be a good decision to return,” Kapoor said.

The first six months back in India were incredibly tough on Kapoor, who experienced culture shock in reverse. He had gaps in his understanding of popular culture and he did not know the Indian ways of doing business. “I came back to India after so many years away and felt like I had joined the Army,” he said. “During those first few months, my personality was deconstructed down to nothing, just like a drill sergeant would do to cadets, and then India helped build me back up again, like a Marine. I started working at Kapoor Lighting, serving in various roles the first 1,000 days to get reacquainted with all the details of running a company in India.”

The company is in the process of consolidating with Kapoor as its leader—the third generation to run the 65-year-old business founded in 1948 by his grandfather, Om Prakash Kapoor. He said the future looks “incredibly bright” and that he has no regrets about the pitfalls he encountered on his rise to the top of the corporate world.

“I am thankful for every single experience I have had, which had to play out in this precise sequence for me to be where I am,” he said. “Every failure, every ‘no’ I ever heard, every disappointment, every rejection—all the negatives were working to help me come closer to being the masterpiece I was becoming. And while this process of continual improvement never ends for any of us, I am deeply thankful for the life I enjoy. It takes a village to raise a child, I had an excellent village around me from the foundation built by family and friends, to WMU, where I came into my own!”