



fabulous.  
brilliant. loveable.

The story of firebrand labs' remarkable 14-year journey  
of consistently delivering value to its clients.

AVIS Viswanathan & Vaani Anand

## About Arvind Aathreya, firebrand labs and this book

Arvind believes he has been dyslexic from childhood. He barely scraped through high school. And he dropped out of college. Yet, he always had remarkable confidence in his own ability to execute whatever tasks he took up. Early on in his career, he worked in a few challenging corporate roles, tried his hand at launching a couple of businesses, and handled some meaty branding and marketing assignments as a consultant.

On October 9, 2009, Arvind set up firebrand labs (FBL) with a former colleague. He envisioned that FBL would be a professional services firm that offered branding, marketing and design services for the digital world. His partner soon quit. But Arvind has soldiered on as an entrepreneur, often against several odds, for 14 years now.

***‘fabulous. brilliant. loveable.’*** tells Arvind and FBL’s story. It explores how, over the years, FBL has made execution excellence its mantra – for growth and value creation. It is the extraordinary story of an apparently ordinary entrepreneur and his remarkable enterprise.

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**fabulous *ideas.***  
**brilliant *execution.***  
**loveable *people.***

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The cover design uses symbols to convey the themes of creative ideas, love, direction, growth and learning. These themes are integral to the culture and spirit of firebrand labs.

**Biographies by *the happynesswalas*<sup>™</sup>:**

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- All content in the book has been written and presented as told to the authors by Arvind Athreya, founder of firebrand labs.
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- The authors are not responsible for misrepresentation of any facts with regard to firebrand labs' journey.

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*Thank you to all our clients and employees –  
past, present and future.*

*Without you, there is no firebrand labs.*

*For all those who seek adventure, learning  
and execution excellence.*

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*“Most of what you hear of  
entrepreneurship is all wrong. It’s  
not magic; it’s not mysterious; and  
it has nothing to do with genes. It’s  
a discipline, and, like any discipline, it  
can be learned.”*

---

*Peter Drucker,  
management guru.*

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## Prologue

This book tells a true story – authentically.

It tells the extraordinary story of an apparently ordinary entrepreneur – Arvind Aathreya – and his remarkable enterprise, firebrand labs. There are chances that you may find the story very relatable. Besides, therefore, you may want to take away learnings that are relevant to your life and business.

But before we tell you more about this book, let us tell you how it came about.

### **“Can you report to work at 4 am – daily?”**

We first met Arvind Aathreya on Saturday, September 19, 1998.

Back then, we ran **imagequity+**®, Asia’s first reputation management firm, out of our home office in Chennai. We were recruiting an executive assistant (EA) for AVIS. And Arvind had applied for the position.

That first meeting with him didn’t start well though. Because Arvind came late. He said he was stuck in traffic.

Although we don’t normally entertain latecomers, we went ahead and interviewed Arvind. We instantly liked what we saw in him. He displayed a rare hunger to succeed. He was just getting to be 21 then. Yet he was well-informed and well-read. He had barely scraped through high school. And he had dropped out of college. But he did not let the lack of a college degree affect how he presented himself. His confidence and aggression shone through the meeting. He expressed a genuine keenness to work hard and to learn.

## Prologue

We loved having smart folks on our team. We counted on their restless energy and their adventurous spirit. Arvind evidently possessed both these qualities. So we knew that he would fit the role of AVIS' EA perfectly.

We offered him the job – with one, critical, condition though: He had to start work at 4 am, and be willing to go on till well after 9 pm – daily! This was indeed a punishing work schedule. But an EA had to comply with it because AVIS started work at 4 am every day and usually went on working till about 10 pm.

***Would Arvind be willing to start at 4 am daily – sharp on time, every single day – and work those long hours?***

Arvind grabbed the offer. He didn't think twice. He was excited, ready and willing. He joined our firm on Monday, September 21, 1998 – at 4 am!

It was fun having Arvind on our team. He was cheerful, curious and enterprising. He asked relevant and important questions. He always took notes diligently. In a non-Google era, he did his research for client projects through extensive reading and by talking to people in industry. He was continuously improving his skills sets even as he was learning. He was planned, organized and methodical. Over time, therefore, he became our go-to person for executing ideas for our firm and for our clients.

There were, of course, times when he came across as impatient, demanding and pushy. But these traits formed part of his quintessential urge to get things done. He was never satisfied with mere talk. He loved taking charge and going to work on a plan. ***He thrived in the adventure and action that executing a project offered.*** Naturally, therefore, he resisted the idea of anyone coming in the way of getting something done.

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Importantly, over the two stints that he had with our firm, spread over four years, he was never once late. That he showed up late for his interview was clearly an aberration. Whether he was reporting to work or attending a client meeting, he was always on time.

### ***Drifting apart, reconnecting***

After his last stint with our firm ended in 2006, Arvind and we drifted apart. As it sometimes happens in life, for various reasons, we simply chose to stay distant from each other. It was only during the pandemic that we reconnected with him.

What we discovered is that Arvind has not changed too much. Yes, over the years, he has become more anchored and contemplative. Even so, he continues to be ambitious and aggressive. He remains a compulsive reader. And he's still great at taking notes, asking relevant questions and learning from everyone around him.

### ***Getting to know Arvind, the entrepreneur***

After we reconnected, we often found time to hang out with each other. Our conversations were free-flowing. They happened over no-agenda meetings – usually over great coffee, great whiskey and great food! We surely had heard of him setting up firebrand labs (FBL). But it was only through these conversations that we understood Arvind's thinking – and his journey – as an entrepreneur, as a leader of ideas and people.

As we became aware of Arvind's vision for FBL, and its core ideology, we began to look at him differently: We saw him not just as a former team member who was doing well in life, but as an entrepreneur who has survived the upheavals of leading

## Prologue

an enterprise for well over a decade.

What's significant in the FBL story is that Arvind brings old-school wisdom and practices to lead a 25-member team that has grown up in the digital age. This team, obviously, has not done business in a world without the internet, smartphones, Facebook and social media. Also, this team's members come from heterogeneous, non-marketing, backgrounds. *It is Arvind's sound domain acumen, in branding, marketing and design, and his committed leadership of this young team, that has resulted in FBL consistently delivering value to its clients for 14 years now.*

### Why this book?

We intuitively felt that this story of entrepreneurship and execution excellence needed to be told. That's when – and how – the idea of this book was born.

Now, this is certainly not the story of a celebrity entrepreneur. FBL is also not a sexy tech startup that has attained cult status as a unicorn. Then, why this book?

Good question.

Here's why:

First, an entrepreneur's journey is pretty similar to a pilgrim's. We know this from our own lived experience. We have been entrepreneurs for over 27 years now – 16 of those years have gone by in dealing with a crippling bankruptcy! So we believe that, like a pilgrim on an arduous pilgrimage, through starting a venture, the entrepreneur too sets off on a grueling journey, hoping fervently for *nirvana*, for salvation. Yes, surely, there are successes and profits, and failures and losses, strewn along

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the way in equal measure. But, without exception, every step on the entrepreneurial journey is fraught with uncertainty and risk. And, therefore, every moment in an entrepreneur's life has to be filled with devotion, discipline and dedication. Unable to deal with the constant upheavals, many entrepreneurs quit within one or two years of starting up. ***Arvind and FBL have been around for 14 years! This conviction to stay on the path is truly exemplary; it must be celebrated.***

Second, this journey of survival has undoubtedly been a roller-coaster ride. There have surely been significant wins and gains. But there have also been times when things have not gone too well. ***This journey is like any other – it has its share of stumbling, falling, getting up and moving forward. It is this willingness to get up after every fall, dust oneself, and march onward, that calls for celebration.***

Third, many times over the last 14 years, Arvind has felt lonely. He was plagued by self-doubt and entrepreneurial fatigue. But each time he had to deal with a no-go situation, someone always, miraculously, came forward to help. A connection to a new client happened or a door opened, and the FBL story progressed. ***Well, this is how life is; this is how life in business is. As long as you work hard, with integrity in your intent, no matter how dark it is, the path will unfold. So, the FBL story is, in a way, any – and every – entrepreneur's story. Therefore, it will be very relatable.***

Fourth, this is a story where the entrepreneur and his firm have not necessarily revolutionized the space of branding, marketing and design with one grand, big, idea. They have taken several creative ideas, one idea at a time, and executed them diligently and exceedingly well for their clients. They

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have done this consistently for 14 years. *This is the story of how FBL has made execution excellence its mantra – for growth and value creation. This approach of singularly focusing on one idea, and making it your life, is indeed worthy of celebration.*

### The book's structure

So, this book is essentially a celebration. It is a celebration of **fabulous ideas**, of the **brilliant execution** of those ideas, and of the **loveable people** who make those ideas and their execution possible. It is a celebration of firebrand labs! Which is why we are calling the book so: *'fabulous. brilliant. loveable.'*

Now, normally, an entrepreneur and their enterprise are inseparable. So it is with Arvind and FBL. Yet, in telling their story, we have not just looked at Arvind's entrepreneurial journey. We have also looked at what his leadership has created – and delivered – over the past 14 years.

This book, therefore, has four parts:

- **The journey** – of Arvind, the entrepreneur, and of his enterprise, FBL.
- **The engine of execution excellence** – the people process, the culture and the delivery process that help deliver value to FBL's clients.
- **The showcase** – of stories of value creation for FBL's clients.
- **The future** – as Arvind sees it, and how he's leading FBL into it.

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While writing this book we have ensured that the storytelling is breezy – and conversational. Each chapter is a quick read. In fact, you can read the entire book in less than two hours.

We hope you will find it useful.

Love and *Happyness!* 😊

**AVIS Viswanathan and Vaani Anand,**

*the happynesswalas™.*

Chennai, August 2023.

[www.thehappynesswalas.com](http://www.thehappynesswalas.com).



## Notes

- **firebrand labs** is spelt in lowercase all through the book. This is in keeping with firebrand labs' presentation style.
- American English has been followed as a style throughout the book.
- The quotes in the book that are attributed to some people from FBL's circle of influence – both employees and clients – have been gathered from FBL's archives.
- Acronyms used in the book:
  - FBL – firebrand labs.
  - US – United States of America.
  - UAE – United Arab Emirates.
  - CEO – chief executive officer.
  - CFO – chief financial officer.
  - CMO – chief marketing officer.
  - HR – human resources.
  - KPO – knowledge process outsourcing.
  - B2B – business-to-business.
  - B2C – business-to-consumer.
  - MBA – Master of Business Administration.
  - ICCU – intensive critical care unit.
- The new names of Indian cities have been used throughout the book.

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## Foreword

I have known Arvind Aathreya for over twenty years and we have been in constant touch with each other.

I am proud to mention here that Arvind is my friend. I have been using firebrand labs' services for promoting my creative works, including my books and speaking engagements. FBL has been our company's vendor for a very long time too.

Arvind is also my occasional sounding board, a friend who keeps recommending books (he has gifted me a few great books) and movies to me. We generally keep updating each other on what's happening, and what's not happening, in our lives.

I am humbled and honored that Arvind chose me to write the foreword to this wonderful book on FBL. I find this book to be indeed **fabulous, brilliant** and **loveable**! Just like the boutique entity that Arvind has built with hunger, passion, commitment and conviction, while facing challenges, uncertainties and many hurdles – both on the business side and personal side of life.

I am perhaps entitled to write this foreword as I was Arvind's first customer (even before he set up FBL) to pay him an advance and engage his services. I am glad that he remembers this till date and has captured this anecdote in this book.

### **What is entrepreneurship?**

When I think of the FBL story, I recall this quote by American businessman Dan Pena: "Entrepreneurship is enduring pain for a long time without relinquishing."

## Foreword

Entrepreneurship is often confused with wealth creation. My belief is that wealth creation is just a byproduct. To me, entrepreneurship is all about giving life to an idea or to a set of ideas. It is a journey that someone goes through, along with a set of people. These people are a community that meet and interact every day, giving life to the ideas, executing them relentlessly, bettering the way their enterprise operates, finding ways of delighting their customers, earning a living, and inspiring people around them. They go back home every day with a sense of fulfillment. I am indeed glad that Arvind has chosen this path of building an entity. He has traveled a long distance to become an entrepreneur, to belong to this tribe.

### ***Entrepreneurs have stories to tell***

In this lovely book, *'fabulous. brilliant. loveable.'*, Arvind has outsourced the job to professional writers to tell the story of his own entity, about his own life. There's nothing like telling a story to oneself. Every entrepreneur has stories to tell, and ideally this should start with a narration to themselves. And Arvind has done just that.

I am a fan of small and medium-sized entities and entrepreneurs because they are very natural and passionate. These entities have to compete with the guerrillas and the one-man entities, while gaining customers and retaining them. It is never easy.

I have watched FBL from close quarters. I know its growth trajectory. And until two years back, I used to invite Arvind for a yearly review of his business – his strategy, his people and his ideas. I did this in my capacity as his well-wisher and with a personal interest to learn what's happening in

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the digital marketing world. This review was apart from our annual lunch/dinner ritual.

## ***What I like about this book***

Reading this book, I particularly loved the following:

- How a key recruitment happened at a tea stall and how Arun got into FBL.
- How Arvind created the opportunity with SmartMegh and managed to work within the budget provided by the customer. Also, how he gained, in reality, more out of this association.
- FBL's transition to becoming an outsourced chief marketing officer (CMO) for entities who cannot afford a full-time CMO.
- His voyage of self-discovery to Barcelona in 2016.
- His grit in sending a mail to his team of 25 when the pandemic broke out, saying that FBL is not downsizing – despite the lockdown, loss of business and much-reduced cashflows. I simply loved this.
- His frustration when a few employees started exiting and his straightforward question to each of his employees: “*Nee kelambaporiya?*”, meaning “*Are you leaving?*”. There is no other quicker and easier way to get a confirmation!!!
- Rewarding Arun with equity in FBL and thereby making him a partner. While Arun richly deserved this, it needs a big heart from an entrepreneur to give a share from his little cake.
- I am thrilled to read many accolades from many reputed customers of FBL.

## Foreword

I have been interacting with many of FBL's current team members. And I have interacted with some of the past team members as well. It is like dealing with my own team. That's the kind of freedom I have either assumed with FBL, or have been granted by them. I must mention the names of some of the current and past stars of FBL: They include, among others, Arun, Badri, Raj, Manoj and Doris.

I adore and respect some of the policies that FBL has, including 'no official leave policy', 'food on the house' and 'Once upon a Friday'. In fact, I was a guest speaker at one of the 'Once upon a Friday' sessions.

### **Kudos to FBL!**

I am not sure if Arvind is an accidental entrepreneur. But I am aware of two horrific accidents he has had to encounter: Once along with his wonderful wife Deepa, and once with his smart son Aaryyan. Thankfully, all of them recovered. What astonished me was that the business continuity was intact. Kudos to the FBL team for this and for the kind of leadership demonstrated by Arvind!

FBL has traveled a distance; it has never been a cruise ride but has been a roller-coaster ride. I am sure that this is the case with many entrepreneurial stories. What's key is that one must keep driving looking at the windscreen constantly, and must look into the rear-view mirror whenever it is needed. The journey creates stories, the journey shapes an entrepreneur, the journey ultimately adds wisdom.

Arvind has shared his story for now and, in a way, he is telling many others like us to tell our stories. I need to write my first chapter soon. Thanks, Arvind, for this inspiration.

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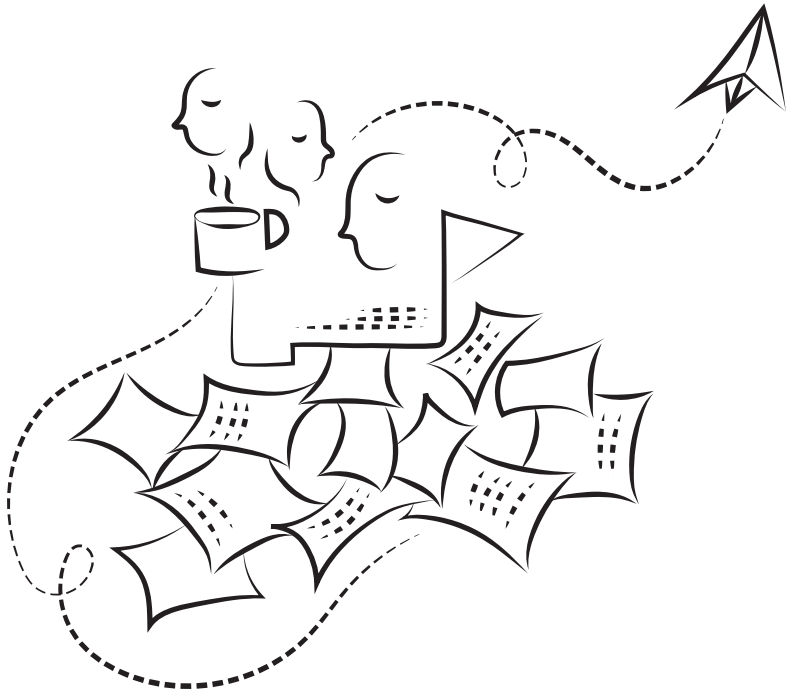
Kudos to FBL! Continue to remain *fabulous, brilliant* and *loveable!!*

**P.C.Balasubramanian,**

Entrepreneur. Author. Speaker.

[www.pcbala.com](http://www.pcbala.com).

Part I  
**The journey**



**The extraordinary story of an  
ordinary entrepreneur and his  
remarkable enterprise.**

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*“I think it is very important for you to do two things: Act on your temporary conviction as if it was a real conviction; and when you realize that you are wrong, correct course very quickly.”*

---

**Andy Grove,**  
*former chairman and CEO, Intel.*



## ***It happened over a coffee***

Arvind could feel the excitement within him as he walked into Coffee World. This was a bustling coffee place on C.P.Ramaswami Road in Alwarpet, a quiet neighborhood in Chennai.

It was Friday, October 9, 2009.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee further lifted Arvind's spirits. He chose a corner table and settled down. His two guests had not yet arrived.

As he waited for them to join him, he reflected on what made him excited and hopeful that afternoon.

## ***Interesting, seesawing times***

His life and career over the past 12-odd years had been very interesting and eventful.

In fact, he had been through some seesawing times in his career: He had gained valuable work experience. He had also tried his hand at business. A few quick wins had brought him some profits. And he had failed at a few things he had attempted – losing some precious cash in the process. But he had no regrets. He had met interesting people, worked on challenging projects, and, importantly, he had learnt a lot from all his myriad experiences.

During this time, he had also found love: He had met Deepa, a bright HR-professional, in 1998. After a two-year courtship, they married in December 2000. They now had a beautiful family: Aaryyan, their son, had just turned eight, and Kaamaakshee, their daughter, was four years old.

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At this stage in life, Arvind felt he wanted to invest himself in building something significant. He had quit his last full-time employment in 2007. And he had been working as a freelancer since then, doing projects related to branding and marketing. But the work was not always meaningful. It left him feeling incomplete and unfulfilled. Also, the income was erratic. He realized that he was going to be 32 soon. *He was eager to do something better – more qualitative, more lasting.*

Interestingly, he knew what that something was.

## **Responding to a market need**

Deep within himself, Arvind believed that he understood a key need of the market. He also had the conviction that he could build a company that could meet that market need. In fact, he was at Coffee World that day to discuss this idea with two people who he thought could be his partners in the new venture.

The two people were the guests that he was waiting for: Hemalatha Madathil and D.Muralidharan.

Hema was a former colleague, and a sales, branding and marketing veteran. Murali was a business acquaintance who came with years of experience in sales and marketing in the fast-moving consumer goods sector.

So, that afternoon, when Hema and Murali arrived, Arvind did not lose even a moment. Once their coffees were ordered, he quickly pitched his idea to them.

He was sharp, clear and focused:

*“The world of branding and advertising was changing with the advent of the internet and social media. Large corporates were*

## **It happened over a coffee**

*seeing this change coming; they were reworking their marketing strategies while still preferring to stay with the big advertising companies. Small enterprises, who could never afford the big advertising companies, were however struggling. Their marketing partners were small-time accredited advertising agencies. These agencies were not quite ready or willing to adapt to the oncoming digital age. They lacked creativity. They also were not agile and tech-savvy. Worse, many of them were unprofessional and remained unaccountable to their clients.*

*“Clearly, there was scope for a new design-based professional services firm to enter the market. This firm would not do traditional advertising releases for print and TV campaigns.*

*Instead, this firm would use design to address the branding and marketing needs of businesses. This would be a professional services firm that would evolve with the times – it would embrace the digital age, and grow with emerging new media technologies and platforms.*

*“This firm would champion free-flowing creativity. It would ask ‘Why not?’ when attempting to solve business challenges for its clients. The ‘Why not?’-question would lead to an answer that would be at the heart of any creative idea and solution being proposed. This aggressive approach would define this firm’s identity and act as its guiding light.*

*“Shall we go ahead and launch this new company – a new professional services firm that offers services in branding, marketing and design, for the new, digital, world?”*

Arvind recalls that moment vividly: “I proposed the setting up of a design-focused, branding and marketing firm. I believed that we could professionalize the space that many small-time players were occupying. We could offer great value to small

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and mid-sized clients. I invited Hema and Murali to join me on this journey.”

Both Hema and Murali liked Arvind’s idea of setting up a professional services firm that offered branding, marketing and design services. They agreed with him that it would do well. But their responses to his invitation to join him were different.

Murali was frank. He said he was not willing to take a risk and face the challenges in an entrepreneurial venture. He declined Arvind’s invitation.

Hema, on the other hand, was willing to come on board immediately! Not just that, she offered to get her father to allow them to set up an office in a vacant space that he had in Pondy Bazaar, a commercial hub in Chennai.

Arvind was overjoyed. Not only was his idea validated by two senior professionals, there was an office space readily available for the venture to get started!

## ***The birth of firebrand labs***

As Murali looked on, Arvind and Hema went to work on naming their new firm. They wanted the name to reflect their aspirations and their firm’s brand promise.

Almost instantaneously, Arvind proposed a name: *firebrand labs*.

He said that ‘firebrand’ reflected aggression, ambition, and the urge to get things done and grow. And ‘labs’ conveyed the essence of a firm that would play around creatively with marketing ideas, even as the digital age evolved.

## ***It happened over a coffee***

Hema liked the name. And that was that.

***firebrand labs was born on Friday, October 9, 2009, at an ordinary-looking table at Coffee World on C.P.Ramaswami Road.***

There was nothing evidently spectacular about the moment.

But as he fell asleep that night, Arvind thought about his father and grandfather. He felt he had inherited his entrepreneurial traits from them.

Both men had set up small-scale businesses. His father, in the early-1990s, had founded a computer-aided design and drafting (CADD) company. That's when he brought home a computer, a 386 machine. Arvind was in high school when he designed the logo for the CADD company on this computer. He also had got his father's business cards screen-printed. His grandfather had done more pathbreaking work in design: He had designed the noteworthy two-door Dolphin car in the mid-1980s!

Thinking about his father and grandfather, Arvind felt good about himself and what he was setting out to do. To grow in the digital world, the market needed professional services in branding, marketing and design. It needed a firm that would go beyond merely offering great ideas. It needed a firm that executed those ideas efficiently, effectively and excellently. firebrand labs (FBL), he strongly felt, was that firm. It was an idea whose time had come!

***Now, that's how all entrepreneurs feel when they are seeding a venture that is backed by nothing but an idea. They don't know if their venture will succeed or fail. They don't know***

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*what the way forward is. They have a zillion questions in their head, but they have no answers. Yet, they are craving adventure. They almost always, intuitively, feel that what they are setting out to do must be done.*

## Getting off the mark

“Our first client never paid us,” informs Arvind.

That first client for FBL was the Chennai franchisee of a national chain of stores that sold vegetables and fruits. Arvind had worked with a freelance designer to deliver the client’s design collaterals in record time. But while they used all the collaterals that FBL had designed, the client simply didn’t pay!

He was initially upset. But Arvind says he quickly overcame that setback: “I didn’t let that experience with that client kill my enthusiasm. It was a time when innocence and purity of intent led the way. We moved forward, taking up any project that came our way – ad films, branding work and designing.”

## When trust keeps you going

Giving him hope and support was another client, and well-wisher, P.C.Bala Subramanian (PC), who was the co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Matrix Business Services.

Arvind and PC had known each other since 2002.

They had met when Arvind and Deepa had cold-called PC. Apart from being a successful business leader, PC was also conducting heritage quizzes for children at that time. Arvind and Deepa pitched an idea for a children-based event to PC on the call. He agreed to meet them. But because they could not leave their baby, Aaryyan, alone at home, they took him along too. PC was understandably surprised to see the young couple show up for a business meeting with a wailing infant in tow. ***Now, it certainly requires drive, and a go-getting attitude, to cold-call a CEO and go with your baby for a crucial business pitch!*** PC felt the same way too: He was impressed by the

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couple's enterprising spirit. He also liked the idea they had proposed. He immediately gave them the mandate to run the event and issued them a check for 50% of their fee as advance!

Ever since, PC has often entrusted his core branding and marketing efforts, both personal and professional, to Arvind and his team. "So far, it has been a fascinating journey with FBL. The energetic and passionate team under Arvind's able leadership never fails to deliver," says PC. In 2010, PC turned an author. He invited Arvind to manage the promotion and launch of his first book, *Rajni's Punchtantra*. Barely into its first year of operations, this launch offered a great opportunity to FBL to showcase its capability in execution excellence. The event, and the promotions around it, were a big hit.

"We were just getting off the mark in 2010. So PC's support counted in a big way. His trust in what I was trying to do was immense. That mattered a lot to me," says Arvind.

## **Two top priorities emerge**

As the first year progressed, Hema quit FBL, saying that she wanted to focus on other priorities. Her young son, Prashant, a student of visual communication, was interning at FBL as a designer for a few months. In fact, he was FBL's first design resource. But he too left the firm when he went overseas for his graduate studies.

Hema's decision to move out meant that Arvind had to vacate her father's space, which they were using as an office, in Pondy Bazaar. So, Arvind set up FBL's office in his children's bedroom in his apartment! Saving on office rent gave him the bandwidth to focus on other areas of the business that needed urgent attention.



## *Getting off the mark*

The two top priorities at that time for FBL were these: It desperately needed a designer. And it needed more paying clients.

### ***A key recruitment happens at a tea stall***

When Arvind spread the word that he was looking out for a designer, a friend introduced him to Arunkumar Ravi.

Arun was 22 then. He had an interest in design but he was working at a knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) company. It was a job with a fancy title and a decent salary. But Arun wasn't happy doing that job. He was sure he wouldn't keep it for too long. That's when he came to meet Arvind.

Their first meeting happened at a tea stall on Wednesday, June 16, 2010.

Arvind found Arun to be quiet and measured. He also appeared to be willing to work hard and learn on the job. As they sipped tea from small glass tumblers, Arvind outlined his requirement for someone who could anchor and lead FBL's design function. But he was also very clear that this was only a freelancing role. FBL, he said, could not afford to pay a designer a full-time salary – not yet.

Arun liked Arvind's in-your-face and down-to-earth nature. He did not think too much. He accepted the offer immediately. He remembers that conversation at the tea stall: "Something made me decide that I could freelance with FBL. I saw this as an opportunity to learn design and to do something more exciting apart from keeping my primary job."

That's how FBL's first key team member, its designer, came on board. As a freelancer though. Importantly, Arun agreed

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to work out of the children's bedroom in Arvind and Deepa's apartment. He didn't complain. He was very understanding. Arvind quickly helped Arun set up his workstation in the children's bedroom. And made the dining table his own workspace!

### ***A retainer client brings stability beyond the cashflow***

Around the same time, Arvind had also been networking and leveraging his contacts. So small design-based projects kept coming in at regular intervals – and these kept FBL chugging along. The good word began spreading on its services – and its reliable execution capability. Soon, new clients reached out.

One of them was the well-known foreign exchange services player, VKC Forex. The client's requirement was for month-on-month support with branding, marketing and design across their operations in Chennai. Arvind proposed a retainer fee of Rs.20,000 a month. The client signed up immediately. *This was FBL's first retainer client.* The firm had finally got off the mark in the truest sense – with a regular, steady, revenue stream!

As soon as this contract was in place, Arvind called up Arun: He said that FBL could now offer him a full-time role. Would he like to quit his job with the KPO company and join FBL?

Arun instantly agreed to take up the assignment. Thinking back to that time, Arun says, "I didn't have much to lose. I was not enjoying my work at the KPO company anyway. Moreover, the work at FBL was interesting and exciting. So I decided to join Arvind's team."

*That moment when Arun joined FBL marks a significant*

## ***Getting off the mark***

*milestone in FBL's journey. It showcases that, revenues, cash, valuation and funding are not the only key requirements for a venture that is starting up. People come first – ahead of everything else. In choosing to invite Arun to join him, Arvind had instinctively followed this age-old golden rule of entrepreneurship.*

Also, Arun's joining was an important step forward for all three parties: Arvind, FBL and Arun. Over the next several years, this association would turn out to be mutually beneficial for all of them.

### ***A trophy client arrives***

Meanwhile, even as Arun joined as a full-timer, FBL bagged a trophy client. A co-sponsor of the Chennai Super Kings (CSK) Indian Premier League (IPL) team awarded a marketing-and-promotions contract to FBL – for execution during the third edition of the IPL in 2010.

The client was Tilaknagar Industries, one of India's leading spirits companies. Their flagship brandy brand, Mansion House, was CSK's co-sponsor. The client was referred to Arvind by a friend. The mandate involved promoting Mansion House through all key IPL-related collaterals. This included working within CSK's strict brand guidelines and helping promote brand Mansion House on the costumes for cheerleaders, bus panels and billboards. Also, since regulations in India do not allow liquor brands to advertise, the promotions had to be around a surrogate product – Mansion House sugar cubes!

Typical of Arvind, he seized this amazing opportunity to work closely with Mansion House and CSK. He astutely led the promotions for Mansion House – brilliantly executing every

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small detail that the project required. The client was delighted with FBL's performance on the mandate.

Recalling the association with Tilaknagar Industries, Arvind says he gained personally from meeting the company's chairman and managing director: "I went to Mumbai to meet him before they awarded us the contract. He was very unassuming. I learnt the importance of staying grounded, despite being wealthy and successful, in that meeting with him."

Arvind's perspective there is an important one.

*Working with a trophy client is a great learning opportunity for any entrepreneur and their business. The value of the business deal itself does not always have to count. But the opportunity to do business with a large brand, and their leadership team, can often teach you what to do – and, importantly, often, what not to do! For instance, if you analyze your efforts and the returns carefully, you will learn a lot about being profitable versus being visible. You will also get exposed to corporate standard operating procedures, to operations at a mega scale and to inspiring leadership styles. On the other hand, you may even get to see how poor leadership affects an organization's culture and performance, and how bureaucracy stifles creativity in large companies!*

Overall, the first year of operations had been eventful and memorable for FBL. Each day had brought with it new opportunities, challenges and learnings. Arvind was excited with the way his journey as an entrepreneur was shaping up. He surely did not know what lay in store for him on the road ahead. But he was more than ready to embrace whatever came his way!

## Soldiering on

At first, Arvind and Deepa thought that they were both dead. That it was all over for them.

Just a moment ago, they had been listening to Ilaiyaraaja hits on the music system in their red Hyundai Accent Viva, on the Bengaluru-Chennai highway. And now, they were beginning to experience shooting pain.

It was still dark. It was 5 am on Friday, July 8, 2011. In a few moments, despite the state of shock they both were in, they realized that they had met with a terrible accident! A tipper truck had overtaken them from the left and made a blind U-turn. In a nanosecond, they had crashed into it, and the front part of their car had gone under the truck's fuel tank!

Arvind, who was driving, had only a few external injuries. But Deepa took the brunt of the impact. She was seated on the left, next to Arvind. She went into a seven-hour surgery at Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, to have a titanium rod implanted in her left arm. She was in hospital for a week. It took two months for her to be able to get up and walk.

With Deepa bed-ridden, the pressure on Arvind was immense during this time. He had to manage FBL's fledgling business, take care of Deepa and babysit their two young children. "In this trying time, I developed an attitude in me that I could now face anything in life. I discovered that I had quietly become stronger. I also stopped driving at high speeds. And I stopped chasing goals maniacally. I could have wound up the business but an inner voice urged me to keep going," he says.

His close friend, Professor S.Arunachalam (Prof.Chalam), too motivated him. Prof.Chalam visited Arvind and Deepa a few

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days after she was out of hospital. He told Arvind: “You have defied death. Don’t worry about anything. Just move forward.”

Those words gave Arvind great clarity. He had surely been kept alive for a reason. If that reason was to build FBL into a more qualitative, stronger, larger, professional services firm, he resolved that he was not going to spare any effort in doing that!

Interestingly, despite the upheaval that he was experiencing, the business somehow kept coming in. And Arvind knew that as long as he could keep the focus on his team coming up with powerful and innovative ideas for FBL’s clients, and on executing the ideas well, they would be able to retain those clients. So he simply, clinically, concentrated on doing just that: He planned meticulously for each client’s deliverables with his team and followed through on those plans diligently.

Arvind’s email sign-out around that time had this powerful line: “*Serving piping hot, simple and workable ideas!*” It was good thinking, sound strategy and a promise that his team and he unfailingly kept with every client.

But even as Deepa recovered, and normalcy returned to their home and work situations, life threw another googly at Arvind. In September 2012, he had to go in for a surgery to rectify a kidney condition that he had been dealing with. He may have surely felt frustrated that life was constantly pinning him down. But, again, he chose to not let his challenges get the better of him. His automated replies to emails he received during this time reflect his positive outlook: “*Regret the absence from work... One of life’s ways of challenging me... Version 2.0 will be a lot more promising and productive too! :)*”

*Undoubtedly, everyone goes through similar phases in life when they have to deal with unforeseen circumstances and crises. But the story gets more complex, and more challenging, for entrepreneurs because if they are grounded, the business is impacted majorly. Which means, operations, client delivery, revenues, cashflows and profitability – every aspect of the business – gets affected. So, a personal downtime for an entrepreneur is really more crippling than many can imagine.*

### **Developing a new capability – and a key relationship**

Now, Arvind is not someone who can remain overwhelmed by a situation for too long. He has always been adventurous and has constantly sought new horizons. That's why he launched another company, Sitewisdom Technologies, in 2012.

This company too had a sharp focus: Building high-quality websites. The new venture reflected his vision of evolving in the digital space while offering professional services. Arvind partnered with two smart, young, engineers to start this company.

Sitewisdom did well for the three years of its existence. But when the two young engineers moved on to join a large jewelry chain, Arvind shut down the company. "I did not see any point in running two outfits. I integrated the website design service with the other offerings from FBL. I had learnt a lot about website design while running Sitewisdom. I decided to put those learnings to work at FBL," explains Arvind.

Designing websites is an important capability that FBL has. They proudly, and characteristically, sign off every website they design with the tagline: "Designed with ♥ by firebrand labs!"

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***Learning and experimentation are key entrepreneurial traits. If the experiment succeeds, astute entrepreneurs quickly monetize the opportunity. That's exactly what Arvind did with website design.***

The website design business rewarded Arvind in another special way. It helped him forge an important, long-term, relationship. This was with R.U.Srinivas (RU), a growth mentor for startups, entrepreneur and HR (human resources) thought leader.

RU was the CEO of Caliber Point, an outsourcing and offshoring consulting company, at that time. FBL designed the company's logo and website.

RU later went on to set up The Idli Factory, a food company. He again roped in FBL to handle all its branding and marketing efforts. RU swears by the value that he gained from working with FBL: "Arvind anchored the marketing for us when I ran The Idli Factory. The entire function was outsourced to FBL and they did it in style. Over time, they created a brand that became known globally, yes, globally! They designed fabulously innovative names and packaging designs, and labels, and came up with ideas repeatedly, many times, even when unasked. Arvind is a class act. He takes the effort to understand the business, asks probing questions honestly and fearlessly to help you think better, and completely aligns with the business in all aspects."

## ***Another fruitful association***

Meanwhile, in 2014, Arvind met Venkat Aravamudan, the founder and CEO of an IT services company, SmartMegh, for exploring a business opportunity. It was the first time that



the two were meeting each other. But that one meeting led to a very productive two-year association for both FBL and SmartMegh.

Venkat urgently needed branding and marketing support, on an ongoing basis, at SmartMegh. He instantly liked Arvind and the value proposition that FBL brought to the table. However, he did not have the budget to hire FBL on a monthly retainer.

By then Arvind was clear that he did not want to sign business deals that did not make financial sense. After all, FBL had been around for five years. It was now time to focus on being profitable while growing.

So he proposed a win-win arrangement to Venkat: Pay half of FBL's retainer as a fee, and for the other half, give FBL seven seats at SmartMegh's office.

By then, FBL had shifted its office multiple times. These shifts happened either because they had outgrown the space or they couldn't pay the rent or for both reasons!

Venkat loved Arvind's proposal. He accepted it immediately.

In under a month, the small team from FBL moved into SmartMegh's office in Guindy, a busy commercial area in Chennai. And, soon, the two organizations began a journey of supporting each other and growing together.

What is significant here is that FBL's business arrangement with SmartMegh opened an avenue for Arvind to test a powerful idea that he had been nurturing for a while.

He felt that small companies, like SmartMegh, could not afford to maintain dedicated marketing teams that were led by professionals who had decades of domain experience in industry. A small company, on the other hand, would be open

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to having an insourced chief marketing officer (CMO) and an accountable, ready-to-ideate-and-deliver, team. As Venkat began to see value in having the young team from FBL work closely with him, he too bought into this idea. In having FBL work out of his office, therefore, Venkat saw Arvind as his CMO and Team FBL as his insourced marketing arm! At one time, SmartMegh's website, in fact, called Arvind their CMO!

It was still early days for the outsourced CMO idea to evolve and become a key offering from FBL. But the idea had taken root and not one, but two clients – RU and Venkat – had realized value from it!

*Almost all entrepreneurs come up with new, exciting, ideas. But only a few go on to implement their ideas. And fewer still build successful delivery models with their ideas that can create value for their customers. Arvind, clearly, was showing signs of belonging to the third category.*

## ***Taking a tough call***

“She has to go. It is a painful decision. And I am taking it, no matter what happens.”

These were the thoughts that were racing through Arvind’s mind when he parked his car at FBL’s office one morning in August 2016.

He had taken a decision to separate from a business associate that FBL had come to rely on hugely over the past four years. That morning he was going to announce his decision to her and ask her to leave.

## ***The entrepreneur’s dilemma***

An entrepreneur’s journey is often peppered with instances of interesting partnerships with like-minded businesses, fellow entrepreneurs and associates. These partnerships and associations happen because the entrepreneur is hungry for growth. And they want to believe that a potential partnership or association will help them grow or will deliver a crucial break. But sometimes when a partnership stops delivering results, the entrepreneur has to take the tough call to end it.

This happened with Arvind too.

Between 2012 and 2016, he had a business arrangement with a young branding and marketing professional, Mala Menezes (name changed to protect identity). She was married to a friend that Arvind had known for some years.

Over the four years that Mala was associated with FBL, she regularly brought in business through her wide network of contacts. There was a commercial arrangement in place that

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governed her relationship with FBL. This arrangement was largely fulfilled on a regular, ongoing, basis.

“It worked fine as long as it lasted. We got some important clients through Mala. And based on our understanding, and our cashflow, we kept compensating her. She was also very committed to help FBL grow. For instance, when we needed a larger office space, she paid the advance deposit to the landlord,” recalls Arvind.

Then, what went wrong?

Sometime in July 2016, Mala wanted a new commercial arrangement drawn up. She was keen to pursue other business and personal interests. So she proposed a lower investment of time and effort from her in FBL. However, she wanted to take home a fixed remuneration which was not linked to her performance.

“This was completely unacceptable to me. I am one who believes that when people work together, everyone must have their skin in the game. When I saw that she was now unwilling to make this commitment, I told her to leave. It was not exactly an amicable separation. There were dues to Mala that were outstanding when she left. But over a period of time we paid her off fully,” informs Arvind.

*This is a classic situation that most entrepreneurs have to face at some point or the other on their journeys. For instance, people who were once high-performers have to be sent out when they stop performing. Or high-performers whose values don't align with the organization's values have to be asked to leave. These are tough calls. But they have to be taken. And there is no easy way of doing this. Simply rip off the Band-Aid – be blunt, direct and execute the decision.*

## ***Taking a tough call***

*It surely will hurt. But it always works.*

### ***Taking time off to repair and revive***

The separation from Mala certainly hit FBL's business badly.

FBL had around then moved out of SmartMegh's office to a new office space in Besant Nagar, an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Chennai. This was the first office, since the firm's inception in October 2009, where the firebrand labs signage was on display. It had taken FBL seven years to get to have an office where a signage could be hung on the door! Surely, this meant stability. This also meant that there was now a need to meet a rental commitment each month. Besides, the team had grown in size. So the monthly cash requirement was high.

Something had to be done quickly to ramp up client acquisitions and bring in revenue.

Arvind felt the pressure building in him. He wondered if he had done the right thing in asking Mala to leave.

One afternoon, he decided to take his mind off everything at work and went on to aimlessly scroll through his newsfeed on Facebook. An online ad for a 10-day retreat for entrepreneurs in Barcelona, Spain, caught his attention. He was at once excited with the prospect of taking time off and connecting with other entrepreneurs. He signed up for the retreat immediately.

The retreat was offered by a Danish entrepreneur-couple, Michelle Rødgaard-Jessen and Nikolaj Astrup Madsen.

As someone who seeks adventure constantly, Arvind loved being in a new city, in a different country, among complete strangers. He says he gained a lot from interacting with the

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20 other entrepreneurs who had come from all over the world. It definitely gave him a chance to break away from his routine. He also found it interesting that he got to understand multicultural perspectives on life and business.

“I met an entrepreneur from London who shared his story of how he leads a four-member team and generates £2 million in revenues annually. It made me question our own business model and my acumen as a business leader. I realized that I had to reduce costs and grow revenues significantly. The 10 days I spent in Barcelona transformed my perspectives. It was a voyage in self-discovery,” declares Arvind.

*Like with any other context in life, taking a step back from all the action – and chaos – is important in entrepreneurship too. Entrepreneurs normally don't do this because there are costs involved. There is a financial cost, of course, if they have to get away to a place. There is also an opportunity cost that they fear – what if the operations break down in their absence, what if a new client opportunity is missed? Well, these arguments and counterarguments will go on endlessly. The truth is that unless you step back, you will not see the big picture; unless you let go, you will not see what's possible.*

Arvind came back from Barcelona in end-September 2016. He was not just refreshed and rejuvenated. He was confident that a new chapter was going to unfold for FBL soon. He did not know how it would happen. But he was sure that it would happen.

## Doors open

“Arvind, we want you and your team to handle social media and digital marketing for all our 15 properties.”

This is what Vikram Cotah told him when they met two days after Arvind returned from Barcelona. Vikram was then the chief operating officer (COO) of GRT Hotels, a leading hospitality chain in South India.

The words that Vikram spoke were magical from Arvind’s point of view. After Mala’s exit, FBL needed to urgently bring in clients with whom it could build and sustain long-term relationships. The door that opened at GRT Hotels offered FBL precisely that through a monthly retainer arrangement. This contract continued till January 2020.

It gave FBL the opportunity to understand and deliver digital marketing services for the hospitality industry. It involved constantly coming up with new, powerful, ideas to create engaging content for the hotel chain’s 15 properties; each of these properties had separate social media handles. So, the content had to be sharply localized while following the brand protocols of the group. It also required making the digital presence of GRT Hotels very vibrant and interesting.

“This engagement made FBL gain insights and knowledge on the hospitality industry. This is a space where the competition among the various players is intense. Our challenge and mandate was to make sure that all our digital marketing ideas resulted in growing the business for GRT Hotels. I am very proud that my team stayed agile and delivered consistently on the mandate,” says Arvind.

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## **After hospitality, healthcare**

Even as FBL was finding its rhythm working with GRT Hotels, Arvind received a call from a business associate, Deepa Johnson. She had been FBL's contract manager when they had done work for a company called Covai Property Centre, a leader in assisted living for senior citizens. She was now heading brand strategy for Kauvery Hospital. They were looking for a firm to support their branding and marketing initiatives. She wondered if FBL would want to pitch.

Arvind led FBL to make a very well-researched, structured, presentation to the management team of Kauvery. The client liked the pitch. And FBL was awarded the mandate.

Over the next several months, FBL's creative ideas and diligent execution capability generated a positive buzz around brand Kauvery. The design collaterals from FBL communicated the Kauvery value proposition strongly. And the digital marketing effort was nuanced and professional. This focused approach built Kauvery's reputation as an expert healthcare company that had great empathy for its patients.

Veni Verghese, who subsequently headed branding for Kauvery, mandated and closely reviewed several of FBL's marketing initiatives for her company. She specifically refers to a concept that FBL conceived and executed in 2019: "The campaign titled '*1 billion neuron. 1 expert team.*' that helped the launch of advanced neurosurgery at Kauvery was a big hit. FBL's ability to turn around the collaterals quickly, and to consistently deliver everything on time, was appreciated by everyone including our founder and group managing director, Dr.Manivannan Selvaraj."

Now, the healthcare scene in Chennai is very active. And



## Doors open

fiercely competitive. The players in this space constantly keep tabs on what their competitors are doing. Therefore, word got around soon that Kauvery had a young and professional team leading its digital marketing efforts. This led to Arvind receiving a call from a senior member of Rela Hospital's management team. The caller wanted to know if FBL would be open to working with his hospital. Naturally, Arvind was elated that their client's competitor had sought them out. But while thanking Rela Hospital for the offer, he declined it citing a non-compete agreement that FBL had signed with Kauvery.

*Entrepreneurs always have a choice to grow faster if they are not very insistent on being ethical. But it is only by being ethical and staying true to its core values that a company can build its character, culture and reputation. It is only by being uncompromising on this front that an ordinary company, over time, transforms into an institution.*

Arvind chose well. He chose right.

FBL continued to create value for Kauvery Hospital all the way till the end of 2020. For various internal reasons though, Kauvery decided not to continue this relationship.

Interestingly, as soon as Rela Hospital came to know of this development, they reached out to Arvind again in January 2021. This time, Arvind did not hesitate to accept their invitation to work for them! In under two days of meeting their leadership team, FBL had been appointed as Rela Hospital's branding, marketing and design partner.

## The first international project

Arvind firmly believes that relationships in business are more important than the money in business. "Over the years

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of running FBL, it has been my endeavor to nurture the relationships we have built with people in our network. This includes clients, partners and employees. Yes, profiting from a contract is important. But the goodwill that is earned from sustaining key relationships is priceless,” he explains.

Bearing testimony to this business philosophy, almost all of FBL's clients have been referred to them by other, satisfied, clients. One such referral led to FBL bagging its first international project.

Euroceil, a manufacturer of stretch ceilings, has been FBL's client for several years now. Its founder and CEO, N.Badrinarayanan, connected Arvind to the Dube family.

At that time, the Dubes – Dr.Ravi Dube and his wife Sujatha, and their son, Akash – were hosting the Terry Fox Run in Chennai annually. Akash was battling cancer and was receiving treatment in Chennai.

The Terry Fox Run hails the courageous spirit of young Canadian athlete Terry Fox who, despite losing his leg to bone cancer, ran across Canada to raise funds for cancer awareness. Ever since, Terry Fox Runs have been held in various cities across the world by people to support cancer research.

Unfortunately, Akash passed away in a hospital in Houston, Texas, in May 2012. He was being treated there after his cancer relapsed.

Even after Akash's passing, the Dube family supported the Terry Fox Run in Chennai. They mandated FBL to handle the complete marketing efforts for the annual event. FBL did this without charging a fee. “We believed in the cause. We wanted to give back to society. And we were inspired by the story of

## Doors open

Akash's leadership and drive, that too when he was dealing with cancer himself. The runs were for promoting cancer awareness and for research. We surely could not think of this as a commercial opportunity," says Arvind.

The Dube family was very appreciative of FBL's support for the Terry Fox Run campaigns.

So, when Ravi needed a professional team to handle digital marketing for his Sharjah-(UAE)-based healthy-snacking company, Prime Nuts, he turned to FBL. It was a challenge, and a huge opportunity, for FBL to understand global marketing trends and needs in the nuts business. This understanding was then translated into powerful ideas. Subsequently, collaterals and campaigns were created out of those ideas. "It was a memorable experience working for Pime Nuts. We gained as much value from the relationship as the client gained from working with us," says Arvind.

Clearly, many doors had opened for FBL. This phase of growth was crucial for it as a professional services firm in the digital branding and marketing space. Working with clients in India in the hospitality and healthcare sectors helped it sharpen its expertise and focus. And in working with an international company, FBL gained global business perspectives and insights.

*It was also beginning to mature as an organization. Importantly, the people process and the delivery process were both functioning optimally: They were well-aligned to create value for clients.*

In January 2020, as he sat in his office and looked ahead into the year that had just arrived, Arvind felt hopeful and excited. He realized that the time had come for him to lead FBL into

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the next orbit of growth. He also knew that he could do it pretty well.

That's when crisis struck – in the form of the pandemic!

## ***Crisis, confusion, clarity***

Arvind was inconsolable. He wept like a baby for several minutes.

It was past 9 pm, on Tuesday, March 24, 2020. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, had just announced a 21-day national lockdown in an effort to control the spread of covid-19.

Arvind was aware of the global threat that covid-19 posed. He had been reading up on it.

Besides, there were loud and pronounced early warning signs on the havoc that the pandemic was likely to cause to FBL's business. Sensing that lockdowns were coming, and that the pandemic may last for several months, perhaps even a few years, some of FBL's clients had already canceled their retainer agreements with the firm. The first cancellation had come in from Feathers Hotel on March 16, 2020. More than 50% of FBL's revenues had dried up in just under a week. FBL, as of that evening, March 24, 2020, had just one retainer client and two ongoing projects as revenue sources.

Even so, nothing had prepared Arvind for the full impact of the pandemic on his business.

Sitting in his living room, in his apartment in Thiruvannamipur, a quiet residential suburb of Chennai, he had watched Modi's announcement on TV. As he began to make sense of the likely repercussions of the announcement, he realized that businesses across India were going to be hit majorly. They would have to take drastic measures to survive. Experience had taught him that every time an upheaval took place in industry, companies normally, immediately, slashed marketing budgets. This was

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already evident from the retainer cancelations that had come in.

*But how does anyone deal with a lockdown – brought about by a global pandemic?*

With no clear roadmap available at that time on how the pandemic was going to be tackled, it certainly appeared that more lockdowns would follow.

*How could a small company like FBL then acquire new business? When would clients resume their retainer arrangements with FBL? And until all this happened, how were salaries going to be paid? How would he be able to retain his exceptionally talented team members? Will FBL survive?*

These questions were overwhelming, coming as they were, all at once. That's when Arvind broke down and cried continuously, loudly, for several long minutes.

Finally, with support from an equally-shocked-and-clueless Deepa, and Aaryyan and Kaamaakshee, Arvind gathered himself. He knew that he had to stay anchored in order to lead his firm, his team and his family through this ordeal.

*He knew he was not alone. Every entrepreneur, including Deepa, every business leader, every self-employed professional was in the same situation. But as it often happens with every person in a leadership role, in a crisis, you still feel you are alone.*

Arvind hardly slept that night.

## **Transparency is strength**

The next morning, on Wednesday, March 25, 2020, he got on a long call with Arun. Over the past decade, Arun had emerged

## ***Crisis, confusion, clarity***

as a key member on the team. Besides leading the design function, he was the longest-serving team member in FBL.

On the call, Arvind shared his thoughts and his concerns with Arun. He outlined the plan that FBL would follow to keep delivering value to the three active clients that they had. He talked about how they would do *whatever it takes* to ensure that the team's interests – and *salaries* – were protected.

Arvind then immediately wrote an email to his 25-member team. The subject line of the email read: “*We are not downsizing!*”

He chose to be direct and transparent. He gave specific financial details of how FBL's business was impacted by the pandemic-led situation. He reassured everyone that there would be no layoffs. He told them that their salaries for March 2020 would be paid in parts, as and when the payments for invoices due were collected. He said he would come back in a few weeks on the plan forward for April 2020 and beyond.

Again, as promised, he wrote to the team on April 20, 2020. Many of the team members had joined only over the past year. So Arvind had to tell them that FBL had never denied anyone their salaries in the firm's history. “There is no free lunch. We must get paid for the time we invest at work,” he wrote. He prepared the team, however, for salary renegotiations given the exceptional circumstances. He also let the team know that it could take up to six months for a semblance of normalcy to return. He promised everyone that 100% of their salary dues would be cleared when that happened. “In this time, I seek your support for sticking together as ONE team,” he added.

***In doing what he did, Arvind lived by a key principle of leadership: Transparency is strength. Some people think***

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*otherwise though. They think that transparency makes a leader vulnerable. But the truth is when you have nothing to hide, when you lay all your cards on the table, you are actually inviting everyone on the team to do what is right for the organization than what is right for an individual or for a few people. When the leader is transparent, it often brings people together.*

## **The team adapts**

For most of 2020, the team rallied around Arvind's clarion call. They adjusted, adapted and collaborated.

Just like most companies across the world did, FBL too became tech-enabled. Arvind planned a new workflow process that ensured that people could deliver on client mandates from their homes.

The fact that his small team had faced the situation with courage and conviction made Arvind feel good. It inspired him to go after new business opportunities.

## **Business picks up**

Even as he was doing this, Ather Energy, a company that makes smart electric scooters, reached out.

Ather had already evaluated a proposal from FBL in 2019. This was to manage a campaign that enhanced employee engagement. Although the FBL proposal was cleared by Ather's chief human resources officer, its finance team did not approve it. Arvind and his team were very disappointed with this development at that time.

So everyone at FBL was excited when they heard from



## *Crisis, confusion, clarity*

Ather again. The company needed an urgent revamp of their employee portal. They wanted to know if FBL would be able to handle this requirement. And, of course, FBL said yes!

A detailed remote-working battleplan was laid out by Arvind. He asked Doris Santhus, a design strategist with FBL, to lead the project. The team worked cohesively, as one unit, and helped Ather launch the new version of their employee portal in a record period of four months.

It was an *aha* moment for FBL. It reiterated to them that they were still great with ideas, with execution excellence and with managing client relationships very well. This was a morale booster for Arvind too – because leading through the pandemic was very challenging.

Meanwhile, a few other significant client wins happened. Rela Hospital signed up as soon as Kauvery ended its contract. Xpheno, a Bengaluru-based specialist staffing services company, contracted with FBL. Also, Delphos International, a large capital and market advisory service firm, based in Washington, D.C. (US), gave FBL a monthly retainer mandate. This was FBL's second major international client opportunity.

There were a few other engagements too that came FBL's way: A national brand in the foreign exchange services space headquartered in Mumbai, a subsidiary of Reliance Industries, an ed-tech company based in Chennai, an app developer based in the San Francisco (US) Bay Area, a cosmetics brand from Australia and an IT company based in Dubai (UAE).

### ***“Are you leaving?”***

Even as Arvind was leading the planning and execution process for every client deliverable, he realized that his team

was beginning to disintegrate. It started with Doris leaving soon after Ather's employee portal was relaunched. A couple of other team members too resigned in quick succession.

This was happening even as businesses were struggling to bring their operations back to pre-pandemic levels. FBL had also started following a hybrid working arrangement. Arvind concluded that the pandemic had indeed weakened the foundation of his team. Working remotely, at renegotiated salaries, and bending backwards to deliver client deadlines – all these were surely taking a toll. In one instance, when a team member's lack of performance was questioned, he immediately quit. This person had been working with FBL for five years. And, in the past, he had been a good performer.

Arvind was angry and distraught. "I was affected by Doris' departure and these other exits that followed. It seemed like everyone was doing their own thing without seeing how hard I was working to lead FBL during these challenging times. I decided to go ahead and find out who was still with us and who was leaving," recalls Arvind painfully.

So he asked everyone to get into office one morning. When everyone had arrived, he walked up to each team member – and asked them the same question in Tamil.

*"Nee kelambaporiya?"*

*"Are you leaving?"*

He asked this question to 15 people on the team. 10 of them confirmed that they were indeed leaving. Arvind wasn't entirely shocked. He preferred knowing the status of his team upfront. But he was undoubtedly frustrated.

Among those who said they were staying on was young

Badrinarayanan Venkatanathan. He was a content curator and manager at FBL. Although he was an engineer, Badri had great interest in branding and marketing. He was extremely hardworking, creative and reliable. Badri told Arvind that he would eventually quit to go to the US for an MBA; but for now, he said, he was deferring his career goals by a year. He offered to stand with Arvind and help FBL navigate through these tough times.

Arvind was touched by Badri's ownership and empathy. It made him lean on Badri more – not just for managing deliveries to clients but also for bouncing off ideas and strategies.

Around the same time, Arvind also noticed that Arun was not as enthusiastic about work at FBL as he used to be. Again, the pandemic seemed to have punctured his quiet, enthusiastic, spirit. Additionally, Arun was also planning to start a family. So his attention was invested in his personal affairs.

### **When Arvind too considered exiting FBL**

Unable to perhaps cope with all the chaos and confusion around him, Arvind considered the option of exiting FBL. His frame of mind was understandable.

*At some point, an entrepreneur too experiences fatigue. You get the feeling that you are running faster than ever but you are still in the same place. You are exhausted. And you think you cannot go on. Every effort at work is feeling like a struggle. Every day is tiring, taxing and draining. This happens to all entrepreneurs. To some, it perhaps happens even more than once during their journeys.*

Arvind carefully examined how he was feeling about himself and his business. He then began exploring ways of exiting

the business. Several options were considered. He even tried applying to companies seeking a CMO's role for himself. Nothing much came out of all his efforts though.

But one option that he pursued led to a critical decision point. It involved FBL offering to become a part of a large Indian IT player, L&T Infotech. This was an acqui-hire proposal that Arvind made to L&T Infotech. Acqui-hire is a process through which a company buys another company primarily for the talent and skills of the latter's employees. L&T Infotech showed interest in considering the proposal from FBL.

It was a unique experience for Arvind.

He was clear that he could not run FBL in a mode where they had a hand-to-mouth existence. But he was not looking for just a financial sponsor either. The pandemic's impact apart, growth had been linear at FBL. The operations were cost-intensive and delivered lower profitability. Attracting and retaining talent was also becoming challenging. So, Arvind was hoping that someone like L&T Infotech would play the role of FBL's godfather.

Over the next few months he worked hard on clearing the various stages of vetting that L&T Infotech carried out. Finally, however, after reviewing a detailed presentation from FBL and its team's capabilities, L&T Infotech withdrew its interest.

"I discovered that we were not good enough for them. It was a huge setback for me personally. My frustration only grew," confesses Arvind. He quickly goes on to add, characteristically, "But I told myself that we needed to become bigger and look better so that companies come after us with proposals instead of the other way around."

*In life, if something doesn't happen the way you want it to, it doesn't always mean that it will never happen again. You simply have to trust the process and keep moving forward. You have to keep working harder at doing what you must do so that what you want happens.*

## **Reverse mentoring**

Arvind understood this truth about life. But at that time he found it difficult to embrace it fully.

Interestingly, Badri helped him with this process. He spent countless hours with Arvind – asking questions, strategizing, holding up a mirror, and critiquing every aspect of FBL's business model and Arvind's role as an entrepreneur. They sat up all night on many occasions or they went on long drives – discussing, brainstorming and sharing notes. "It was an organic and seamless process. There was no fixed agenda. We just talked a lot about everything. You can call it reverse mentoring, where Badri evolved from being a fresher on my team, and my subordinate, to being my teacher. And I evolved from being his boss to being a student. It helped me immensely. I realized that despite all the challenges and upheavals, entrepreneurship alone defines who I am," says Arvind.

*The beauty about life is that when you are willing to learn, the lessons and the messages that are meant for you, will come from many unlikely sources around you. The key to invoke this process of learnings flowing to you, is to keep alive your seeking, your thirst, your quest – for a greater understanding of what life really is all about.*

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## **Alive for a reason**

Thanks perhaps to his subconscious inner quest, and thanks to Badri's support, Arvind soon regained his form – as a leader, and as an entrepreneur. He could feel a renewed vigor and a fresh energy in him.

Meanwhile, Badri had quit FBL, as planned, and had moved on to prepare for securing admission to a B-school in the US.

That's when another ghastly accident occurred. It was the second major accident that Arvind was involved in. This one too almost took his life. It happened on Saturday, October 1, 2022, on Chennai's Old Mahabalipuram Road.

Arvind was on his motorbike, a 150cc black Yamaha FZ-X. Riding pillion with him was Aaryyan. Both of them were wearing helmets. And they were waiting at a traffic signal to hang a U-turn, right outside the House of Hiranandani residential complex, where Arvind and Deepa currently live. They were heading to a multiplex in the heart of Chennai. They were booked to watch Mani Ratnam's magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan: I*, that morning.

A truck coming in the wrong direction, entered their lane at high speed, and crashed right into their stationary motorbike. Both father and son were thrown off the vehicle. Aaryyan fell on his back and sustained a few external injuries. But Arvind was grievously injured. The truck had rammed into him head-on. It was his helmet that perhaps saved his life. Arvind, in fact, says he does not recall the actual moment of impact. He believes that he had blacked out.

He ended up being in Kauvery Hospital for a full week. He had nine fractures. Four of them were in his ribs. The doctors

## *Crisis, confusion, clarity*

had to keep him in an intensive critical care unit (ICCU) for four days because they feared that one of his ribs may have punctured his lungs. Arvind also went through a major surgery to fix his broken right wrist.

During this challenging phase, Deepa spent all her time at the hospital with Arvind. She led from the front and compassionately supported his recovery.

“Lying alone in the ICCU, I kept asking myself: *‘Why am I alive? Why has the time not come? Is there a reason for me to stay back?’* I kept these feelings to myself. I was in great pain. But these larger questions, which I couldn’t immediately answer, kept coming back to me,” says Arvind.

That was also when he recalled what Prof.Chalam had told him in 2011. He knew that there was a reason why he had survived this second accident too. He was now clear: *He had to lead FBL to the next level!*

On Tuesday, October 18, 2022, within three weeks of the accident, Arvind told Deepa that he wanted to go to his office. He said he wanted to sit at his desk at FBL for some time. It was also the day that Team FBL had planned to celebrate Deepavali that year.

While in the office, Arvind reviewed FBL’s operations for the time that he was out of action. He was very impressed with the way his entire team had rallied together and stood up for what he had always championed: *Exceptional, high-quality, on-time, delivery, every single time!*

FBL’s young team members must have surely felt inspired and motivated seeing Arvind back in the office. They had seen pictures of the accident. They knew that Arvind’s survival

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and recovery had been truly miraculous. Arvind himself remembers thinking: “I am back! Even I can’t take myself out of the company!”

*14 years is a long time in anyone’s life. And if you have survived two near-death experiences in that period, you begin to look at how you can make your life more meaningful. Also, in the lifespan of a business, completing 14 years reflects reaching an interesting threshold. For the entrepreneur, there’s ample wisdom that has been gained from lived experiences. For the firm, there’s a maturity that has come into the processes and operations. Arvind and FBL too are at a crucial point on their journey. And, as it happens with any 14-year-old, they too will be led onward by a free, daring, adventure-seeking, spirit!*



## Arvind's entrepreneurship handbook

"I am convinced that I have been dyslexic all along," declares Arvind, matter-of-factly.

He pauses. And then adds: "I recognized it first with my inability to understand what was being taught in school. Particularly numbers. Even today, numbers are not my forte. Which is why, relationships matter to me more than money, more than billing. Being dyslexic has also given me the advantage of observing patterns easily that normal people tend to overlook or not see. My views on branding, parenting and entrepreneurship – they are very different from how others would see these disciplines. My dyslexia has shaped me. I have evolved to be who I am because of it."

Arvind lists these as some of the guiding principles that he follows – all of them have been drawn from the lessons he has learnt from his entrepreneurial journey:

### **Be good, do good, build goodwill**

*The core idea of being in business, Arvind believes, must be to do good. He says, "The client has a need. As a firm, FBL has the talent, the capability. We must use that capability to create value and do good for the client, while meeting their need. Beyond the money that the client pays us, it is the goodwill that is created between the client and us that is FBL's true wealth."*

Arvind lives by this principle at all times.

In one instance, in May 2022, Matrix's PC had an important, additional, requirement. Arvind wrote to PC saying that FBL would deliver it soon. PC invited FBL to bill Matrix for the

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service. But Arvind politely declined the offer. He said that the cost of the time invested in meeting Matrix's requirement would be absorbed by FBL. PC wrote to Arvind complimenting him: "We are proud of your attitude and culture. No wonder we have been associated with you for two decades now." PC's colleague, P.Sankararaman, who was also marked on that email thread, added, "This shows your class, Arvind. This cannot be taught."

Other clients have seen Arvind practice this principle too. One of them is Anindita Bagchi, who heads corporate affairs and communication for the Gurugram-based Pipeline Infrastructure. She is a senior branding and communications professional who has used FBL's services in the past. "Arvind's belief, that every client/business is first a relationship and then a business, is what makes him different," she says emphatically.

### ***Pay people on time – every time***

As an employee, Arvind has had to accept deferred salary payments on many occasions. This had naturally caused him and his family a lot of stress and anxiety. Also, in the early days of FBL, clients either delayed payments or some did not even pay up. Resultantly, FBL's own cashflow was often seriously impacted. Despite a lot of juggling that Arvind would do, a payment here or there, that FBL had to make, would inevitably get delayed.

But sometime in 2011, into their second year of operations, Arvind took a principled decision to pay FBL's employees and vendors on time.

He began with putting in place a process to pay team salaries before 6 pm on the last working day of each month or by noon

on the first working day of a new month. For over 12 years now, except during the initial months of dealing with the pandemic in 2020 (March 2020 ~ August 2020), FBL has been able to sustain this practice.

“I call it a blessing, a sign of grace that we have been able to do this. And I eternally live in gratitude,” says Arvind. He then elaborates: *“People fight daily battles to get to work. From traffic to family issues to money problems to health challenges, people brave several challenges all the time. Yet people show up at work and create value. They help us with on-time delivery for our clients. As an entrepreneur, one of the ways I can thank them for what they continue to do, is to credit their salaries on time each month.”*

In order to be able to sustain this practice, FBL always seeks committed payment dates from its clients. Almost all clients stand by their commitments. In a way, this also sets up a mature working arrangement between FBL and its clients: “We always deliver on time, so please pay us on time.”

### **Peace of mind is more important than profits**

*Arvind has learnt the big secret to making his entrepreneurial journey enjoyable: Don't take up work when your heart is not in it, when you are not excited.*

He recently said no to doing the design and layout of a legendary surgeon's autobiography. After two pre-engagement meetings with the surgeon, Arvind concluded that the man was not likely to give his team the space and freedom to be creative. He wrote to the prospective client, telling him exactly that, and turned down the opportunity.

In another instance, a client reached out wanting FBL to design

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and set up a stall at an exhibition. Again, Arvind expressed FBL's inability to take up the project. This is typically the kind of additional income that a design agency would want. But Arvind sees, and presents, FBL as professional services firm. And that's exactly how FBL functions – it is not a design sweat shop, it is not an agency that makes a commission on the ad spends of clients, it is not an event management company.

In fact, the last event that FBL handled was the launch of PC's second book, *Grand Brand Rajni*, way back in 2012. "At that time, PC was turning very prolific as an author. We were his agent, event manager and marketing consultant – all rolled into one. But we decided that we didn't want to be in that space. We stopped doing events and launches. We definitely lost growth opportunities with that decision. However, without taking that tough call, we would not have built a reputation for who we are today. As an entrepreneur I love that FBL has a very sharp focus," says Arvind.

### ***Go all out if you believe in a cause***

While FBL declines billable business opportunities at times, it supports some social causes unconditionally. For some, these choices may appear to be contradicting each other. But Arvind firmly believes that people who are doing great work, for a cause, must be helped.

For instance, FBL supported Terry Fox Runs in Chennai for a few years, working closely with the Dube family. Similarly, FBL has been backing cycling enthusiast Ramanujar Moulana's Chennai-based non-profit initiative, *Cycling Yogis*, for several years now. *Cycling Yogis* brings out a publication every August – to commemorate Madras Day – listing unique cycling trails

in Chennai. FBL offers free designing and layout services for bringing out this publication.

“People who are leading causes are doing so against all odds. We empathize with them. Which is why, when the cause is good, we don’t hold ourselves back. The joy we get from supporting a cause like cancer awareness or *Cycling Yogis* is unparalleled. No amount of billing can get us that joy,” he says.

### ***Be clear and transparent***

Whenever Arvind is meeting a prospective client, he concludes his introduction of FBL with a summary. He leaves the client with three key points that they must remember about FBL:

- What FBL is good at doing: “*We excel at this.*”
- What FBL is not good at doing: “*We suck at this.*”
- What FBL will not do: “*We won’t do this.*”

“Everyone’s time is precious. We don’t want to make promises that we can’t keep. And we don’t want clients to have unreasonable expectations from us. So, the approach we follow is to say it exactly the way it must be said. When there is clarity, decisions are made quickly and qualitatively,” explains Arvind.

### ***Keep improving constantly***

Arvind believes that FBL’s competition is not going to come from the large companies in design and marketing. It would most likely come – and is perhaps already coming – from young, smart, freelancing designers and creators. To stay competitive, Arvind and FBL must launch newer versions of themselves almost daily. “We have to be agile. We have

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to be informed. We must read, and we must explore newer horizons. We have to learn, unlearn, and relearn, 24x7,” points out Arvind.

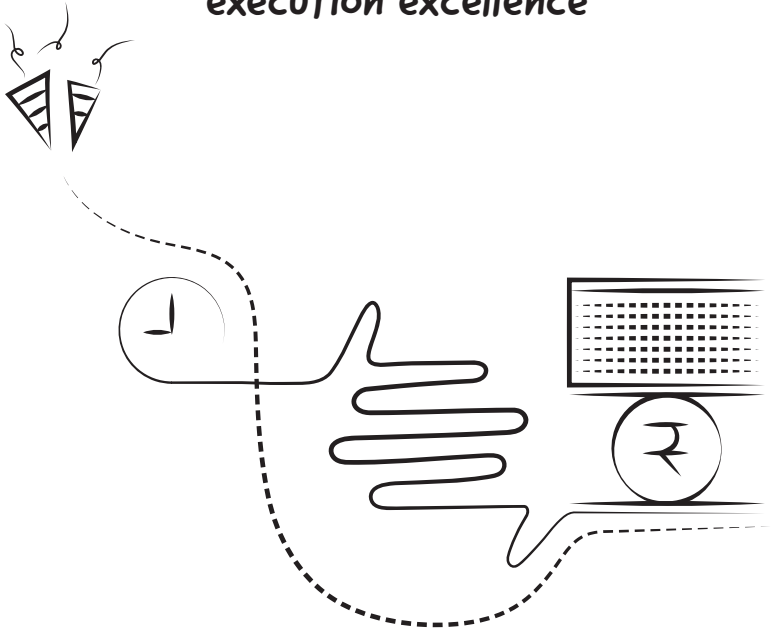
To get FBL started on this journey, Arvind first focused on himself. He worked closely with a professional mentor, Govindan Ramanujam, for three years. Govindan came with over 35 years of corporate experience; 20 of these were in leadership roles. His brief was to hold up a mirror to Arvind, and to highlight his blind spots. Arvind says he gained valuable insights from Govindan. Specifically, when Mala was asked to leave FBL, Govindan helped Arvind manage that exit efficiently. “It was pretty challenging for me. I leaned on Govindan’s advice. He guided me on how I could stay unemotional through the entire process,” informs Arvind.

Over the last few years, Arvind says he has made continuous improvement a daily endeavor – not just for himself, but for his entire team.

***Surely, the idea of having a set of guiding principles is not entirely original. Almost every entrepreneur has learnt to lead their business based on lessons learnt from their lived experiences. But not everyone manages to flesh out and articulate the principles that work for them with simplicity and clarity. This is what makes Arvind’s entrepreneurship handbook unique – and meaningful!***

Part 2

## The engine of execution excellence



**How FBL's people and delivery processes  
combine to create a dynamic engine that  
powers execution excellence.**

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***“Organizations don’t execute  
unless the right people, individually  
and collectively, focus on the right  
details at the right time.”***

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**Ram Charan,  
management guru.**



## The people process

Arun was very apprehensive. He had made a terrible mistake. There was a flaw in the design and layout for a set of business cards that he had designed and printed for a client. All the cards had to be trashed. And the entire order had to be redone. The cost of redesigning and reprinting was going to be a few thousand rupees. It was big money for a small firm. It would have to be borne by FBL.

It had been only a few months since Arun had joined FBL as a full-time designer. As he walked up to Arvind, he wondered what lay in store for him: *Would he be fired? Would the cost of redoing the order be recovered from him?*

Arvind was definitely surprised that Arun had made this costly mistake. But he simply told Arun to redo the cards. And advised him not to repeat the mistake again. He told Arun that he *trusted* him.

“We don’t pull up our people for making mistakes. We certainly tell them not to repeat a mistake, but we don’t stop them from making a new one! Instead, we encourage and empower them, to take ownership and be responsible going forward. This is who we are as a firm. Our culture thrives on employee centricity which, in turn, drives our client centricity,” explains Arvind.

## From freelancer to equity owner

Arun not only overcame that moment of apprehension, he has since then gone on to truly take complete ownership of FBL’s vision over the past decade. He, in fact, is FBL’s longest-serving team member.

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“Working here, I have learnt that I am directly responsible for the outcome of my work. This has made me a better designer and a better professional. I have also got a great opportunity to meet several business owners and handle a diverse set of projects for them. This has helped me understand the world of business better. I am constantly learning new stuff daily. That’s one of the reasons why I have stayed on at FBL,” says Arun.

For his part, Arvind views Arun as a FBL’s Mr.Reliable: “I have a great bond and a deep friendship with him. I am glad I found him and invited him to join us in 2010. I have realized that it was a very intuitive, naïve, decision. But Arun has made it work so beautifully. With his sincerity, integrity, passion and hard work. Rain or shine, I can count on him. In fact, on the night of December 1, 2015, he was in office up until an hour before the horrible Chennai floods happened. I can sleep peacefully because I know he is there.”

In 2022, in recognition of Arun’s dedication, and with the idea of making the firm less centered on himself, Arvind made Arun an equity partner in FBL. It was indeed a significant moment for a small professional services firm that has had very humble origins.

***Importantly, it showcased Arvind’s philosophy and vision as an entrepreneur: Over time, FBL would belong to more of those loveable people who continuously came up with fabulous ideas, and who went on to brilliantly execute those ideas, to help clients solve their business challenges through design.***

“I have always led FBL with a people focus. But something in me has changed after my second accident in October 2022. Yes, my team led amazingly well in my absence. But I now realize

## **The people process**

that a company cannot be dependent on a single person. I am realigning every people process that we have at FBL to inspire more of our team members to graduate to a higher level of ownership,” says Arvind.

### ***A culture that fosters doing, learning and growing – together***

The people process at FBL, that Arvind is talking about, consists of a few, simple, unpretentious, practices that come together to create a culture of doing, learning and growing – for everyone on the team.

Here’s an overview of these people practices:

- **Earn while you learn and deliver:** One, salaries are paid on time, each month. The message is that your time is valued. And that there is no free lunch. Two, there is a continuous emphasis on doing, failing, learning and doing it right. So FBL’s work environment is fast-paced and full of action. Says Badri, who worked with FBL for over five years, and who has recently moved to the US to do an MBA program, “The company, nay, tribe, taught me how to fail the right way, learn from everybody and every experience. It taught me to stand up for myself and my teammates, and to solve complex business challenges.”
- **No official leave policy:** FBL’s team members are encouraged to do whatever it takes to deliver what’s due to clients. Therefore, everyone’s focused on executing well – and on time, every single time. But if someone has to take a break, they are allowed to decide for themselves. The overall message is that they are trusted with doing what is right for themselves and for FBL’s clients. This trust is

what has kept Manoj Angusamy going at FBL. Some years ago, he was struck by an episode of chickenpox. For two months he could not get out of his home. Yet he got to keep his job. Arvind told him to “get better so that he could do better”. And, indeed, Manoj has gone on to do well. He says, “I am thriving in a dynamic environment at FBL. I am constantly contributing to innovative and challenging projects that utilize my skills and expand my own vision.”

- **Food on the house:** When Arvind visited Tilaknagar Industries’ office in Mumbai, in end-2009, to close the contract for the Mansion House-CSK promotion for the third edition of the IPL, he was amazed to see the company serving free food to its employees. He immediately implemented the practice of offering lunch on the house for his team members. That practice continues even today. Anytime between 1 pm and 3 pm daily, Team FBL usually hangs out and eats together. Even visitors to FBL’s office are invited to join in. Plus, those working late or starting very early are invited to order in food and claim a reimbursement from the firm. “Food brings us together. That’s the way we bond at FBL. Also, those having long commutes to work need not bother about having to carry their food,” says Arvind who, interestingly, is a complete foodie. So he personally enjoys leading this practice!
- **Celebrate being together:** At FBL, Arvind strives to make sure that everyone’s time together is memorable. Some years ago, he implemented the practice of making Deepavali special for the team. The idea was born from his own lived experience. In the early years of their careers, Deepa and Arvind did not have enough money to buy their children clothes and gifts for Deepavali. So,

## The people process

when they were able to afford doing it, Arvind decided to include his extended family at FBL too in the celebrations. Apart from sweets, team members get a unique gift each year. From helping them set up a public provident fund account, with a first contribution from FBL, to gifting them an Amazon Echo Dot, Arvind says he is constantly coming up with inspiring ideas. “FBL turns Santa Claus when Deepavali arrives,” he adds. In 2019, for its tenth founding anniversary, FBL took the idea further. Parents of all the team members were invited to a special celebration over lunch, at the premier GRT Convention Centre in Chennai. Almost everyone on the team is young. And for many it is their first job. So the parents too loved the idea of coming face-to-face with the company that their children were enjoying working at. It was a big moment at FBL. Parents came from all over Tamil Nadu to be at this lunch: They came from Dindigul, Madurai, Coimbatore, Gudalur, and, of course, from Chennai. Arvind got to experience their genuine love and admiration for FBL, for how they felt about their children’s careers being shaped professionally by the firm.

- **Once upon a Friday:** This is a monthly learning activity that usually happens on a Friday evening at FBL. A senior professional or achiever in a field is invited to share their journey with the team at FBL. It’s a talk that’s followed by a thought-provoking conversation that the team has with the guest. The idea is to go beyond the monotony of everyday work, seek newer avenues for learning and for knowledge to be shared.

Preethi, FBL’s outsourced chief financial officer (CFO) since 2018, shares an outside-in perspective on the firm’s work

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culture: “I have very limited in-person interactions with the team. But each time I interact with them I get to experience the mutual respect that the members of the team have for each other. There is a huge focus on teamwork.”

*Importantly, as someone who loathes bureaucracy and formality, Arvind strives to keep the practices that power the people process at FBL very uncomplicated, consistent and, therefore, efficient.*

## **Getting talented folks on board**

It is a similar outlook that governs how Arvind recruits people at FBL.

His hiring philosophy is clear: Look for attitude and character. Look for communication skills. Every other skill can be taught.

As someone who didn't finish college himself, he does not insist that people who want to join FBL must have a college degree. What he looks for is whether the candidate can communicate well. So, he specifically explores whether the candidate can write well, speak well, and articulate or express well. He then considers how well they will fare at FBL, handling the kind of work that is done by the firm.

Finally, when he has decided that he is going to hire them, he asks them for their personal story. “I am keen to know what's driving them to seek an employment. Nine times out of 10, candidates have a significant other reason than to just earn a living. When I know that reason, I can lead them better,” explains Arvind.

*This is an interesting perspective. Not many business leaders and entrepreneurs leverage the human side of*

## The people process

*human resources. To most of them, HR is a department and recruitment is a process. Arvind, on the other hand, feels that being dyslexic enables him to look at people on his team with empathy and conviction. Understanding each of their stories helps him to mentor and guide them personally. He's very proud of all the 25 people on his team currently. Some of their stories are powerful – and inspiring.*

Take Muhsina Fathima's story for instance. She has an undergraduate degree in psychology and a master's in fine arts. She is the first woman in her family to have a master's degree, and the first one to go to work. She's been at FBL for close to three years and is a graphic designer. Arvind calls her a "heavy lifter" who has "learnt quickly and is very reliable".

Or consider Jeyakumar Jayaraj. He is an engineer who hails from Dindigul. He had kept a few jobs in his hometown before he joined FBL six years ago to support its IT requirements. He learnt on the job, skilled himself, and today runs the website development team at the firm very efficiently. He also conceived and developed a timesheet application that FBL uses. It helps them track the time invested on each client and each project. Arvind says he's a big fan of Jeyakumar's ability to learn, innovate and create – continuously!

### **Interns add to the buzz at FBL**

And then there are the interns. Arvind highlights the fact that young, smart, people often want to do their internships at FBL.

There are two reasons why they choose FBL. One, it has been around for 14 years now. And, two, it has a reputation among young, creative, folks that it is a fun place to learn and grow.

In recent times, there has been someone with a commercial

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pilot's license who worked for 18 months at FBL. And someone who had an engineering degree from Birla Institute of Technology and Science (Goa) interned at FBL in two spells. Yet another person came after quitting a job with Deloitte, to "check out how life and work is at a smaller professional services firm".

"Our interns bring a whiff of freshness and lots of excitement to FBL's culture. They are passionate and curious. I personally get to learn a lot from them," says Arvind.

*Interestingly, while the people process at FBL is unsung, it is not necessarily a pathbreaking one. Yet its importance must not be underestimated. Because what Arvind has understood as an entrepreneur is something that not everyone either understands or pays attention to. Which is, it is only the people who make a business successful and profitable. Surely, it is not the investment, the machines, the strategy or even the entrepreneur who can make a business tick. It is an out-and-out people's game. And Arvind sums it up simply: "Talent first, business second."*



## ***The delivery process***

It was a huge mistake that his colleague at FBL had made unintentionally. It was likely that the mistake could cost the client their operating license!

The young team member at FBL had been mandated with handling the client's social media accounts. FBL itself had won the client's mandate barely a week ago. In fact, the team from FBL had not yet been onboarded fully by the client.

In this time, one of the social media handles of the client had received a request for a service which is not legally allowed to be provided in India. Such a request should not have been replied to. But the team member from FBL had naively acknowledged the inquiry with a promise to revert with more details soon.

When he discovered what had happened, Arvind had no hesitation in talking to a top manager at the client's end. He was transparent and truthful. He told the client that the team member from FBL had not intended to breach any legal protocol. The reply had been sent to the inquiry to showcase empathy and responsiveness, on behalf of the client, to someone seeking information.

The client greatly appreciated Arvind's direct, honest, appraisal. And FBL went on to work with the client for well over three years.

## ***Owning client mandates***

Recounting this anecdote, Arvind says that the delivery process at FBL is governed by four non-negotiable values:

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- Be truthful: Always say clearly what you can do or can't do. Own up mistakes, always!
- Be creative: Constantly come up with practical ideas that can help solve business challenges for clients.
- Be sharp with execution: Implement these ideas very, very, very well.
- Be on time, each time: Plan well. And always stick to client delivery deadlines.

*These four delivery guidelines are not plastered on the walls of FBL's office. They are also not screen savers or wallpapers on people's devices. Arvind lives by them. And he champions them in just the way he leads each of his team members.*

Arvind's entrepreneurial philosophy has been shaped by all that he has read and experienced. He has been greatly inspired by what former GE CEO Jack Welch would often say: "Business leaders must have a global outlook and yet function like grocery store *owners*." The key operative word there is *owners*. To Arvind, entrepreneurship = ownership. And he relentlessly tries to invoke that spirit of ownership in each of his team members.

"I always tell them to think like a multinational company but act like a *kirana* (grocery) store owner. I encourage them to own their client mandates. When you are doing a job, you may end up delivering mediocre work. But when you are owning a mandate, you strive for excellence and high-quality outcomes," explains Arvind.

R.B.Raj Kumar, who has been with FBL for close to nine years now, has embraced this philosophy wholesomely. He says, "Throughout my tenure at FBL, there have been instances

## **The delivery process**

where I have had differences of opinion and engaging arguments with Arvind or Arun. These interactions have challenged me to think critically and have undoubtedly contributed to my development as a professional. One of my key takeaways would be this: ‘Don’t settle for mediocrity.’”

Sushmidha Jawahar, a UX designer and an ex-employee of FBL, makes a similar observation, though in the context of leadership at FBL: “My first real job in the professional world was at FBL. It not only equipped me with vital skills but also established a pretty high benchmark for managers and superiors. As I transition to new professional environments, I find that these standards set by FBL have been quite high for my future employers to match up to.”

### ***Agility is the killer app at FBL***

Over the years of leading FBL, Arvind has understood that what will continue to differentiate FBL from any other player in the market is a rare corporate value called agility.

***He defines agility in FBL’s context thus: How soon can FBL understand what the client needs? And how soon – and how well – can FBL create and deliver what the client needs?***

Agility here is not just about speed. It is not about rushing to get deliverables out of a pipeline.

First, it means learning quickly about the client’s business. So each team member assigned to a client is encouraged to:

- Read up on the industry the client operates in.
- Look at the client’s past portfolio of marketing campaigns and collaterals.
- Study the client’s competition in detail.

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Next, at FBL, agility also means that you have to come up with ideas even as you are trying to understand the client and their business. In the marketing world, everything is always wanted yesterday. So a professional services firm cannot take a long time to produce results.

The other dimension about agility that Arvind keeps reiterating to his team is about seizing the opportunity to create value for the client. He often reminds everyone at FBL that the client's plate is always overflowing and is full of challenges. So there is every chance that everything at the client's end may be unplanned and disorganized. As a professional services firm, FBL, therefore, has to perfect the art of working creatively and efficiently, amidst all the chaos, to deliver results on time.

Bringing back the analogy of the grocery store owner to make his point, Arvind emphatically says, "We have grown the culture at FBL to be very client-centric. We are agile like a *kirana* store while striving to be qualitative like a multinational corporation!"

Undoubtedly, over the years, agility has emerged as a key differentiator of FBL's culture. It is the firm's killer app!

### **Enable and ensure execution excellence**

Though 25 is not a large number, it is still challenging to get everyone on the team to have the ownership and agility that *kirana* store owners display.

So, in order to enable and ensure execution excellence with every client mandate, FBL remains non-hierarchical. The firm is divided into two business units. And each unit handles a set of clients. A simple rule of thumb is that no team member in a unit will handle more than three clients at a time. This

## **The delivery process**

way Arvind has ensured that ownership and agility continue to drive the delivery process at FBL. Also, should any team member be unavailable for any reason, a client deliverable or response to a client's query will not get impacted.

Arvind also monitors every client deliverable constantly. He explains what drives him to lead with such laser-sharp focus: "I am only scared of failure. So we will do anything to ensure we don't fail. I am not scared of problems. I tell my team to take a problem head-on and work backwards. But we can't fail our clients. We cannot let down the trust they have in us. We will break our backs, but we will deliver value and we will deliver on time."

This focus manifests as different experiences at different times for Team FBL:

- **Pressure-cooker:** There are many stories of people sometimes not being able to handle Arvind's intensity or the pressure of deadlines. Badri describes these experiences as "fun and ballistic". Adds Arvind, "I am told that people have often gone into the toilet and cried!"
- **Empathy:** On one occasion, Arvind realized that a key team member was not reachable every time he stepped out of the office. His phone always appeared to be switched off. When this went on for a week, and sensing that client delivery was likely to be affected, he asked the person what was wrong. He discovered that the team member's phone had crashed. And that he did not have the means to buy a new phone immediately. Arvind immediately bought him a new Samsung phone. "I could understand his problem. I have faced such a situation in life too. Also, in our business, you cannot be unavailable when a client

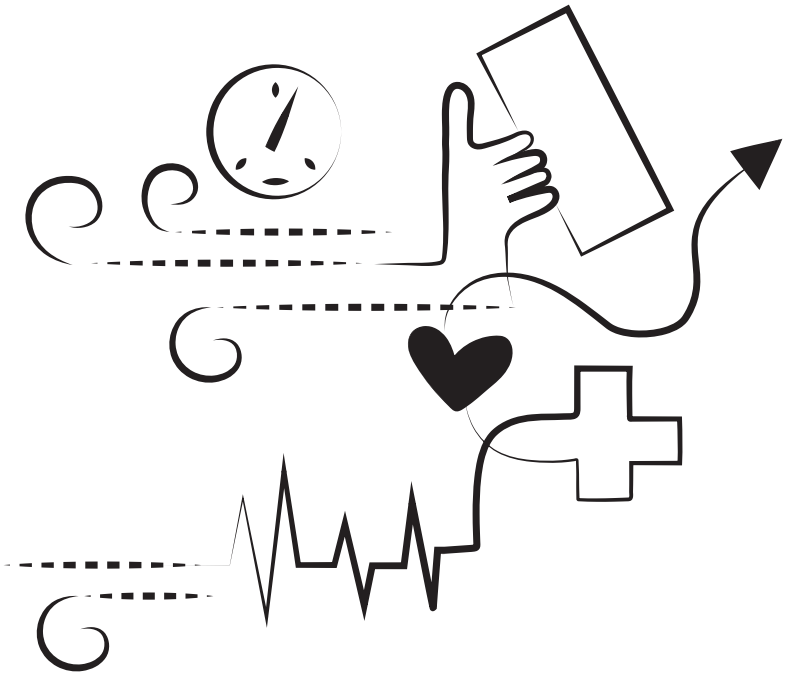
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tries to reach you,” reasons Arvind.

- **Party hard:** Every major client delivery or an important milestone that the firm has achieved is unfailingly celebrated in the office. Given Arvind’s preference for great whiskeys, it is always a spirited celebration! All the pressure dissolves as the evening progresses, and Team FBL go on to have some unadulterated and uninhibited fun. Says Arvind, “The team works very hard to make each deadline and milestone count. They deserve a break and some fun. So we don’t miss an opportunity to celebrate.” In November 2019, the team decided to raise a toast to their ‘deadline master’: They put up a surprise birthday celebration for Arvind. It was themed like a local politician’s birthday bash on the streets on Chennai. It was loud, garish – and funny!

*FBL is surely not the only company that focuses on execution excellence with such diligence. But what makes this effort commendable is that the spirit to achieve and excel is unwavering. The team receives adulatory emails from clients most of the time. There are occasions when they get critical feedback too. But Arvind says he encourages the team to take neither to heart. He believes that there is more work to be done and there are more peaks to be conquered. There is remarkable simplicity and a quiet aggression in that stance. When sustained, it can propel FBL to greatness.*

Part 3  
The showcase



*Presenting six authentic stories of how  
FBL has delivered value for its clients.*

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*“If you want to achieve excellence,  
you can get there today. As of  
this second, quit doing less-than-  
excellent work.”*

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*Thomas J Watson Sr,  
former chairman and CEO, IBM.*



## **Redesigning Ather Energy's employee portal**

### **What the client wanted**

Ather Energy, India's leading manufacturer of smart electric scooters, wanted its employee portal, Interstellar, to be urgently redesigned. This was to enable their team of 3,000 people to stay connected and engaged during the lockdowns.

The revamp was mandated because the existing portal had a lack of scalability. There was also poor user adoption because the portal did not have an aesthetic grammar. Importantly, it was restricted to carrying only HR-related information. Meanwhile, the pandemic had made it critical for internal communication and employee engagement to be enhanced.

### **What Team FBL did**

The process that was followed involved conducting user research, evaluating user experience, creating user experience design, development and deployment.

A team of five full-time and two part-time resources delivered this project in exactly 16 weeks. This was a phenomenal achievement, particularly when remote-working (during the covid-19 pandemic) was the only option.

### **What was achieved**

The new version of Interstellar was a huge hit! There was widespread adoption among the employees driving integration and collaboration. It turned into a platform for engagement

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and expression, fostering culture-building. Company-wide announcements could now be made dynamically, in real time. It became a single, go-to, source for all information on the company – its story and its plans.

### ***What the client said***

**Sunitha Lal, chief human resources officer, Ather:**

“Thank you for owning this close to your hearts and for delivering this with so much passion and care. This project is very critical for us. It is not just a site to store stuff when needed, it is a place where teams come for information and understanding context.”

**Rohith Hariharan, head, employer branding, Ather:**

“What we have been able to get done in the last 120-odd days is really commendable. Looking back at why we chose to work with FBL, I think you guys haven’t disappointed at all. Interstellar 3.0 is considerably easy to access and use compared to the current version, Interstellar 2.0. A large portion of that credit goes to Doris and Arun. I don’t think we would have gotten here without their conviction in the idea.”

**Kirthika Soundararajan, former senior executive, internal communications and employer branding, Ather:**

“You put all your heart into this project. And it shows. As a South Indian meals-loving team member from Ather puts it, “Thanks for turning our Starbucks into a Saravana Bhavan.”

## Rebranding Quadrobay Technologies

### **What the client wanted**

Quadrobay Technologies is an IT services company that is an Oracle Platinum Partner. It is founded and led by Oracle product veterans.

The company had grown organically over a decade. However, it felt that it had not communicated its ethos and values effectively to its people. Meanwhile, new software-as-a-service (SaaS) players in the market were beginning to attract talent.

So Quadrobay wanted to reposition their employer brand. This was to attract and retain high-quality talent, particularly, young millennials and Gen Z workers.

### **What Team FBL did**

FBL first understood the client's business context and landscape. Then brand-mapping and tone-of-voice studies were done. A brand narrative thus emerged. And key statements defining the brand beliefs were derived. Finally, a logo was designed and the new brand identity was launched.

Three full-time and two part-time resources completed this project in eight weeks.

### **What was achieved**

A new brand narrative was woven around the theme, '*Ride The Wave*'. This theme was built on the premise that the values of the surfing subculture across the world were in sync with Quadrobay's values. Both environments are close-knit, promote learning through trying and failing, enable growth

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through taking risks and responsibility, and encourage taking challenges head-on.

Five brand beliefs soon evolved into the company's core values:

- Ride the wave.
- Respect, don't fear.
- Own the act.
- Do it with passion or not at all.
- Live every moment together.

These beliefs and values are now core to the company's culture. They reflect how the team at Quadrobay live and work together. They also are what potential recruits are invited to embody.

The logo eventually went on to visually represent the metaphorical theme, *'Ride The Wave'*.

### ***What the client said***

**Murugadoss Narayanan (Muru), managing director, Quadrobay:**

"Kudos for a great job done!!! On behalf of the Quadrobay team, please accept our appreciation for the excellent job that your team has done over the past several months in our rebranding journey.

"The proof of the pudding was the way our customers, vendors, well-wishers, and even our competitors, appreciated our rebranding exercise.

"Last, but not the least, we would like to thank you for the way you handled our queries, the requests for reworking (and sometimes re-re-working) and, in general, for the way you took care of every detail we asked of you. We enjoyed every moment of the rebranding journey."

## **Highlighting Kauvery Hospital's expertise and empathy**

### **What the client wanted**

Kauvery Hospital is a leading multispeciality healthcare chain in South India. They operate out of several locations in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

The client wanted a strong, distinct, character and positioning for the brand to be created. The focus was on presenting Kauvery Hospital as an expert healthcare company that had great empathy for its patients. The branding exercise had to promote Kauvery's multispeciality capabilities and build a loyal community for the brand on digital media.

### **What Team FBL did**

A detailed mapping of Kauvery's competition was done. Based on this a long-term program was designed. This program consistently championed two key strengths of Kauvery: Its core philosophy of empathetic patient care, and its core competence of thought leadership and expertise in several medical disciplines.

Five full-time and three part-time resources led this relationship and mandate over three years.

### **What was achieved**

A content engine was set up to regularly churn out high-quality information on Kauvery, and on healthcare, on the internet. This content was generated in vernacular languages

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as well. A repository of knowledge-based videos, offering information on health conditions and expert opinions from top doctors, was created on Kauvery's YouTube channel. This made Kauvery the go-to resource for information on healthcare. This built trust and credibility.

The design treatment focused on building a visual identity using hand-drawn illustrations.

With both content and design being powerfully created, over time, the brand achieved an average increase of over 500% in social media engagement across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube.

### ***What the client said***

**Dr.Aravindan Selvaraj, co-founder and executive director, Kauvery Hospital:**

"It has been a wonderful journey with firebrand labs. Team FBL have been marvelous."

## ***Supporting Delphos with strategy and ideas for thought leadership***

### ***What the client wanted***

Delphos International is a large global capital and market advisory service firm. It works in over 70 markets. It has been in this space for 35+ years and has handled transactions worth USD 20 billion.

Delphos wanted to build a strong brand for its chairman and senior partners through thought leadership. It was keen on growing its business partnerships globally, through building trust and creative context-setting.

### ***What Team FBL did***

FBL began by investing time and effort to watch and track trends in the private-equity space. These trends were analyzed to draft a narrative for brand Delphos to embrace and express. The expert opinions of the chairman and the key members of the leadership team were then presented on LinkedIn. Polls were regularly conducted to create engagement with the global community of business leaders and professionals. High-quality content was generated in the form of well-researched reports that showcased Team Delphos' credibility and competency to offer reliable capital solutions to its clients. Vibrant and classy designs for all collaterals aided the presentation of Delphos as a global leader in its space. FBL also led with the end-to-end management of Delphos' LinkedIn newsletter. This enabled qualitative insights that supported other online conversations and discussions.

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Four full-time and two part-time resources worked on this mandate for close to 18 months.

### ***What was achieved***

FBL used several of its capabilities to create value for Delphos. These included research, data visualization, social media marketing, creative designing and brand management.

Delphos' engagement on LinkedIn grew by 60%. It also added a substantial number of followers organically on YouTube.

FBL's brand-building strategy and ideas created networking opportunities for Delphos in South-East Asian markets like Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. It led to a business partnership with a leading development finance institution in Europe.

### ***What the client said***

**Arunkumar Krishnakumar, investor, entrepreneur, author, and former partner, Delphos:**

"FBL, led by Arvind, are easily the most professional and holistic design, branding and marketing team I have worked with. They have helped me for my books, my NGO, my personal branding work, and with my team at Delphos. FBL are a highly driven and committed bunch of folks!"



## **Designing an interactive web experience for WSFx**

### **What the client wanted**

Wall Street Global Pay (WSFx, previously Wall Street Finance) is a leading foreign exchange services company in India. It has been operating in both B2B and B2C segments for over two decades now.

The company was transforming itself to be an agile, tech-enabled, business.

WSFx wanted a new, modern, web design and experience that would appeal to the tastes and sensibilities of young and tech-savvy users. It wanted to claim and reinforce its position as a trusted, tech-driven, forex solutions player.

### **What Team FBL did**

The process that was followed by FBL included fully understanding the current user experience. This involved conducting extensive research. Then, a wireframe version of how the new web design would look, feel and work was created. Based on this wireframe model, user interface designing was undertaken. A new user experience template thus evolved.

To implement this project, FBL employed its expertise in design thinking and UX writing. Essentially, the brand's visual language was reimaged on the website to create a new, interactive, web experience.

Three full-time and two part-time resources took this project live in under 16 weeks from kick-off.

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## ***What was achieved***

The WSFx sitemap was divided into four distinct pages to cater to key user segments. The features for each service and tool were specifically mapped for each segment. The mobile app and the website were strategically integrated.

Content was then created to align with user needs and business priorities. The tone of voice was kept friendly to appeal to young audiences. Integration with search engine parameters was also achieved efficiently.

Pastel colors with contrast were used to enhance the appeal of the visual style. This gave the site a soft and light look.

Overall, the thought that went into designing the web experience, and the minimalistic visual style, ensured that the new website was a big hit with WSFx's customers.

## ***What the client said***

**N.Srikrishna, CEO, WSFx:**

“The work carried out, be it in terms of design, brand-building or digital user experience, was fantastic. Great ideas and timely execution.”

## **Building Rela Hospital's brand aura**

### **What the client wanted**

Rela Hospital is a multispeciality center of excellence in Chennai. It is a leader in transplant procedures in India. Liver transplantation at Rela Hospital is much sought after. It is performed by one of the best surgeons in the world, Prof. Mohamed Rela.

The hospital wanted to strategically position its multispeciality capabilities. It wanted to create a thriving community on digital platforms. Eventually, it wanted these two efforts to generate higher revenue for key transplant procedures.

### **What Team FBL did**

FBL began with first understanding Rela Hospital's target audience – specifically, their wants and needs. It then conducted an extensive analysis of Rela Hospital's competition. The findings from these two studies were then deployed to arrive at a set of keywords that would lead to the brand being visible extensively on digital platforms. This effort was used to deploy online advertising strategically, to generate leads, and to convert some of them into revenue.

A team of nine full-time and two part-time resources are fulfilling this mandate for over two years now.

### **What was achieved**

FBL is constantly leveraging trends on social media platforms to increase traction and momentum for the brand. The communication from the brand centers on healthcare

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information, presented stylishly as memes and pop-culture collaterals. Consistency of style and communication are maintained to increase brand recall.

A host of FBL's capabilities are being used on this mandate: Competitor research, digital ad strategy, customer insight extrapolation and analytics, creative copywriting, brand design, social media management, social media design, and web landing page design and development.

The cost of lead generation for transplant procedures has come down five times since FBL began work on this mandate in January 2021. Several thousand qualified, valid, leads have been generated because of the brand's increased visibility and reputation.

Here's a summary of the value created by FBL:

1. The visibility of the Rela Hospital website has grown 21x.
2. The user base of the Rela Hospital website has grown 19x.
3. The number of their ranked keywords on Google's search engine has grown 10x.
4. Their return on advertising spend has risen 7x.
5. The Rela Hospital YouTube subscriber community has grown 8x.
6. The number of followers on Rela Hospital's Instagram handle has grown 3x.
7. Their followership on LinkedIn has grown 2x.

A nurses day campaign that Team FBL had created was trending on the internet for several days. It was viewed a record 2.5 million times in a very short span of time. The other social media campaigns, which used IPL-based and movie-based

## **The showcase**

covid-19 awareness messaging, were very successful too.

### ***What the client said***

#### **Dr. Ilankumaran Kaliamoorthy, CEO, Rela Hospital:**

“firebrand labs has been working alongside the Rela Institute, offering expertise in the realm of digital engagement. Their creative wing has brought fresh and subtle approaches to the table, making our website and other digital platforms a space for easy navigation and information retrieval for users. In the vibrant world of social media, they have portrayed the spirit of the Rela Institute sensitively, creating posts that are both engaging and in tune with the ethos of the institute.

“They have taken steps in digital marketing to carve a simple yet defined space for the institute online.”

#### **Sujay Sambamurthy, director of operations, Rela Hospital:**

“A big shout-out to Arvind and to the entire team of FBL!!! The way you guys jazzed up some of our work is simply amazing. Your creativity and support for immediate digital engagement is off the charts! Big kudos to the entire team – keep rockin’ it!”

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## Part 4 The future



**A peek into the idea of the future –  
as Arvind and FBL see it.**

***“The future isn’t ahead of us.  
It has already happened.”***

---

***Philip Kotler,  
marketing guru.***

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## Forecreate

Arvind and Badri were ecstatic.

It was Friday, October 1, 2021.

They had just come up with a new idea. It was a theme that they believed would define what FBL would do. It would guide them on how they would work, and what kind of clients they would work with, over the next few years.

This theme was being readied for launch on October 9, 2021, when FBL entered its 13th year of operations.

***Their idea was a single word: Forecreate!***

***They defined forecreate as the act of creating something that brings new realities into existence and actualizes the future.***

For FBL's clients, Forecreate would be a new model, a new way of working. FBL would now present itself to its clients as their extended marketing arm, as an outsourced CMO. On offer would be FBL's core competence in digital branding, marketing and design. This competence emerged from having developed and perfected a set of key capabilities: Competitor research, digital ad strategy, customer insight extrapolation and analytics, creative copywriting, brand design, social media management, social media design, web landing page design and development, and motion graphics.

Two clients had already experienced the power of this model's beta version in the past – SmartMegh's Venkat and The Idli Factory's RU. But it was only now that FBL was launching it formally.



### Forecreate's value proposition

Arvind explains how Forecreate works: “When a client engages with us as their outsourced CMO, we are essentially offering to think, function and deliver like we are part of the client's team. Yet the client need not have the challenge of having to engage with an employee mindset. Also, most young professionals in the marketing world have not really worked in the non-internet era. Therefore, they lack knowledge and hands-on experience of marketing without technology and resources. Working in that world taught you to think outside the box. Team FBL is trained to think this way. So they bring that key skill to the table. And clients get high-quality, creative, inputs 24x7. They have access to FBL's key capabilities in all disciplines of branding, marketing and design. We bring freshness and creativity to the idea-generation process, the professional rigor and discipline of execution excellence to the delivery process, and the entrepreneurial spirit of ownership of the client's business goals. FBL functions with the head of a CMO and the heart of an ethical company in such an engagement.”

*Importantly, with the Forecreate model, FBL becomes a strategic partner for an organization. It is now an integral part of their growth journey.* Like everything else that FBL does, this model too offers a powerful value proposition. It has three dimensions:

- **Thinking:** Team FBL thinks alongside the client to address their business challenge. This means understanding their business and offering them creative, breakthrough, ideas.
- **Doing:** Team FBL takes over the management of a host of marketing activities for the client. These are must-do items

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that are both time-consuming and creatively demanding.

- **Growing:** Team FBL executes ideas brilliantly so that the marketing effort delivers tangible, measurable, business results – consistently.

FBL already has a client who has signed up for this model. They are LMExams, a division of the Singapore-based ed-tech company, Littlemore Innovation Labs. LMExams offers paperless digital exams as a tech-enabled, cost-effective, foolproof solution to academic institutions. Littlemore's founder and CEO, G.Srikanth, has clearly placed his trust in FBL. Arvind says Srikanth uses all of FBL's capabilities to leverage its outsourced CMO model.

## ***The changing face of marketing***

It's still early days. But Arvind is confident that this is the way forward for FBL: "I had hoped for this model to succeed for one large company. Which is why I pursued the acquire-hire strategy for a while. But it was not to be. Perhaps we are ordained to serve a lot more clients. There are companies out there who are in great need of our services, capabilities and core competency."

Arvind's optimism is justified. The world of marketing has indeed changed rapidly in the past decade. Being in the thick of all the action himself, Arvind has seen the changes coming and has prepared FBL to embrace them.

On October 9, 2020, FBL's 11th founding day, in the midst of all the chaos that the pandemic had brought about, he wrote an email to his team. In this email he talked about the 11 key aspects of marketing that FBL saw as changing and evolving. In a way, his thoughts serve as a primer on how to market

successfully in the digital era:

1. *Traditional marketing, as we know it, is dead.*
2. *Brand perceptions are directly proportional to the quality of the digital experiences a brand offers.*
3. *Employer branding will stay relevant in this post-pandemic world. Humane, empathetic and authentic messaging will remain in focus.*
4. *Investing in creating content helps in building communities around the brand. This content includes animated, live, real videos, podcasts and results-centered marketing ideas. Everything else is just noise.*
5. *UI/UX will be the foundation stone for any business/brand looking to have their web presence.*
6. *Content marketing will be more aligned with UI/UX. Keywords and emotions need to be captured masterfully.*
7. *Significant digital advertising spends are needed for making a significant impact.*
8. *Capturing and broadcasting micro-moments will aid brand-building.*
9. *Marketing will be more tech-aligned.*
10. *Real art and photography is in. They bring out the uniqueness around ideas/brands. Stock images are out!*
11. *Creative thinking can solve almost any business challenge. This discipline will become more mainstream in the future.*

What is significant about Arvind's sharp perspectives is that they are firmly rooted in classic branding and marketing wisdom. Yet, there is a strategic, practical, realistic, willingness to adopt new-age technology, tools and trends. At the same

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time, clearly, he is not invested in betting big on social media. “Hyperactivity on social media is not the same as digital branding. In fact, social media is just a phase. It will soon give way for tech-enabled, qualitative, digital branding experiences. I see FBL being able to quickly seize that opportunity to create more value for our clients,” says Arvind confidently.

*Historically, entrepreneurs who have stayed tuned to the changes in the marketplace have always been more prepared for the future. You don’t have to necessarily invent the next big thing in order to seize the future. You are already pretty extraordinary if you are creative, agile, and are willing to adapt quickly to change. That’s what Arvind is leading FBL to do. That’s what will keep them relevant and help them occupy a niche space as a professional services firm. That’s also what will continue making them loveable people – who come up with fabulous ideas consistently and execute them brilliantly!*

***“You can’t shrink your way  
to greatness!”***

---

***Tom Peters,  
management guru.***

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## Epilogue

At the end of telling the story of its 14-year journey, we believe that FBL is poised for growth and glory!

Let us tell you why we think so.

You see, in life, you always start off on a new journey with hope and conviction. You are quite sure that you have the perfect strategy and the best plans. And then, over time, you figure out that not everything has happened the way you planned for it. You won some, you lost some.

Looking back, you always realize that the journey was never a straight line. You rose, you fell, you stumbled, you lost your way, you struggled with the fear of the unknown, you groped in the dark, and, eventually, miraculously, you found your way again. It is this inscrutable, unpredictable, nature of life that makes it an adventure!

In fact, with time and through their own spiritual evolution, everyone figures out that their journey was never meant to be a straight line. And that the path was not found by them, it was shown to them!

This is how life works. This is the process for everyone. And you must simply trust the process.

*Now, the bottom line is this: If you have been uncompromising with your values, and if your intent has been pure, doors will open, people will come to help you along the way, you will be pointed in the right direction, and life will lead you to where you must arrive. Again, this happens to everyone – unfailingly.*

This is where Arvind and FBL are presently. They have

## Epilogue

reached here because of their hard work, their diligence, their values and their quest for excellence. Along the way, they have developed a huge core competence in digital branding, marketing and design. And they have sharpened their unique capabilities – of consistently thinking up *fabulous ideas*, and of *executing* those ideas *brilliantly*. Above all, they are a bunch of ethical, creative and *loveable people*.

If they keep at what they are currently doing, and constantly strive to get better at doing it, they won't just continue to be a professional services firm; they will be the *best* professional services firm in the world!

We wish them well for the next phase of their journey.

Thank you for reading this book. We hope you found it useful.

Love and *Happyness*! 😊

**AVIS Viswanathan and Vaani Anand,**

*the happynesswalas™*.

Chennai, August 2023.

[www.thehappynesswalas.com](http://www.thehappynesswalas.com).

## **They said it: Testimonials**

### **Preethi, outsourced CFO:**

“I have been associated with FBL from 2018. I will summarize my experience as five key points:

1. Autonomy – I work virtually and have my space to work on my deliverables.
2. Trust – Once I had proven myself, I have been trusted completely.
3. Mentor – I admire, and try to follow, Arvind’s vision for the business. He has clear ideas of where the company is headed. I consider him to be one of my mentors.
4. Team – I have very limited in-person interactions with the team. But each time I interact with them I get to experience the mutual respect that the members of the team have for each other. There is a huge focus on teamwork.
5. Consistency – On the first of every month, I have seen a personal note from Arvind go out to the team. I think the consistency of that practice, of writing to the team, offers me an important learning. It tells me that even though a lot of things are changing around us, some things don’t change. Although I am not directly connected to the everyday work, I spend time on the first of every month reading Arvind’s note.”

### **Mona Adesara, employee:**

“Working at FBL is a rewarding experience. It fosters a collaborative environment and promotes growth. My key learnings include effective teamwork, adaptability and honing



## ***They said it: Testimonials***

problem-solving skills. The diverse projects I get to handle allow me to enhance my skills, and help me to grow both personally and professionally.”

### **Manoj Angusamy, employee:**

“I am thriving in a dynamic environment at FBL. I am constantly contributing to innovative and challenging projects that utilize my skills and expand my own vision. Over these nine-plus years of being here, I continue to gain invaluable lessons and insights. I have learned the importance of teamwork, adaptability, and continuous learning.”

### **R.B.Raj Kumar, employee:**

“I am grateful for the opportunities and space FBL has consistently provided me to share my views and ideas. The support provided by Arvind and Arun has been instrumental in my professional growth. I truly value the collaborative environment we have at FBL.

“Throughout my tenure at FBL, there have been instances where I have had differences of opinion and engaging arguments with Arvind or Arun. These interactions have challenged me to think critically and have undoubtedly contributed to my development as a professional.

“My key takeaways would be:

1. Be open to feedback.
2. Don't get emotional at work.
3. Don't settle for mediocrity.”

*fabulous. brilliant. loveable.*

**Shreyas Mudumbai, employee:**

“Working at firebrand labs has been an eye-opener. Not just to the world of marketing, but to the world itself! From what it takes to be a competitive professional to being authentic with what you create, it’s been a fast-paced, wild, ride with a lot of life in it!! And that’s from me who’s just getting started!!!”

**Kirthika Sathiyamurthy, employee:**

“My experience of working at firebrand labs over the past two years has been nothing short of a roller-coaster ride – in a good way! This is my first job. I had an opportunity to make mistakes, to be clueless and to learn from all these situations. Also, I had an opportunity to walk up to my boss’ chamber and tell him that I needed help whenever I was stuck. I am glad that I am in the right place at the beginning of my career.”

**Leander Angus, employee:**

“Working with FBL has helped me scale up an ever-flattening learning curve! This has helped me to not just work faster, but also to understand a client’s need better, often to the point of fulfilling their needs in the very first attempt!”

**Sai Smrithi, employee:**

“This is my first full-time job. Working at FBL has boosted my confidence in a big way as I get to see my designs come to life. I also have the opportunity here to work among colleagues who have a lot more experience than me. They are always ready to share their knowledge and to work together. I am learning on the job every day. I learn not just in terms of design but I also get to understand the psychology behind it. I am given the

## ***They said it: Testimonials***

freedom to interact with clients on my own.”

### **Raj Antony, employee:**

“I am glad to work in such a challenging and positive work environment where the focus is on solving problems through teamwork and continuous progress. FBL has a transparent culture, effective internal communication, strong leadership support, and numerous learning opportunities. I still remember the day we first met at work. I am grateful to be a part of the FBL team.”

### **Nithya Muralikrishnan, employee:**

“Working at firebrand labs over the past one year has been nothing short of a roller-coaster ride! There have been steep learning curves that have helped me to come out of my comfort zone completely and to challenge myself every single time.”

### **Sushmidha Jawahar, ex-employee:**

“FBL will forever occupy a cherished place in my heart. I entered the organization as a novice – as a designer. But by the end of my tenure there I had grown sufficiently to call myself a professional UX designer. This institution instilled in me a lot of self-belief and gave me the opportunity to embrace valuable lessons from my mistakes. My first real job in the professional world was at FBL. It not only equipped me with vital skills but also established a pretty high benchmark for managers and superiors. As I transition to new professional environments, I find that these standards set by FBL have been quite high for my future employers to match up to.”

**Divyavalli Murugappan, ex-employee:**

“Working at FBL has been such a great learning experience for me. I have learnt a lot – from finer technical nuances of design to team-building. This was a place that I loved coming to, and I loved what I did. (Unlike how Mondays are for most people!!!) The team was a bunch of friends and not ‘colleagues’. When our ‘heads ran dry’, we always had someone to keep us going.

“I also learnt a lot about workflow management and how to streamline processes and tasks. The informal work environment was the best part. The constant urge to grow, not only as a firm but as individuals too, made FBL stand out. I love packaging and branding projects. When such opportunities came up, I got to work on them. This continuously nurtured my creative side. FBL remains one of my most favorite work experiences – I keep talking about it even now!”

**Badrinarayanan Venkatanathan, ex-employee:**

“Fun, ballistic and learning-filled – that’s how I would sum up my experience at FBL. From joining as an intern to exiting 70 months later as a member of the senior management, it has been a transformational journey. The company, nay, tribe, taught me how to fail the right way, learn from everybody and every experience. It taught me to stand up for myself and my teammates, and to solve complex business challenges. For five years it was home to me. And it will remain my home for eternity.”



## About the authors

**Vaani Anand** and **AVIS Viswanathan** are ***the happynesswalas™***. Their Life's purpose is *Inspiring 'Happyness'™*!

AVIS is the author of *Fall Like A Rose Petal* and its Tamil translation, *Uthirum Roja Ithazh Pola*. (Both books are available on Amazon.)

AVIS has been an accomplished journalist in the early part of his career; he has worked with *The Indian Express*, *India Today*, *Businessworld* and *Business Today*. Vaani has written features for *The Times of India*, *Verve* and *The Economic Times' Madras Plus*.

Vaani and AVIS are culture and content specialists. They design and lead culture transformation mandates in corporates. They create and curate bespoke content that helps corporates and people tell their stories to audiences. They do this through talks, conversations, events, biographies/profiles, podcasts and videos. They are based in Chennai.

This book on firebrand labs is part of their offering, ***Biographies by the happynesswalas™***.

To know their fascinating story, look them up on [www.thehappynesswalas.com](http://www.thehappynesswalas.com).

## Why this book?

Good question.

Here's why:

First, every step on the entrepreneurial journey is fraught with uncertainty and risk. And, therefore, every moment in an entrepreneur's life has to be filled with devotion, discipline and dedication. Unable to deal with the constant upheavals, many entrepreneurs quit within one or two years of starting up. **Arvind Aathreya and firebrand labs (FBL) have been around for 14 years! This conviction to stay on the path is truly exemplary; it must be celebrated.**

Second, this journey of survival has undoubtedly been a roller-coaster ride. ***This journey is like any other – it has its share of stumbling, falling, getting up and moving forward. It is this willingness to get up after every fall, dust oneself, and march onward, that calls for celebration.***

Third, many times over the last 14 years, Arvind has felt lonely. He was plagued by self-doubt and entrepreneurial fatigue. But each time he had to deal with a no-go situation, someone always, miraculously, came forward to help. A connection to a new client happened or a door opened, and the FBL story progressed. ***Well, this is how life is; this is how life in business is. As long as you work hard, with integrity in your intent, no matter how dark it is, the path will unfold. So, the FBL story is, in a way, any – and every – entrepreneur's story. Therefore, it will be very relatable.***

Fourth, this is a story where the entrepreneur and his firm have taken several creative ideas, one idea at a time, and executed them diligently and exceedingly well for their clients. They have done this consistently for 14 years. ***This is the story of how FBL has made execution excellence its mantra – for growth and value creation. This approach of singularly focusing on one idea, and making it your life, is indeed worthy of celebration.***