

Kevin Systrom - Biography

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Module: Software Engineering - CSU33012

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Kevin Systrom was born on the 30th December 1983 in Hooliston, Massachusetts. He is an American entrepreneur and Software Engineer. He is best known for creating the monumentally popular social media and photo sharing app: Instagram along with his co-founder Mike Krieger. With an estimated net worth of \$1.4 Billion, he is included on the list of America's wealthiest individuals under 40.

Systrom studied Management Science and Engineering in Stanford University where he would later graduate with a Bachelors degree. He spent his third year abroad in Florence, Italy. During his time there, he studied photography, which would prove to be useful in the future as his deep understanding of the subject was a major driving force for the intense success of Instagram.

While in university, he also got his very first taste of entrepreneurship and startups when he was nominated to participate in the Mayfield Fellows Program. The fellowship led to an internship at a company called Odeo, which specialised in allowing users to create, record, and share podcasts with a simple Adobe Flash-based interface. The creator of Odeo would later go on to create Twitter. Interestingly enough, Jack Dorsey, the current CEO of Twitter, was also working at Odeo at the same time as Systrom.

Systrom's desire to become an entrepreneur and start his own business started when he was working at Google early in his career. He worked on Google services such as Gmail and Google's own Document Suite(Docs, Spreadsheets). He was employed at Google for a total of two years before finally quitting due to frustrations of not being promoted to an Associate Product Manager position.

After his exit from Google he joined a startup that specialised in social travel recommendations called NextStop. NextStop mixed elements of social recommendations with a reputation system and gameplay. It was bought by Facebook, who shut it down, a year after its inception.

While at NextStop, Kevin had began work on his own app which he aptly called *Burbn* after his favourite spirit. The app combined location-based social networking with photo-sharing. The app first gained traction when

Systrom pitched the idea at a party in Silicon Valley, where he found early adopters as well as two investors who each invested \$250,000 even though the app was in its infancy. This was also around the time when Systrom brought on Mike Kreiger as co-founder.

Although early adopters loved the app, it was a nightmare for newcomers. The clunky and overbearing UI proved too steep a learning curve for many. Although initially, Burbn launched as a direct competitor to Foursquare, it could not match the app's ease of use. Systrom and Kreiger decided to look at the data, and what they found was that people really enjoyed taking pictures, applying a filter from a filter app and posting it for their friends to see. So they completely stripped Burbn of most of its features, shifting their focus solely to photo-sharing. What was once a competitor to Foursquare had now transformed into a whole new category, with no competition.

The real "eureka" moment came to Kevin when he was at the beach with his girlfriend who was complaining that she didn't want to post her pictures online because they did not look as his friend Greg's. When Systrom told her that Greg had used a filter app before posting his pictures, she told him that he should include filters in Burbn. Thus photo-filters were introduced into the app, the first filter created by Kevin himself called "X-Pro II" is still available on Instagram today. Burbn was officially rebranded to *Instagram*, (a combination of "instant" and "telegram") in October 2010.

When Instagram first launched, more than 25,000 people downloaded it in the first 24 hours causing its servers to crash. During its first couple of years, the app saw exponential growth amassing an excess of 50 million users in 2012. This was even more impressive considering that Instagram only employed 13 people including Systrom and Kreiger at the time of its acquisition by Facebook.

Systrom's excellent understanding of user behaviour from Burbn coupled with his passion and knowledge of photography greatly boosted the success of Instagram. The distinct square photos, simplicity, ease of use and built in filters meant that users could easily adopt the app and not jump between other apps to edit their photos before posting kept users locked in and coming back. The uniqueness of the app compared to competitors felt

fresh compared to longstanding rivals such as Facebook and that also drew people in.

In 2012, Instagram was bought by social media giant, Facebook, for \$1 Billion. This was a notable move for Facebook, who up until now had only focused on smaller acquisitions, worth less than \$100 million. Systrom, who owned 40% of the company at the time, reportedly made a total of \$400 million from this deal. This acquisition was extremely beneficial to Facebook who were struggling in the mobile market but now had a foothold through Instagram. Mark Zuckerberg said at the time that he believed Instagram and Facebook were separate, unique entities and that Instagram would continue to operate independently of its now parent company.

Under Facebook, the company thrived and implemented many new groundbreaking features. One of the more controversial ones being *Instagram Stories*, which Systrom admits is a copy of the popular *Snapchat Stories*. Many people think that Instagram Stories was a direct response by Facebook to Snapchat when they denied the offer of acquisition by Facebook. Systrom has publicly defended the feature, insisting that all new services launched by tech companies are "remixes" of other products and that "all of these ideas are original when you remix them and bring your own flavour". This move crippled Snapchat's user base as creators, influencers and average users alike realised how limited Snapchat's version was and how much more people could be reached using Instagram's alternative.

Despite the success of Instagram, there were rumours that Kevin and his co-founder Mike Kreiger were experiencing creative differences with their parent company, Facebook's CEO; Mark Zuckerberg. Following these rumours, Systrom abruptly announced that he would be leaving Instagram alongside Kreiger on September 24th 2018. Systrom's resignation from the company was viewed by many as the end of Instagram's pseudo-independence from its parent company, Facebook. Although Systrom has refused to comment on his departure from the company he has said that "no one ever leaves a job because everything's awesome" and that he had wrote his resignation to Zuckerberg "very, very quickly", indicating that there were indeed tensions between the two.

After leaving Instagram, Systrom vowed to create another company, al-

though he has not done that as of yet. He has lived a relatively quiet life since his exit from Instagram. In 2015 He married his girlfriend, a fellow graduate of Stanford University, whom he now shares a daughter with.

Recently he has invested \$30 million in a new startup *Pitch* which was created by the people who developed Wunderlist. Wunderlist was sold to Microsoft in 2015 for \$100 - \$200 million. Pitch aims to be a direct competitor to Microsoft's PowerPoint software. This could mark the start of Systrom's return to the software industry, but one thing is for certain, Silicon Valley has not yet seen the end of Kevin Systrom.

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