



**Creativity, Innovation and Entrepreneurship**  
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**Case Study of an Entrepreneur:**  
**Ashish Mehta- Founder, Trainingfirst**

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## 1. Introduction

All firms come into existence primarily because of one person's vision, efforts, and leadership, and this phenomenon is referred to as entrepreneurship (Mallya, 2011).

The quasi-official definition by Harvard Business School defines entrepreneurship as 'the pursuit of opportunity regardless of resources that are under control.' (Murphy, 2011).

As many researchers agree, entrepreneurship does not precisely require a specific standardized framework of skill sets. Rather it is more about belief, passion, and commitment.

Entrepreneurship is a way of thinking, observing the external environment, and derive ways to change it for better. In the entrepreneurial world, skills are like commodities (Mallya, 2011).

Stig Leschly, a Harvard Business lecturer, explains that 'One of the reasons people get excited about entrepreneurship is because nobody exactly knows what it is' (Murphy, 2011).

Entrepreneurial studies show that an individual's behavior, his psychological traits, his economic background, and the social factors around him all contribute to mold entrepreneurial behavior. Psychological characteristics, such as creativity, passion, ambition, persistence, calculated risk-taking ability, confidence, challenging individuality, are all factors that characterize an entrepreneur (Murphy, 2011).

A successful entrepreneur is the one who constantly evolves his venture with respect to the new developments in society and continuously adapts to the changes (Mallya, 2011).

This case study discusses in detail about concepts of entrepreneurship based on the cited literary sources and an interview given by Entrepreneur Ashish Mehta, Founder of Trainingfirst.

This study will focus on principles of entrepreneurship, types of entrepreneurship, and classification of entrepreneurs based on basic social motivation and their basis of self-evaluation.

Conceptual principles that are analyzed in the case study include motivation to pursue entrepreneurship, visions, and values of an entrepreneur, effectuation logic, bricolage, entrepreneurial identity, opportunity creation, and importance of personal and professional networks during the entrepreneurial journey.

## 2. Trainingfirst– Vision, Value and Business.

*Ashish's Vision: "No one should be left behind."*

Ashish Mehta, an entrepreneurial enthusiast, established an educational and skill development eLearning startup called 'Trainingfirst' in 2017 (Mehta, 2020). Ashish is a social entrepreneur and has a passion for developing innovative learning methodologies and for accomplishing creative projects through strategic partnerships (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>1</sup>).

At an early age, Ashish had identified some major flaws in the delivery of education and professional training (Mehta, 2020). The education system seemed to focus more on the theoretical side rather than imparting practical knowledge and building up the skill sets. He observed a similar skill gap among employees in the corporates and poor performance among the blue-collar workers. This setback in the education system and the corporate world was the impetus that motivated Ashish to conceptualize Trainingfirst (Mehta, 2020).

Before Trainingfirst, in 2010, Ashish established a not-for-profit educational organization, Tagore Foundation, to empower the youth and worked on different projects for various civil and international organizations, including the United Nations. He gained rich experience in developing e-learning based solutions and training sessions (Mehta, 2020).

After managing that organization for almost three years, Ashish realized that there was a need for a scalable social venture and was determined to dedicate his life to addressing the issues in the current educational and skill development system (Mehta, 2020).

In 2012, while pursuing his Master's degree from Columbia University in New York, Ashish started working on his entrepreneurial ideas under the guidance of Dr. Garry Natrielo, founder of EdLabs at Teachers College, Columbia University, and began his market research (Mehta, 2020).

Gradually the business plan evolved with the support from Dr. Garry and Professor Sarah Holloway, who helped Ashish to develop a scalable business proposition plan.

By the end of his Master's Program, in 2014, Ashish had a complete market-ready business model in hand (Mehta, 2020).

However, Ashish felt the need to work more in the field of e-Learning before pursuing his venture plans. He worked as a Program Manager for Liquid eLearning Services Pvt Ltd from 2014 until 2017 (Mehta, 2020).

In 2017 Ashish launched his venture, Trainingfirst, to redefine the educational landscape in India. Ashish strives to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and ensure that individuals from every community get an equal learning opportunity through his integrated platform and services so that no individual is left behind (Mehta, 2020).

Trainingfirst provides its services to government departments, Not-for-Profit organizations, and private corporations to upscale their employees' performance (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>2</sup>). The firm

offers education and training courses through online and blended learning methodologies while also delivering customized content through interactive web-based learning and instructor-led training sessions (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>2</sup>).

Trainingfirst services cover a vast array of fields, such as education, healthcare, finance, environment, and have programs for various skills ranging from sales assistant, lab technician, counselor, and policymaker (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>2</sup>).

In the education stream, the firm delivers a wide range of content, including vocational courses, training sessions, and lifelong learning employability courses. Trainingfirst conducts several mission-driven courses, such as soft skill language programs for nursing staff across six hospitals in Northern India (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>2</sup>).

Trainingfirst believes that one size doesn't fit all, so they do not create standard generic courses for everyone. They identify individual customer's problems and then create customized content for higher completion and better retention rate (Mehta, 2020).

Trainingfirst has a team of instructional designers who develop strategies to leverage the impact of content delivery and a panel of subject field experts for specific projects to impart relevant expertise to the projects (Mehta, 2020).

All the content is self-paced and interactive, with no one-on-one interaction. The purpose of creating this is to facilitate individuals to learn at their convenience. Trainingfirst designs the content as per the customer's needs and uploads it on the platform, and the customers are given access to it. Some webinars are also arranged for customers with master trainers when required (Mehta, 2020).

As Ashish explains, Trainingfirst is not purely output-driven as the company is more inclined towards projects that are outcome-driven and can potentially create an impact in society. It employs CAPE methodology in most of the projects, which is Concept, Activity, Practice, and Evaluation methodology (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>1</sup>). Ashish explains that evaluation is the most critical component of the entire project since concept, activity, and practice are standardized and do not have much value unless evaluated.

Prominent customer organizations include International Union for Conservation of Nature, Max Life Insurance, Kotak Mahindra Bank, SightLife, Biocon, Fortis, Central Square Foundation, and Max Healthcare (Trainingfirst, n.d.<sup>2</sup>).

### 3. Thematic Analysis.

#### 3.1. Principle of Effectual logic

Saravathy coined the term 'Effectuation' in his research on entrepreneurial expertise. He defines it as 'the science of entrepreneurial thinking' (Mauer, 2015).

Thinking different is regarded as the rationale behind the entrepreneurial expertise. Researchers interpret this process by analyzing effectuation (Mauer, 2015).

Effectuation theory evaluates an entrepreneur's psychological traits and his cognitive psychology during the process of opportunity identification and venture creation (Mauer, 2015).

Studies show that entrepreneurs tend to de-emphasize actions that are based on predictions and emphasize on creating opportunities (Mauer, 2015).

Sarasvathy's study compares effectuation against causation. The latter describes an established model of decision making, referred to as management or strategy (Mauer, 2015).

Application of effectuation principle shows that effectuation and causation are two different mindsets, and individuals always prefer one over the other (Mauer, 2015). The effectual process is more general, more ubiquitous, and more prevalent among entrepreneurs (Mauer, 2015).

#### 3.2. Bricolage

As per Lévi, entrepreneurs that work on the principles of effectual logic generally 'make do with whatever they have at hand' (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015). Such entrepreneurs are called bricoleurs, and this concept is called *Bricolage* (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015). Lévi describes that when there are limited resources from a conventional perspective, then a bricoleur utilizes the means that are at his disposal. In this context, 'means' refer to information, knowledge, financial assets like savings, professional and personal network, or roughly anything that has potential in the entrepreneur's eye (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015).

Bricoleurs are action-oriented, they persevere in their objectives, and manage to dig feasible solutions instead of passively waiting for a perfect solution to appear (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015). Penrose explained that bricoleur with similar resources might use them differently depending on their knowledge, their idiosyncratic experiences, and perceptions, creating a unique permutation of solutions (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015). These solutions are highly idiosyncratic and individual to each bricoleur because they work through personal resources to formulate different solutions to the same problem, and also can develop other solutions by using similar resources (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015).

Shane says that for bricoleurs, the information that they already possess, and their network are the primary sources of opportunity creation (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015).

A shortage of resources, along with fierce competition and unexpected rise of challenges, are the reasons that cause the need for bricolage (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015).

Such circumstances motivate the bricoleurs to manage with what they have at hand. As Baker and Nelson describe, 'bricoleurs can create something from nothing' (MacMaster, Archer & Hirth, 2015).

### **3.3. Opportunity: created or discovered?**

As Kim explains, 'Entrepreneurship is about action.' An entrepreneur gathers ideas that he thinks have the potential, devotes the required efforts to evaluate the viability of the business plan through market research, and risks money and time investment for the execution of his business plan (Kim, 2015). There is one school of thought, which says that opportunities emerge from the external environment, such as a shift in consumer trends, economic changes, technological advancements, or even a disease outbreak (Byrne, 2020).

For example, Jonathan Schwartz is one such entrepreneur that discovered an opportunity in the current COVID-19 outbreak and struggled to think about how he could help (Parkin, 2020). Jonathan is the co-founder of Voodoo, a 3-D printing company (Parkin, 2020). In recent weeks Schwartz mobilized his mainstream projects and started to manufacture sanitizers, masks, and other such health care products that were now in shortage as the traditional supply chains could not meet the unprecedented demand (Parkin, 2020).

Stevenson describes entrepreneurship as the 'pursuit of opportunity regardless of resources under control' which means that an entrepreneur does not wait for opportunities to arise on their own or waits till he gathers sufficient finances to move forward with his plans (Kim, 2015).

Another researcher, Jasdeep Singh Bhatia, said that a real entrepreneur has the motivation to create opportunities within him and knows his vision (Bhatia, 2005).

While starting a business, an entrepreneur requires to take certain steps and create his opportunities (Kim, 2015). This depends on that individual's decision-making to act or not to act on the possibility that he may look upon as an opportunity (Kim, 2015). This implies that opportunities are stimulated and created by the entrepreneur through his voluntary actions. This process highly depends on several factors, such as an entrepreneur's prior experiences, his network, his resource at hand, and the prevailing circumstances around him (Byrne, 2020).

An opportunity is created through a person's cognitive skills, organizational learning process, and networking skills or career choices (UK Essays, 2018).

Ashish believes that opportunities are created and not discovered. Trainingfirst was a bootstrap startup (Mehta, 2020).

In 2017, Ashish did not hold back due to the shortage of resources and decided to go ahead with his venture with the available means (Mehta, 2020). Ashish was able to construct a full-fledged business model by the year 2014 when he completed his Master's from Columbia

University (Mehta, 2020). He felt his plan required more refined expertise in the field, and to get a better understanding, Ashish chose to work as Program Manager at Liquid eLearning Services Pvt Ltd in 2014, to expand his field knowledge, so that he could improvise his business model by incorporating new concepts from his own experiences (Mehta, 2020).

Entrepreneurial research in emerging economies suggests that personal relationships and networks with other entrepreneurs, bankers, government employees, friends, and relatives play an essential role in the funding process (UK Essays, 2018). Studies show that different networks accomplish different purposes, and therefore it is necessary to align the systems as per the requirements at various stages of the venture (UK essay, 2018). As per a research paper, networking with customers and government officials improve business performance, while social network provides financial support (UK essay, 2018).

Trainingfirst was a bootstrap startup (Mehta, 2020). In May 2017, Ashish launched the venture, using personal savings as the primary source of funding (Mehta 2020). Ashish's professional and personal network played a crucial role in helping him to get his business off the ground (Mehta 2020). Ashish received indispensable intellectual guidance from his professors at Columbia University (Mehta, 2020).

### **3.4. Passion**

Entrepreneurship allows individuals to pursue professions that are meaningful to them, and for which they have a passion. This enables entrepreneurs to engage in their job more creatively and independently while getting a chance to earn a living while doing what they love. Cardon defines entrepreneurial passion as 'a positive and intense feeling for the roles that are identity-meaningful' (Cardon, 2015). Different types of role identities are associated with types of passion, such as a passion for inventing, passion for founding, and passion for developing firms (Cardon, 2015). There are high chances that an entrepreneur comes up with business ideas, so he builds a plan, lay the foundation of his business and grows it, thereby experiencing all types of passions (Cardon, 2015). This explains why habitual entrepreneurs launch a venture and lose interest in it as soon as it reaches a growth level. They again start developing a new venture plan because they have a passion for founding (Cardon, 2015). Passion for a social cause is an increasingly important concept in entrepreneurial passion. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) names these founder roles as Communitarians and Darwinians. These two types of founders are not economically driven and consider their business as a tool to attain a social cause (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

Such entrepreneurs exhibit a persistent commitment, even when their venture is not doing well (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

Ashish says that passion is the drive that enables social entrepreneurs to make a difference in society (Mehta, 2020).



Ashish acknowledges that being passionate about the work you do, and being able to enjoy it every day plays a significant role in one's career satisfaction. He further explains that the most challenging part of this process is to bring your professional skills and the cause you want to work for on the same page. One way through which aspiring entrepreneurs can tackle this challenge is by sculpting their career goals around their cause and then identifying the required skill set (Mehta, 2020). That is how Ashish himself tackled this challenge. Ashish had been working in one or the other way towards this entrepreneurial plan since 2010 (Mehta, 2020). He had always been interested in mission-driven educational and training organizations, so he chose career paths that would have helped him to gain the knowledge and expertise in the relevant field, leading him towards his entrepreneurial ambitions (Mehta, 2020). Ashish outlines that a common difficulty that entrepreneurs usually face is the unlikelihood of finding like-minded people who can help you in the journey. He explains that it is often difficult to set an appropriate balance between the impact you intend to make and organizational growth (Mehta, 2020).

Ashish further explains that the best reward in pursuing his passion is the ability to make an impact in society, solve problems, and the satisfaction that comes with it.

### **3.5. Entrepreneur's Identity**

*'I am what I do'- Martin Buber. (Murray, 2017)*

Since organizations are often developed by a single founder, the implications of the founder's identities on the venture tend to be high (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

We reflect who we are through our engagement with our social environment, through our actions and our work. Entrepreneurs generally categorize themselves with a social identity with respect to class, gender, ethnicity, and ethics (Down & Giazitzoglu, 2015). The apparent rise of social enterprises highlights the moral and ethical status of entrepreneurs' identity (Down & Giazitzoglu, 2015). Bird says that intentions play a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial behavior, which indicates a strong relationship between an entrepreneur's mental state and his actions (Townsend *et al.*, 2020).

Cardon has given three entrepreneurial identities to help us understand the role of an entrepreneur's behavior and its implications on the process of venture creation (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). First is an inventor role identity, which refers to entrepreneurs that like to explore new opportunities, while second is the founder role identity, which relates to entrepreneurs who are intrigued about the initial staged of the venture. The third is the developer role identity, which refers to entrepreneurs that work with perseverance for the growth of their venture (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). On the basis of this theory, we can identify all the three types of entrepreneurial identities associated with Ashish. Ashish identifies himself as a hybrid entrepreneur with characteristics of Darwinians, Communitarians, and Missionary (Mehta, 2020). Ashish believes in conscious capitalism and continues to

innovate with a sense of responsibility. Trainingfirst intends to grow responsibly and be self-sustainable to contribute to the community at large (Mehta, 2020).

### **3.6. Values**

*“A world where every individual has an equal opportunity to learn”-Trainingfirst core value.*

One of the reasons, some people leave their jobs to start a venture is because they are not able to express their ambitions and values through their careers. These values can be a result of individual experiences or social concerns. Though ventures are created to provide a commodity or a service for a target audience, the entrepreneurs still have the liberty to design their operations in a way that translates into their core values and ambitions. They have an open field to be as creative as they want while shaping their business model and imbibing their core values that ultimately reflect through the venture.

Researchers agree that an organizational value is a principle around which its operations revolve (Kim, 2015). Selznick describes organizations as ‘institutes infused with values beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand’ (Kim, 2015). Scholars go further on defining a venture as ‘a vehicle that embodies the founder’s values’ (Kim, 2015).

Research shows that generally, ventures find themselves under pressure or temptation to deviate from core values at a certain stage, for different reasons (Kim, 2015). The intensity of values rooted in business highly depends on the type of startup and the kind of entrepreneur (Kim, 2015). Mission-driven startups tend to have a greater intensity of the founder’s values (Mehta, 2020).

If the founder is a communitarian or a missionary type of an entrepreneur, then the venture is generally a social startup, as per Steve Blank’s classification of startups (Blank, 2011). In such cases, the values tend to be the reason behind the company’s existence, and it is very unlikely that the founder will deviate from his objectives and values (Mehta, 2020).

Ashish agrees that organizational values are the force that creates the difference. Ashish firmly believes that if a startup is primarily driven by a social cause, then the founder will instinctively find ways to create a balance between core values and corporate culture. This argument infers that entrepreneurship does not only incorporate the founder’s values but also shields these values from external deviation pressures (Kim, 2015).

## **4. Conclusion**

This case study is a conceptual analysis of the principles of entrepreneurship and their implications on different types of ventures and Trainingfirst.

The main principles analyzed in this report are effectual logic and behavior, bricolage, entrepreneur's identity, and opportunity discovery.

This project further explains the reasons and motivation due to which individuals pursue entrepreneurship, the initial development phase of an entrepreneurial venture, and various factors associated with entrepreneurship.

These factors include market research, network support, funding, passion, values, challenges, and rewards. All the mentioned concepts have been discussed in an academic context based on the literary sources referred to in the case study, based on the interview conducted with entrepreneur, Ashish Mehta, and the application of these principles in Ashish's eLearning venture, Trainingfirst.

Social identity theory has become a key concept in evaluating the behavior, actions, and decision-making process of entrepreneurs. This research enables us to understand why entrepreneurs working within the same industry establish different types of ventures with various social and motivational drives.

Through this study, I identify Trainingfirst as a social startup that is mission-driven and strives to bridge the gaps that Mr. Ashish identified in the current mode of educational delivery and lack of adequate implementation of skill development courses.

This study helps to understand these academic principles from an entrepreneur's point of view and helps to grasp a deeper understanding of the subject.

This report also entails learnings acquired from interactive sessions with Mr. Ashish Mehta about his entrepreneurial experiences and his interpretation of the scientific principles of entrepreneurship.

This study was conducted in stages, beginning with an understanding of academic concepts, followed by an interactive conversation about the same principles with entrepreneur, Ashish Mehta, a recorded interview, and finally, a comparative analysis between the theoretical and practical facets of entrepreneurship.

*'Entrepreneurial venture is the shadow of you.'* - Ashish Mehta.

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