YOUNGEST OF ‘EM ALL!

Nalika Fernando

Dr Hans Wijayasuriya at 29 becomes the youngest and first Sri Lankan CEO in a multi million Dollar investment. Dr Wijayasuriya speaks to ‘Business Today’ on his meteoric rise to chief executive officer of MTN Networks.

Can you outline your academic and professional experience before joining MTN Networks?

My schooling was at St. Thomas’ college Mt. Lavinia. In 1986 I went to Cambridge University to study electronic engineering. Soon after graduating I joined IBM Sri Lanka where I spent nearly two years. During this period I was involved in systems engineering and marketing. Even at that time I was still interested in pursuing higher studies. I looked around in the job market for what could be the growth industry in 2 to 3 years. It was a calculated choice to specialize in Digital Mobile Radio. Telecom was going to be a boom industry specially mobile. I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship so I went back to England to do my Ph.D. at the University of Bristol. I came back in 1994 and joined MTN Networks at inception. This again was timely, when I was doing my dissertation MTN was being formed. I heard about it and got in touch with the director personnel. My Ph.D. studies were in Digital Mobile Radio, I felt it was the ideal opportunity to return to Sri Lanka.

With your qualifications and experience you could have pursued a career overseas, why did you opt to return to Sri Lanka?

For several reasons. Firstly it’s personal ties. I grew up here, it is my home. I will not compromise this for any financial benefit or career. Secondly I had this confidence that Sri Lanka offered the best career opportunities for Sri Lankans who are ready to work and give one’s best. Actually I did get a couple of offers in the States, after my Ph.D., but I feel my efforts paid off by coming here and I hope it will be the same for others who make similar decisions. In Sri Lanka you are given far more freedom. For example in UK, at my same level I would be one out of a 100 in a big organization, but capability wise I feel I can run a big organization. It’s just that you are kept small and kept low in a developed country. Whereas in Sri Lanka avenues open up. I would recommend it to any career minded patriotic person coming to Sri Lanka.

How long have you been at MTN Networks and what led to your meteoric rise as chief executive officer?

I have been here since 1994, I was within the first 3 employees of the company. I recall sitting around a table just in a small room at one of the Maharaja offices, just 3 or 4 of us invested with the task of building a company. It was an invaluable experience. We learnt quickly. It was fortunate that Dialog ran into trouble early and not down the line. Within the first 7 or 8 months we were in trouble. Always in adversity either you give up or you fight back. Along the way many people gave up I was one of the few who stuck with it. Zaini had confidence in me because I was there when it was really bad. There was a time when we had just one or two customers a day. Now we have around 60 to 70 customers a day and the highest growth rate in the market. If I take the early days of my work, project management and also perseverance has attributed to my success today. I would encourage anybody working in small companies to think in the long-term even though the short-term may not look that attractive. My first job here was as the deputy technical di- rector, at that time the technical director was an expatriate. Then I was promoted to general manager-Engineering. That was my last post before becoming chief executive officer.

Your specialization is in the technical side what measures would you take to improve the commercial side of your company?

Though my qualifications are technical I have been quite aware and interested in the commercial aspect and marketing. I am a firm believer of customer first, and the company should be customer driven and not technology driven. It is very easy with a leading edge technology like ours to be technology driven. At IBM I was in marketing and it gave me a good foundation. IBM is excellent in marketing. The same worldwide marketing ethics are present in the Sri Lankan operation as well. I am also doing my MBA on a part time basis.



How would MTN networks benefit by having a technical expert heading the company?

I don’t think you need a technical expert. At the very start I think I would have to dilute my expertise across the board and there will be newer and younger people coming in to be the technical expert. You can’t be the technical expert everyday, you have to get a wider perspective. That’s the task I’ve chosen. If I wanted to be a technical expert for the rest of my life I would have been in research. My background will enable me to keep abreast with technology and know what technology can be applied in our market and choose it wisely and correctly. For that matter MTN will benefit on the technical side. However what we need is a level approach to management. Applying technology in the context of what the customer needs, what the customer can afford and how the customer thinks about the product. Sometimes you try and change the customer attitude as you see in Sri Lanka with something which is purely technology driven. If I am going to do that as a technical expert then MTN won’t benefit. I must know the limitations of technology. That is where MTN will benefit because I know the benefits and the limitations of technology.

As a Sri Lankan you might have a better understanding of the needs of the people when promoting the product, how do you intend to take advantage of this situation?

It's easy for me to think of myself as a customer that's the advantage. However my predecessor was also equally familiar with the Sri Lankan market. He made a conscious effort to live local and be local. He did it very well, I am not sure that I can really add to that as I saw no deficiency in that. However, you are right, the advantage is that I can see myself as a customer. I know exactly how Sri Lankans are approached by advertising. This is the basic advantage.

In Sri Lanka most young chief executives are inhibited by the fact that their counterparts are of ten older people. This is a cultural problem. Do you anticipate this kind of problem and if so how would you overcome such a problem?

So far I have not come across such a problem, not even as head of division. I don't think age really matters, age should be measured not by the years but in how you approach a problem with regard to what you are doing. Personally I have not experienced such a problem. I would approach life assuming there is no such problem as it should be in anything, if you go into something negative you'd get a negative response. Most people like to see development in the country. With the opening of the economy, freedom of speech, people are becoming more vocal, your magazine is vocal. This encourages an environment where conventional norms breakdown. Thus I don't anticipate such a problem.

You are chief executive at 29, do you think you've reached the pinnacle of your career? or what do you foresee for yourself in the future?

Hope not. I don't want this to be the end of my career. There is a huge job to be done at MTN at the moment that's what I am thinking about. My main ambition is to make MTN number one, this is a huge task but it can be done with the right team. I have a good team of both Sri Lankans and Malaysians together. I want to build a very team oriented culture in the company. A company should not depend on one individual alone. Building a team environment that's my main concern, I have not thought beyond that. Its too early to think of the future, I am still getting used to being chief executive. What I would like while continuing here is to get more and more opportunity to contribute to the country. Get involved in general telecom issues. I feel I can contribute in a technical capacity. Apart from running this

company I am confident that I can be impartial and contribute to the country. This would be quite rewarding.