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## Context to the nugget

Ambi talks about how he has approached some of career choices. He specifically talks about some context behind moving to IIMC after IITM and then after graduating from IIM Calcutta, he discusses how he spent some time on the Agency side and the Client side before committing to a direction with the Agency world at FCB Ulka.

## Transcription

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**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ):** Having spent 25 plus years in the Ad agency context. What is your advice to people who want to join the Ad agency versus the industry? What question should they ask themselves to have a fulfilling career? How people should make directional choices or career choices?

**Ambi Parameswaran (AB):** There's no fixed answer for this whether you should work in an agency or in the client side of the business so let me just trace my own career journey, going back to 1997, even before that when I finished my IIT or when I was finishing my IIT I realised that B.Tech or working in engineering may not give me the jollies and I have got involved in few organizing stuff in campus and realized maybe there is some fun in that and went to IIM and actually enjoyed I mean people who have been in IIT could not believe that I was topping my class in IIM Calcutta and they didn't expect me to be anywhere near the top 10% of the class or top 25% of the class, because I was not a very academic guy in IIT but then IIM Calcutta I actually enjoyed. I enjoyed all the courses, I enjoyed finance, I enjoyed HR, I enjoyed marketing so it was actually serendipity, which kind of got into advertising in the first pass, I didn't know anything about advertising in my first year I wanted a summer assignment in Calcutta in those days, because I wanted to spend time in the city, move around the city, enjoy the city which I had not done, because as you know IIM Calcutta is really in the boonies, it's in Joka way out of the city. So, I wanted two three months to spend in the city to soak up the city, so I was looking for an assignment and I got summer assignment with the very young advertising agency called Rediffusion, when I got to know those people I discovered they were all IIM graduates who had come together to set up the company and I really enjoyed working with them three months I did my summer assignment, at the time a very esoteric project called Simulation model for media planning we didn't have computers at our disposal so it was largely written out as a with the flow chart and all that, so I enjoyed the thing and next year when the placement session was rolling by I got a call from them saying, and those were the days when this whole concept of pre placement offer was still not in vogue, so I got a call and I said you know what are you planning to do and I said look I am applying and I have got a HUL interview tomorrow, so they said look Subhash Chakraborty was the branch director of Calcutta, I said look lets meet for a drink, so I went and meet him for a drink on that particular historic so to speak Sunday evening and at the end he said OK, so he said will you join us? I said yes, are you making an offer? He said yes. I

said done, am joining you. So he said OK. We shook hands and then I left, and then next day my placement secretary caught me and said I hope you are appearing for the 2 o'clock interview with HUL. And I said No. he said why? I said I am going to advertising. So are you crazy? I said no, I think it's interesting, I wanted to do something interesting and not just sell soap, I mean it's another story I ended up selling a lot of soaps, as an advertising career guy but I actually ended selling a lot of soaps as a part of my advertising career but I said I don't want to sell soap I want to do other things, so he said look, you just can't walk out an interview you have been short listed you have to pay for the interview, so I said what do I do? So he said these guys have to give you an offer, so what's an offer? So they have to give you a letter, so that I called those guys up look you have to send a letter, the letter has to reach the placement office by 12 o'clock, if it doesn't reach, I will appear for the interview so don't blame me. So they said no, we will make sure that will send someone with the letter I think the telephone lines in the Calcutta were not too good, I think they tried faxing it or whatever and then finally they sent the letter, so theoretically in my batch I was the first guy to be placed because I didn't appear for any interview, got into advertising, really enjoyed three years in advertising, then someone said look may be this is not it there is another big world out there so I jump from advertising into marketing, I went on to the client side as a product manager at Boots, handling Coldarin and Strepsills, Burnol and some fairly large OTC plus I also handled some ethical brands, RX, Brufen and kind of all enjoyed it then as it happened the boss there moved to sales, you know kind of an oriented company called Yellow pages it was a pioneering thing so he made an offer, I went and worked there for two years, setting up the sales system for selling yellow pages in this country to really enjoyable, learnt a hell of a lot but the company had its own issues, and that was the time I said I should go back to advertising because I was missing it, I was missing the fun of working on different problem, every other day, interacting different sets of clients and then I got into ULKA and then ULKA made it you know FCB ULKA and continued there for what 20 or 27 years but of my 40 year career almost 10 years were spent not in advertising it was spent in Sales and marketing. So, you have to pick the right things, you know when I joined ULKA, I remember the head of Lintas Alec Pudumsee said you are making a big mistake this agency will shut down, I said OK if it shuts down I will come to you for the job, so he said yaa OK good answer but you know you should join us now, I said no!

**DJ: And how did you pick ULKA out of the other options that you had?**

AB: My former boss joined ULKA, and I wanted to go to Chennai to work in Chennai for five years or whatever so he said OK, place yourself wherever, look after wherever you come, so I went the company, actually I don't know how he hired me because the company was not making too much money, making a loss but was assembling a team of likeminded people and then the thing worked, so I think whichever job you are in, whether in advertising, marketing I think the first probably 10 years is when you need to figure out what gets you going and then by the time you are probably 35 you should hit the highway and stay on that for the next 15-20 years and then decide, do you want to work till 60 like I did or you want to get off at 55 or you want to work till 70 that's up to you.

**DJ: And I think what's also interesting is you tested life both sides of the fence and then you took a call, on this side is better or just to make it binary but that's interesting as well.**

AB: Both sides have its own positives and negatives and I enjoyed one side shall we say little more than the other side but I still have a lot of respect for brand teams and I think they do a great job.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Given the flux in the world of work, am not sure if the students of this generation will be able to clock 25 years in one direction on the highway as Ambi mentions. There might be some exits and turns that one might have to take. But the crux of the insight remains. Go broad first and then once you have some data on yourself (in terms of what you like and don't like) and have experienced a few contexts, you are in a better position to commit.

The other piece that struck me was that sometimes we need to work with large organizations early on to acquire some basic habits, discipline, learn from our bosses and to have a little bit of Branding on our CV, but after that, it might help to be open to opportunities where we could be a big fish in a small pond and ride a wave. Ambi talks about his choice to join Ulka instead of LINTAS in those days. No sweeping recommendation here but once we hit a certain point where we have accumulated certain capabilities, habits and CV branding, it might help to take on more risk in our career portfolio.

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## End of nugget transcription

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### **About Deepak Jayaraman**

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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