Our Conversation with Vikas Narula

**Duke I&E:** Tell us a little bit about your background. You got a degree in computer science and worked in engineering for many years.

**VN:** Yes, I did my undergraduate degree in computer science and spent 15 years in the medical software industry working for two different entrepreneurial firms. I spent most of my time serving as a "bridge" between the customer and our software development teams.

**Duke I&E:** In 2007, you joined the Global Executive MBA (GEMBA) program at Fuqua. Tell us about your time in the program.

**VN:** It was an amazing, mind-expanding experience. I was so ready to get back in the classroom and broaden my perspective. The international aspect of the program was the hook that lured me in. Learning about business, while in 7 different countries, studying with highly talented classmates from all around the world was both exhilarating and humbling.

**Duke I&E:** You started Keyhubs in 2009. Tell us the story of how it got started.

**VN:** In our first managerial effectiveness class (with Jack Soll), we were introduced to the concept of informal networks in the workplace. I had never heard of it before, but it immediately resonated with me. I was eager to apply the concept in my job. Surprised and frustrated by the lack of business-oriented software out there, I decided to build my own. I teamed up with fellow classmate, Ron Dees, and together we launched Keyhubs about 6 months after graduation.

**Duke I&E:** Keyhubs seems to be doing well, and you've picked up some good customers. I know a lot of people who hear "social networking" automatically think of Facebook and LinkedIn. You're in social networking, but pretty different from those companies. Can you explain how you're different and why companies want to buy from you?

**VN:** We are in the business of social network analysis, not really social networking. Imagine visualizing the web of all your LinkedIn and Facebook connections. Keyhubs does just that, but we focus on the network of relationships that exist in the workplace. We dig deeper to understand and reveal not just who's connected to who, but who trusts who, who relies on who to get their job done, etc. Intuitively we know (and the business literature reinforces) that these informal relationships largely drive how work gets done. Yet, this information is often hidden from management view. By uncovering it, organizations can be much more effective in how they manage and develop talent, boost collaboration and / or drive change. There is a great video clip from one of our customers outlining how this process translated to better business outcomes: [http://www.keyhubs.com/blog/informal-networks-and-social-capital-in-the-workplace-keys-to-driving-change/](http://www.keyhubs.com/blog/informal-networks-and-social-capital-in-the-workplace-keys-to-driving-change/)
**Duke I&E:** Tell us what your business is like these days. What do you spend your time on?

**VN:** Business is progressing steadily. I spend my time on one of two things: implementing projects or selling projects.

**Duke I&E:** As you reflect back on the last couple years since you started, what are some of the things you've learned that you wished you'd known when you were starting.

**VN:** Two things:
- Things always take a bit longer than you would like
- Effective networking is the most potent lever for growing a business. When I say effective networking, I mean meeting anyone and everyone not purely for the sake of growing your business, but for the shared purpose of connecting with other human beings and finding ways to help them.

**Duke I&E:** Are there a couple of key things from your MBA that have helped you with Keyhubs? (e.g. your network, a favorite class, overall experience)

**VN:** The learnings from my MBA around entrepreneurship, continuous innovation and the importance of culture have greatly influenced and shaped my approach to building a business. Several of my classmates have engaged us to uncover the hidden networks in their organizations. Not only was Fuqua the inspiration and catalyst for Keyhubs, Jack Soll is now a devoted customer. He uses Keyhubs regularly as a vehicle for introducing informal networks to students. In that way, we have come full circle and it is tremendously gratifying.

In short, the Duke MBA has been paramount in giving birth to and making Keyhubs a reality.

**Duke I&E:** Thinking back to when you were a student, were there things you wished you'd done differently to prepare for being an entrepreneur? And what did you do as a student that you are glad you did?

**VN:** I am not sure anything can really prepare you for being a 1st-time entrepreneur. You're either one or you are not. It is kind of like parenthood. Can anything really prepare you? Once you're "in" it, you learn to figure it out. I am glad I listened to my inner voice and yielded to the calling of creating a product I did not see in the market place. I am glad I shared the idea with my classmate, Ron Dees. Without his guidance and partnership it would not have happened. The whole process has brought me professional satisfaction like none other in my life.

**Duke I&E:** If people are interested in learning more about Keyhubs, what should they do? And how will they know if they are a good potential customer for Keyhubs?

**VN:** They can check out our website at [www.keyhubs.com](http://www.keyhubs.com). They can contact me directly at vnarula@keyhubs.com or 763-607-3675. If you work in an organization of more than
20 people, you would be a good potential customer for Keyhubs -- we would love to hear from you!

**Duke I&E:** Tell us what it’s like to live in the Twin Cities as an entrepreneur. What is the entrepreneurial scene like?
**VN:** What the Bay area is to software startups, the Twin Cities are to medical device startups. This place is a med-tech hub.

Minneapolis / St. Paul is also a hub for organizational development consultants and learning. That makes this environment ripe for things like Keyhubs, which are trying to improve business performance through the use of innovative technologies and services. Many of the large businesses in town are highly progressive and constantly on the lookout for new organizational tools and services.

It is also worth noting that Minnesota has more Fortune 500 companies per capita than any other state. Furthermore, many of those firms started in a bootstrapped way, without VC money. That is particularly inspiring, as I look to grow my business organically. Folks like 3M (based here) are legendary in the field of business because they have managed to preserve the entrepreneurial spirit in spite of their size. That is a model I subscribe to and look to emulate as we grow and expand.

**Duke I&E:** Anything else you would like to share with students?
**VN:** Pursue your dreams whatever they may be!