LEADERSHIP

SPOTLIGHT



AHEAD OF THE CURVE, ALWAYS

The Man Who Keeps Backing The Next Generation

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A Small-Town Boy and a Big Idea

Uday Kothari did not grow up near a city. His father worked for the state government, and the postings took the family through small towns across rural Maharashtra. It was a modest, middle-class childhood, and it lasted right up to the twelfth standard.

Then his father was transferred to Pune, and a whole new world opened up. Big-city culture, bigger classrooms, and bigger possibilities. He went on to complete his graduation and a master's degree in electronics, and by the mid-1980s he was in his first job.

He remembers that move as the moment the horizon shifted. It left him with a quiet habit he never lost: look at what is in front of you, then ask what else could be possible.

> "It was a very humble middle class family and very small places. Only after 12th actually I came to Pune."

Roots

Rural Maharashtra

Education

Master's in Advanced Electronics, University of Pune; Master's in Computer Science, Savitribai Phule Pune University

Base today

Pune





The Engineer Who Drew a Circuit from a Phone Call

His first job was at Zenith, and he was only a few months in. A terminal at a customer's site in Nashik had broken down, and his manager sent the young engineer to fix it. He carried a manual and a bag of spares.

Then he arrived. The machine in front of him was a different model from a different manufacturer, and nothing in his bag matched it.

So his manager did something unusual. He dictated the circuit diagram of that board over the phone, line by line, and Uday drew it as he listened. Then he traced the fault and fixed it.

Those were the years of scarcity. Hardware stayed stuck at customs for weeks, and the engineer on the front line still had to satisfy the customer. Out of that came a lesson he still repeats: never complain about missing resources, find a way.

That pressure pushed him from hardware into software. When a printer port failed and the spare part was weeks away, he wrote a small assembly program that quietly redirected the signal from COM1 to COM2. The operating system never knew. The customer never stopped working.

> "I realized that using software I can solve some of the hardware problem."

Give them a satisfying solution. Don't complain about what you don't have.



The Thursday Night Promise

In 1988 he moved to Dubai. It was a good job, but it was not a good fit. The company's policies kept coming up in conversation, and every Thursday a group of friends from different firms would meet and complain about their employers.

One evening, someone in the group pointed out something simple. It is easy to criticise a company's rules, but you never know why they exist until you have had to run one.

That comment stayed with him. He said it out loud that night: one day he would start his own company, and everyone connected to it would be proud of it.

He came home to India. The pull of that promise was strong, but the road was not obvious. Before he had registered anything, the Dubai company that had let him go called him back with work, asking if he could do it from Pune. That was the first sign that world-class work could be done from India, and that clients abroad would pay well for it.

In 1993, he and a friend started a partnership in a small outhouse near Deccan in Pune.

> "I'll start my own company and I'll ensure that all the stakeholders associated with us will always be proud of it."

In those days there was no internet. He found his first international customers on CompuServe, a global bulletin board. He solved other people's technical problems there, became a Microsoft MVP, and the question "Where are you from?" turned into engagements.

A Career in Timeline

Thirty-plus years, many chapters, one steady thread: building something useful and teaching others to build it too.

1986

Begins at Hinditron, a company linked to Digital Equipment

1988

Moves to Dubai; returns to India

1993

Starts his first company in Pune

1995 to 1997

Senior Project Manager at PRT Group, including building a delivery centre abroad

1996

Co-founds Compulink Systems, grown from a 300 sq ft garage

2000s

Launches in-house products; the company lists publicly and expands across 12 countries

2011

Becomes a Charter Member of TiE Pune

2012

Leads Compulink Academy to train young talent

2017

Founds DLT Geeks, an enterprise blockchain studio

Today

Chair of TiE Pune Angels; mentor, angel investor, and active on AI

> "Dream big and have the ability to overcome any constraint."



From a 300 Sq Ft Garage to a Listed Company

Compulink began in a 300 square foot garage. The first client was the same Dubai company he had worked for. The second came by chance, at a share broker's office in Pune, where he started talking to a visiting Swiss businessman of Indian origin. A short trial project followed, and then more.

His first big lesson in product thinking came in the early 2000s. A recruitment-automation product he had built was bought by another company, and he stayed on to maintain it. He saw how a small amount of time and energy could create so much value. Projects pay the bills, he realised, but products give you scale.

The next product was built for project management and quality processes, and it grew to roughly 250 customers within a couple of years. Every customer wanted something customised. If you change the product for each of them, he explains, you end up with a nightmare of different versions.

His answer was to build a web application framework: a configurable platform that let the team adapt the product for a specific customer without touching its core. Today people call that low code or no code. He was designing it more than two decades ago.

> "You can configure the product for a specific customer without changing the binary."

The framework behind Compulink's flagship product worked on the same logic as today's low-code platforms, years before the term caught on.

How to Grow an Engineer

Compulink could not afford senior hires, and the best graduates from top colleges were headed to big companies. So Uday built his own way of growing talent, from Tier 2 and Tier 3 colleges.

His first idea was about experience. What is experience, he asked, other than mistakes you have already made and learned to avoid? If he could capture that learning in checklists and guidelines, a new recruit could do work that was about 80 percent as good as an experienced person's.

His second idea was about thinking. Freshers, he found, tend to arrive with templates in their heads and struggle to think out of the box. For six months, he spent at least two hours a day with every batch.

Checklists over years

Capture what experience teaches, so new hires start ahead.

The assignment of assignment

After a concept is explained, the trainee does not solve a problem. They create one for others. To write a good question, you have to understand the idea deeply.

The clean room test

Each trainee takes a small module from requirement to testing, alone. The result is only pass or fail. No hints on where it went wrong. They must work it out.

> "You create an assignment. So I call it the assignment of assignment."





Earning, Learning, Pension

If you want people to stay and grow with you, he says, you have to help them see their own contribution. He built a simple idea for it.

Every task in a day, he told his team, should fall into one of three buckets. Either it **earned** something for the company, or it helped you **learn** something new. If it did neither, then what you earned that day was a **pension**. You got paid for doing nothing.

Nobody was tracking anyone. The team members mapped their own days for six months, and slowly they could see where time and energy were going. Uday calls it self-realisation, not policing. It also creates a different kind of attachment to the work.

His second principle is just as direct. In his view, every role in a company comes down to two things: contributing to the sale, or contributing to delivery. Whatever your title, find which one you are part of.

> "It's a self realization. It is not policing actually."

Earning

The task created value for the company.

Learning

The task built a new skill or capability.

Pension

Neither. You got paid for doing nothing.

An Idea Ten Years Early

Around 2000, a customer invited Uday to Australia, to an early gathering of about twenty-five people exploring a new idea: XBRL, a standard way of reporting financial data. At the time, comparing two companies' financial statements meant keying numbers in by hand.

He spent a week meeting the people behind it and began to work on it. He built an Indian taxonomy for company reporting and presented it in Mumbai. It was far too early, and nobody acted on it.

About a decade later, the regulator made XBRL filing mandatory for listed companies and for larger private ones.

His patented idea answered a practical question: how do you fill the template? He compared it to a printer driver. Any application can "print" to PDF. He imagined an XBRL driver, so that someone in an accounting system could simply "print" a profit and loss statement and get a standards-compliant report.

He holds US and EU patents for the technology.

> "Probably I'm a little bit ahead of time in this case also."





Blockchain with a Purpose

By 2017 Uday was mentoring startups and, in his own words, still coding. He was drawn to blockchain, but noticed that nearly all the attention went to cryptocurrency, which he saw as more speculation than substance.

He looked deeper and found Hyperledger, built for enterprises. That was where the real use was: proving that something travelled from point A to point B without being tampered with, or authenticating a degree certificate. He founded DLT Geeks, a studio building enterprise applications on Hyperledger Fabric and Ethereum.

He is candid about blockchain's limits. If only one party is involved, a well-built database can do the job. Blockchain works when many stakeholders take part. He once explored a proof of concept for a Dubai client, where postdated cheques are common and a bounced one can hurt a supplier badly. The idea only works if multiple banks join the chain.

Today he also builds machine learning and generative AI applications. He sees the two as complementary, but not mandatory together.

> "It's complementary but not mandatory to combine these two."

Many stakeholders. Shared trust needed. A single party cannot be the referee.

Many stakeholders

Blockchain works when multiple parties need to share trust.

One party?

A well-built database can do the job.



Backing the Next Builders

Uday became a charter member of TiE Pune in 2011, just as he was handing over his old company. The group asked a simple question: what can we do for startups? The answer was a structured six-month mentoring programme. The first batch had five or six companies. It grew every year.

Around 2018, the group noticed something. Even after six months of mentoring, a startup needed more than advice. It needed capital. About 25 of the 60 to 70 charter members formed an angel group, and Uday became co-chair and then chair. The group now invests beyond its own cohort, and has seen a couple of exits in the last two years.

When he evaluates a founder, he asks three questions. Is it a good opportunity? Is it a big one? And is this the right team to execute it?

The opportunity

Is the problem real and sizeable?

The team

Does the founder have deep domain experience?

The market

Will it work beyond friends, family, and early adopters?

> "Features don't sell the products. Your solution to their specific problem does."

What problem are you solving? Who pays for it? Will they pay? How much?



The Energy of the Young

When Uday talks about the next generation, his voice lifts. He recently sat on a panel at a college event in Pune, and he came away amazed. A third-year engineering student from Gujarat was already working with space companies, and he had a product and a customer. A young man from Pune had built a drone and sold it to the Army.

He does not feel he needs to hand out much advice. What these founders need, he says, is a little support: help with going to market, help validating an idea before spending too much energy on it, and some encouragement.

He is optimistic about AI, defence, space, healthcare, and health tech. The week before our conversation, he had seen fifty deep tech companies pitch in Mumbai, from cancer diagnostics to biotech. He was still digesting it.

> "People are already figuring it out. All they need is some little support."

Blockchain or AI by 2030?

AI

One trait he looks for in every founder?

Ability to change

Most overused pitch deck line?

"We are the only one"

Beyond the Boardroom

Away from work, Uday plays table tennis three times a week and goes to the gym three times a week. He likes a good conversation about technology and business, and he will chat for as long as someone is willing.

He also gives back. He runs a scholarship in the names of his late parents, supporting students who score well in their Class 10 exams.

But when he talks about what matters most, he comes back to entrepreneurs. A founder who creates ten jobs supports ten families, he says, and often people who have come from small towns. His wife runs a small company, and some of the young women she employs are the highest earners in their villages. He has seen what that does to their standing at home.

It is why he thinks creating entrepreneurs is the biggest social service of all.

> "Creating more and more jobs is a much bigger social service than donating an amount."

Build the builders, and the rest follows.

