

Alumni profile: Deepak Ahuja

The chief financial officer for Tesla Motors leverages his engineering background to succeed in business



“Change is good,” says Deepak Ahuja, chief financial officer for Tesla Motors, the automotive company that has buyers salivating over high-end electric vehicles that go from 0 to 60 in 3.7 seconds—with zero emissions. “Change forces you to push your limits and discover your potential.”

Ahuja is clearly comfortable with change. He has lived on three continents and worked in fields as dissimilar as ceramic engineering and finance. Above all, he has been flexible about what to do next, learning along the way what gives him the most satisfaction in work and life.

Growing up in Mumbai, Ahuja originally planned to go into the family business. His parents were serial entrepreneurs who had established several successful businesses, primarily in the garment industry, manufacturing jeans and lingerie. After Ahuja earned a bachelor’s degree in ceramic engineering from Banaras Hindu University, his father invited him to become a business partner in a factory that would manufacture ceramic insulators for the electric grid. The plan was that Ahuja would study in the United States to learn more about ceramic technology, then he would return to India.

The initial part of the plan worked well: in fall 1985, at age 22, Ahuja enrolled in McCormick as a PhD student in materials science, his first time in the United States. Two years later he had earned a master’s degree and made a couple of alterations to his life plan: he would not return to India right away, and he would not complete a PhD. “A PhD would have taken me too deeply into pure science,” explains Ahuja, who discovered he was more interested in applied technology.

While at Northwestern, Ahuja maximized his experience both on and off campus. At McCormick he was strongly influenced by professors Morris Fine, R. P. H. Chang, and Thomas Mason. But before Ahuja could learn from them, he had to adjust to the American educational system. “In my first class, Professor Fine made an assignment and said it had to be typed,” remembers Ahuja. “I told him that in India I had done programming on mainframes, but I had never

used a PC. He said that was unacceptable.” Ahuja found an IBM desktop in the department but had no idea how to turn it on, and his repeated inquiries to someone working there went unheeded. “I had a heavy accent and couldn’t make myself understood,” he says.

A fast learner, Ahuja went on to immerse himself in his studies, becoming a teaching and research assistant—“a wonderful experience,” he says. He also took full advantage of his new surroundings. He joined the sailing club and learned to captain a small boat. When he was offered the use of a car to drive to Argonne National Laboratory to do research, he practiced driving in Chicago—“very different from India.” He became president of Northwestern’s Indian student association and organized social activities for the group. While at Northwestern he met his wife, a physical therapist who was also from India. “I have an emotional soft spot for the Chicago area,” says Ahuja.

But Ahuja’s fondness for Northwestern and Chicago did not tie him down. He and his wife soon moved to the Pittsburgh area, where for almost six years Ahuja worked as an engineer for Kennametal, developing ceramic composites for use in the aerospace and automotive industries. While there, he racked up four patents for new ceramic materials. As successful as he was, Ahuja did not see room to grow in his job. He decided to make another transition, this time to the business world. “I wanted to help drive strategic decision making,” says Ahuja, who earned an MBA from nearby Carnegie Mellon University while working at Kennametal.

“When I moved into the business world, I wanted to leverage my engineering background. I wanted to work in an environment with a manufacturing core; joining a bank would have been out of the question for me,” says Ahuja, who put his business skills to work for Ford in 1993, relocating his family to Michigan. “My engineering background made me a much better finance person.”

Ahuja began his financial training at Ford’s

“When I moved into the business world, I wanted to leverage my engineering background.”

DEEPAK AHUJA

Woodhaven stamping plant, where he worked as a production line supervisor for a few months. “I had been in manufacturing plants with my parents from a young age,” says Ahuja, “but manufacturing in the United States is a very different experience. You’re part of a massive enterprise. It gave me a back-to-basics understanding of how manufacturing and the auto industry work.”

At Ford, Ahuja gained diverse business experience dealing with financial aspects of manufacturing, product development, marketing and sales, currency hedging, and acquisitions. “Then Ford offered me the opportunity to grow from manager to leader,” says Ahuja, who became CFO for a joint venture between Ford and Mazda and later served as CFO for Ford of Southern Africa. “South Africa opened the eyes of my children and helped them develop empathy for others,” he says. The Ahujas’ two daughters are now 17 and 19.

Back in Michigan, Ford asked Ahuja to join the leadership team directed to bring fuel-efficient automobiles to the North American market—a segue that foreshadowed his current work at Tesla. Coming back from South Africa also made Ahuja realize that he enjoyed smaller organizations, so when Elon Musk, the charismatic chair and cofounder of Tesla, approached Ahuja in 2008 about joining the company, Ahuja found the offer hard to resist.

“Elon is a dynamic person with a vision to



make all-electric cars for the 21st century,” says Ahuja. “He took me for a ride in a Tesla Roadster and then let me test-drive one. It blew my mind.” Another attraction for Ahuja was Tesla’s unique business model. The company owns all its stores and sells its cars at a fixed price—\$110,000 being the base price for the sculpted, hand-built, all-electric Roadster model.

Persuading his family to relocate to Palo Alto, California, was easy—“After South Africa, they were used to moving”—and the lifestyle agrees with them. Ahuja logs about 50 miles of road biking on weekends and fits in hikes when he can. When the mood strikes he may whip up a Sindhi curry, blending lentils with special spices for a taste of home. He travels to India to visit his parents, but he has not complied with his original plan to return there to work. “It is quite unlikely, but one can never say never,” says Ahuja. “One thing may lead to another.”  Leanne Star



Top: The headquarters of Tesla in Palo Alto, California
Bottom: The Tesla Roadster