

Interview with President & CEO,
Killick Datta



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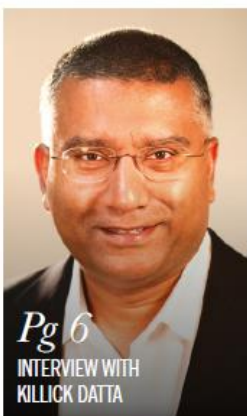
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ALUMNI NEWS

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
LEADING AND MANAGING CHANGE
YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS IN
GERMANY, CHINA AND SRI LANKA
FROM DURHAM TO DIESEL

BETTER BUSINESS THINKING



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KILLICK DATTA

MSc MANAGEMENT 1981/2



FROM DURHAM TO DIESEL

HOW A CHANCE MEETING AT DUBS LEAD TO A SUCCESS IN THE GLOBAL FOOTWEAR INDUSTRY

In 1981 the world was a very different place. Telephones were connected by a cable to the wall, sports shoes were only worn on the court or track and Durham colleges were taking the bold decision to admit members of the opposite sex.

One of the first two male members of St Aidan's SCR was Killick Datta, who had come to Durham to do an MSc in management studies. At that time it was seen as a temporary break from his studies as a chemist and biochemist before embarking on his career, leading to a place on the board of a pharmaceutical multinational, just as his father had done before him.

After studying his first degree in the South of England, friends had encouraged him to look up North for a business course. He stood on the hill outside St. Aidan's, looking across to the castle and cathedral and knew he had found the place. As he sits in a London hotel, thirty five years later, he describes his time at Durham as a wonderful experience and a refreshing break from his scientific research. It also gave him time to pursue his love of sport. He played table tennis for Wales and India, soccer for Durham and was St Aidan's sportsman of the year.

One Sunday, Killick was sitting in the Business School library in his Adidas tracksuit when a man walked in and demanded he take it off. This was his unpromising introduction to Olympic medallist Brendan Foster, who was at the Business School for a refresher course having been recruited

to a fledgling American sportswear company as European Managing Director. Fortunately Killick recognised him from the commentating he did on television, and in the hope of bagging some free tickets to Wimbledon, or other sporting events, replied, "This was given to me free, what are you going to give me?" Foster explained his commercial role and promised Killick some kit from the firm. Killick was unimpressed as he'd never heard of the tiny foreign brand. It was Nike.

A few days later Killick saw Brendan having coffee in the SCR at the Business School, and reminded him of his offer. True to his word, Brendan headed to his car and brought Killick back a little bag with a singlet, T-shirt and shorts. Killick points out that none of this was ideal for the sports he was interested in, but in the hope of tickets, continued to chat. They discussed Killick's plans for his dissertation to study the multi-brand strategy at Proctor & Gamble. Brendan persuaded him not to do this, but to look at a strategy for growth for Nike and offered to pay his expenses to travel around the UK and Europe to research and write the strategy. Killick didn't think twice and shook hands to agree. It was a risk that was to shape his career. As ever, he gave it 100 per cent.

One evening as he was completing the dissertation, Killick invited Brendan to St Aidan's for a formal dinner with the then principal Lady Irene Hindmarsh and the Chancellor, Dame Margot Fonteyn. Over the port and sherry after the meal, the men discussed Killick's

future and Brendan suggested that he come to work for Nike. At that time it was just a small office in Durham with three members of staff to oversee its European operations. The whole firm had sales of £65 million.

So Killick took on the role of Marketing and Purchasing Manager for Nike UK. In reality, as part of a small team, the role involved everything from marketing research for the London marathon to getting branded socks to John McEnroe, often sleeping in airports or on planes to meet all his commitments. The other three staff members were all British track athletes who would run together at lunchtime and in the evening. Fortunately they bonded with Killick over a shared love of Indian food.

The timing was perfect. Nike rode a health boom in the UK, and with its understanding of, and links to, running, the firm grew in the wake of a popular expansion of the sport. Running became a phenomenon, epitomised in huge public events. The London Marathon was launched on 29 March 1981, followed by the Great North Run on 28 June of that year. The Great North Run was co-devised by Brendan Foster and Killick recalls that running it was nearly obligatory for the Nike team. Britain saw a huge surge in love for track, and this celebrity endorsement was another part of Nike's success. Sebastian Coe, Steve Cram, Steve Ovett and David Moorcroft were winning medals at all the major athletic events. Nike signed them all.

Another chance meeting created the opportunity to move on. Brendan had moved Killick to the USA to be director of international business development.

At a trade fair Killick met Robert Greenberg. Robert headed up a group of five guys, with no college degree between them, marketing ladies' aerobics shoes. Killick joined LA Gear as president of international business with responsibility for the international licensing and developed the model of celebrity endorsement he had used at Nike. Unusually then for a street-fashion, sportswear business, they signed up celebrities beyond the sports arena, including Michael Jackson. The company also launched shoes with flashing lights, familiar to any parent with small children. The business grew to be worth \$1 billion in five years, and to be number one on the New York Stock Exchange, two years running. Killick suggests that Nike was a great school where he learned his trade, but it was probably his work at LA Gear that got him noticed.

From LA Gear Killick went on to be president of Wolverine Worldwide International, with responsibility for brands such as Merrell, Brooks and Hush Puppies. Robert Greenberg enticed him back to launch Skechers but at thirty-five Killick decided that he wanted his own business. Against all the advice he was given, he licensed

the Diesel jeans brand for footwear and by designing hybrid shoes including a man's brogue on a sneaker base, created a brand worth £500 million in its fifth year. Since he has sold the company he has been enticed to Singapore to launch a footwear brand. He also serves on several boards and is an advisor to the US Department of commerce on International Trade Issues.

Killick recognises that although he has worked as hard as he could, none of it guarantees success, and it has been an elusive mix of luck, timing and hard work that has paid off for him. He feels fortunate to be paid to do something he enjoys, and clearly relishes attending fashion shows and browsing shoe departments. He is also proud to have made it through his career on his own and stepped beyond his father's shadow. He credits Brendan Foster as the reason he is in the industry and acknowledges that an unpromising meeting in Durham University Business School had a critical role to play in the direction his career took.