

# The Making of Upside Software

Ashif Mawji Founder, President and CEO of Upside Software Inc.

Cool Companies™ profile page 116

Although Ashif Mawji never played video games as a child, he loved computers. What fascinated him was creating computer programs that made people's lives easier and more efficient. Today, Ashif's company, Upside Software, does just that: its software products make managing business contracts a lot easier and more efficient.

Ashif graduated in Computer Systems Technology from NAIT (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology) in Edmonton in 1992. Unlike most graduating students, Ashif decided not to find a job but to go work for himself because Ashif says he has always been the kind of person that thinks, "I can do that myself. Or if it's already been done, I can do that better."

"Opportunities are everywhere," says Ashif. "It's up to the individual to do their research and put in the effort to find them." During his research, Ashif discovered a government office in Edmonton that advertised government contract opportunities for computer programmers. Although all the contracts asked for five years experience and other computer skills he didn't have, he visited the office each week to look at the latest available contracts. After three months of disappointing weekly visits, Ashif's persistence paid off. Although he barely made the minimum requirements, he found a contract he wanted to apply for. "If you don't try, you don't get anything for sure," says Ashif.

Ashif asked people at the government contract office how to prepare a contract application because "you can't do everything yourself," he says. "Sometimes you need to ask for help when you need it." Knowing Ashif's odds of getting the contract were minimal, he was advised to look at the application as a learning experience instead of a sure thing. This was an important idea that Ashif took one step further; he stated with honesty in his application that he might not be the most

qualified candidate to do the contract, but he had desire, drive and attitude to give the contract his biggest effort and work above and beyond what was expected. His approach worked! And, it is an approach Ashif has used a few times in his entrepreneurial career, and it has served him well.

Ashif worked his butt off to fulfill his first contract, and he kept his word by completing the work successfully, on time and beyond expectations. He was then awarded one government contract after another, and impressed many people along the way with his work. By 1995, Ashif's company, Information Systems Consulting Group (ISC) with 15 staff/contractors, won a major contract worth \$60M with IBM as a key partner. ISC expanded to over 100 staff/contractors. It was while running ISC that Ashif realized how difficult it was to manually manage the obligations of many contracts and juggle the associated activities like contract renewals, amendments, rate verification, billing and so forth. "It was on a red-eye flight from Toronto to Edmonton that I thought there has got to be a better way to do this. The next day Ashif did a Google search and found some companies doing pieces of what he wanted but no product that pulled all the pieces together and filled in the missing pieces from A to Z. Then Ashif asked other executives if they experienced the same difficulty managing their contracts. When he heard that many did indeed, he knew he had found a winning product concept.

Upside Software was formed on a shoestring budget and faced many challenges. While finding good people to help develop the product was relatively easy because Ashif had worked with many software developers in Edmonton, Ashif had to work hard to convince potential employees to give up their comfortable salaries and benefits and take the risk of following his vision for Upside Software.



Another challenge was money. "I spent a lot of time surfing eBay to find great deals for the company. We could not afford to buy anything new. For a while, I had the title CEB, Chief eBay Bidder." Finding financing was also difficult because Upside Software started in May 2000 just after the dot-com bust. At the time, companies and venture capitalists were extremely hesitant to buy and invest in software. Through his contacts, Ashif went to Europe to raise money from angel investors. Based on his vision and the credibility of his history, he raised the money he needed in only two hours.

To develop the product feature list, Ashif interviewed a dozen people who managed contracts at different types of companies. Once the product was ready to be sold, Ashif used the same approach he had used at the start of his career. In talks with Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, Ashif was honest, "Yes, we are a startup. Yes, they would be Upside Software's first US customer. And, yes there were associated risks but here was the plan to deal with each issue. They gave us a chance and Upside Software pulled through." Within three months, Hewlett Packard bought a global license of Upside Software's product and then the Government of Alberta followed.

Ashif's final piece of advice is, "Never take a job, contract or new business just for the money. Look for opportunities to learn something you want to learn and that makes you feel happy to go to work each morning. It's the opportunities where you are doing something you enjoy and feel you are growing as a person that brings out your best qualities. It also produces your best results that get noticed!"