

PREOCCUPATIONS

JAY VADIVELLOO

Patents Aren't Only for Engineers

NEVER considered that I might obtain a patent one day. To me, patents were mostly for engineers, not for actuaries like me.

At Towers Watson, I advise insurance companies on risks associated with their businesses. I'm also a mathematics professor in residence at the University of Connecticut. I oversee several graduate students at an actuarial research center there and am always looking for real-world examples for them to work on.

A few years ago, I started thinking about statistical sampling in the insurance industry as something for students to test. I threw out some ideas to them that were based on concepts in consumer polling. We started with simple calculations and moved on to more involved ones. To me, the results were astounding: statistical sampling worked.

Generally when an insurer performs certain calculations, it includes data from all its policies. If it has a million policies, that means a lot of processing as various scenarios are considered. Sometimes, the work can take days.

I believed I had a solution to this cumbersome and costly process: create subgroups from the database, sample policies from each, repeat the process several times, then combine the results.

My technique provides results similar to those from studying all policies, and saves time and money. And unlike consumer polling, which requires finding participants, insurance databases contain ready-made samples.

As far as I knew, no one had proposed this model. I developed and tested it for several months before I told my boss, Craig Buck, head of United States life insurance consulting. We agreed that it should be patented, and that Towers Watson could license it to clients.

I worked with an outside patent firm to translate technical information into



NANCY PALMIERI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jay Vadiveloo, an actuary and mathematics professor, had to follow a long and winding road to win two patents for a new statistical sampling method.

layman's terms for the application. There is an art to that. The description had to be specific, yet generic enough so as not to limit it too severely.

The lawyer I worked with — who later left the firm — said the first step was to search the database of existing patents to see if any were similar to mine. She had me check about 12, and they weren't similar. She submitted the application to the United States Patent and Trademark Office in September 2009, and I hoped for the best.

Now I was excited, and after not hearing anything for months, I called the law firm and worked with another lawyer, Michael V. Young Sr. The patent office had a backlog of applications, but he said he could submit a second application with a request for an accelerated review that would require a special filing fee. Craig and I jumped at the offer.

By then, more than a year had passed since the first application was filed, so Michael did another search. For each new patent that might be similar, I again had to document why it differed from my idea. That was painful and tedious.

In January 2011, Michael filed a second, revised application for accelerated review. He also modified the first application, so both could still be considered. Several months later, the patent office

granted the accelerated review. Our Towers Watson colleagues in Britain, meanwhile, heard about my technique. They came to Connecticut, tested the model and confirmed that it performed as I had described.

Because of our request, a patent examiner picked up the second application first. I was awarded that patent this February and the first one a month later. The original took more than two and a half years from filing to approval, and the second one just over a year.

In February, when Michael e-mailed me that I would soon receive the patents, I probably screamed. First I called my wife, then asked my administrative assistant to read it on the screen.

EVEN before either patent came through, I was nominated for a company leadership award for the technique I developed. I received a plaque, and then \$2,000 when I was awarded the patents. I won't share in any profits, but the feedback I've received has been outstanding.

So if you think you've come up with an elementary idea, remember that anything is possible. I still believe that what I developed is so elegantly simple that others could have discovered it and received a patent. But they didn't — I did.

THE BOSS

Forklifts to Photography



SHUTTERFLY

JEFFREY T. HOUSENBOLD

President and C.E.O. of Shutterfly, the online photo-sharing and publishing service

AGE

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FAVORITE SPORT Football, especially the New York Giants

RECENTLY READ

"Boomerang" by Michael Lewis

Wine and Cuisine Society, which still exists. I was also an intern for the chief marketing officer at McDonald's one summer.

In 1998, I joined Andersen Consulting, which later became Accenture, where I helped found and manage its media and entertainment strategy group and helped my clients make sense of the Internet. After a brief time there, I moved to Andover, Mass., to help start Raging Bull, a community finance portal. A year later, we sold it to AltaVista, the Internet search service, and I moved back to California to work as AltaVista's vice president and general manager. I was a regular traveler on red-eye flights between the East and West Coasts until Ruth and I married in 2000. We now have three boys.

In 2001, I joined eBay as vice president for mergers and acquisitions. After that, I was general manager of eBay's business-to-consumer group, then oversaw its business development and Internet marketing.

Four years later, I joined Shutterfly, which at that point had about 100 employees and \$54 million in annual revenue. Its lead investor, Jim Clark, hired me to help take it public, which we did in 2006. Last year, we had \$473 million in revenue, with 5.5 million paying customers. We now have four sites: Shutterfly, Tiny Prints, Wedding Paper Divas and, starting earlier this year, Treat.com, a personalized greeting card site.

About 75 percent of our business is repeat customers who create their own photo books, calendars, greeting cards and other items, share them with friends and store them with us.

I have had great mentors, a good education and a generous sprinkling of good luck. And I am able to make use of my personal passion for photography. One of my favorite activities is our annual family photo day at Shutterfly, where we take a photo of every one of our employees and their families.

As told to Patricia R. Olsen. E-mail: preoccupations@nytimes.com.

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