

Rising stars

Steve Monnington of Mayfield Merger Strategies continues this series showcasing up-and-coming independent organisers with a look at cyber security conference organiser Qatalyst Global

Many event organising companies start life because their founders couldn't get support for their ideas within the companies that they worked for and Qatalyst falls squarely into that category. Ravi Manji and Kudsia Kaker both worked for Marcus Evans. Manji joined as a sponsorship salesperson in its summit business and, like many people, didn't really know what an events company actually did. Kaker joined a year later to handle delegate sales as she figured that the summits were sufficiently broad in both their scope and geography that she wouldn't pigeonhole herself.

The events that they worked on were senior level 1-2-1 events in life science, legal, tax and finance, through their research they could see the problems that digital innovation was having on the world but were unable to create events addressing these issues.

"As a large company there wasn't the flexibility or infrastructure for us to launch a cyber security event. We had a feeling that this was an issue on the cusp of growth but no-one there was interested," recalls Kaker.

Setting up on their own

Their different personalities pushed against each other while they made the decision whether or not to set up their own business.

"It took us a couple of months from having the idea to making a firm decision," Kaker explains. "Ravi is more impetuous while I like to consider all the angles, but he decided one day that it was



now or never, so I had to decide if I was in or out."

Qatalyst was born in 2011 (while Kaker was 26 and Manji 33), so named because it described how they wanted to facilitate and accelerate growth and innovation for the stakeholders they work with. The cyber security events arena was quite crowded when they started.

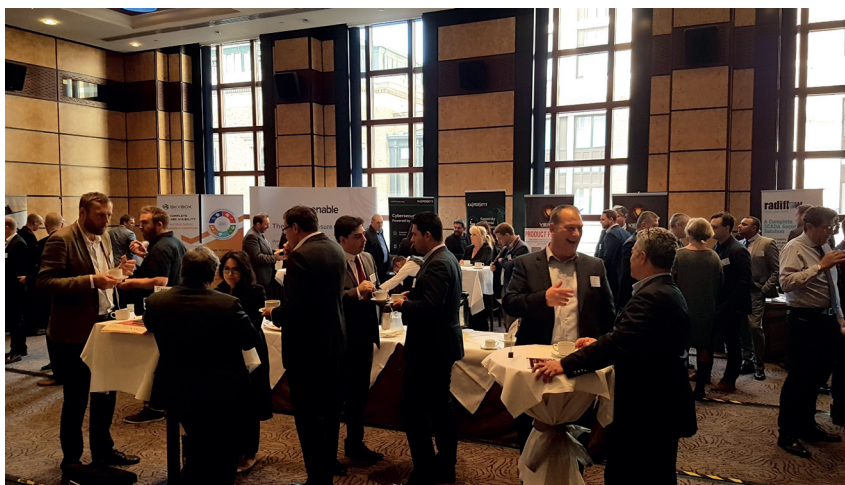
"We were cautious about the direction we took as there were a lot of existing cyber security events, especially in banking and insurance, but we were surprised that the vulnerability of critical assets such as oil and gas, energy and chemicals weren't being addressed, so we decide to focus on this area" says Manji.

Qatalyst didn't suffer from the 'who are you?' syndrome that afflicts many small companies when they try to engage

with large corporations because these corporations understood that, through their events, Qatalyst could help inform the issues that they were facing.

They ran their first event – Cyber Security for Critical Assets (CS4CA) – in London within six months of the company being formed and with only the two of them involved for the first year they had to wait until the first event was wrapped up to start work on their second. According to Manji, small start-up companies experience more than just a lack of bandwidth.

"We both come from a sales background and now we were having to cover off all the roles. It was the first time we had to deal with creating content, so it was a big learning curve but fortunately we both enjoy research which helps," he explains.



The experience of working in a large events company inevitably informs the way that entrepreneurs approach the working culture in their own business and Manji and Kaker took the good bits from their former employer.

“Marcus Evans did some things really well with good processes and, in particular we wanted to emulate the feeling on-site and the fun that clients had, even though the serious business of knowledge and content are paramount,” Manji explains.

“We decided to place emphasis on the informal networking, even though it costs more, people have a better time and open up.” Kaker adds.

The growth story

The journey in building from one event to a portfolio of 13 events today was initially achieved through geo-cloning CS4CA.

“We realised that the challenges that companies have in Europe are the same as they have in other parts of the world, so we worked through the sponsors. Once we had credibility through our initial events our sponsors talked to us about where they were focussing their business and we set up events in USA, Asia Pacific and Latin America for them. This was the first leg of our growth,” explains Kaker.

One of the topics in CS4CA which gained a lot of interest was IoT (the Internet of Things) and Manji and Kaker decided that it merited more depth

and created an industrial IoT event. In the same way, they realised that the manufacturing sector faced similar challenges to the oil and gas sector and ManuSec was born.

Now the business operates four brands across five continents and the founders consider themselves to be market leaders in industrial cyber security. I ask Manji what the main challenges have been.

“Ironically we’ve been victims of cyber security attacks ourselves with our website taken down and our email systems hacked,” he says.

Challenges and rewards

In common with most small growing businesses, staffing has also presented difficulties as the company has grown from the two founders to a current staff of thirteen.

Kaker reflects on the issues: “Understanding what motivates the younger members of our team – the millennials – is a challenge as their motivations are very different from ours. Our senior team is stable but recruiting the right junior people has been a challenge and we made the mistake of

hiring quickly because of the rapidly increasing workload. We came to realise the importance of spending time to find the right person, so the creation of the right team has taken longer than we anticipated.”

These problems aside, the founders never imagined that the business would develop so successfully, and it has provided each of them with unexpected benefits.

Kaker tells me: “I didn’t realise that I would have the passion and interest in the challenges that our clients have and how important it was for me to go on that journey with them in order to provide the platform for them to share and collaborate.”

Manji adds: “At the beginning we were focussing on the commercial aspects, but I soon realised that the freedom to follow our instincts allowed us to do far more than we had expected. We are very close to the clients because, even though the company has grown, we still maintain that personal touch.”

What lies ahead?

So, what’s next for Qatalyst?

Manji sums it up: “Our sector is growing because of increased vulnerabilities and hacking activities. Cyber-war is the new form of terrorism and this is now a boardroom issue rather than an IT one. We’re selling out our events and turning away sponsorship and we’re at the stage where we are starting to create multi-track programmes and to create more exhibition space without compromising the quality that our delegates expect.

“In time we will create a Critical Assets Week which will bring together some of our existing events and expand them into something that is more exhibition-led. To do this we need to concentrate on growing the capability of the team, bringing in some exhibition experience, further empower the senior team and automate more of the processes.”

Have they enjoyed the journey so far? “We’ve loved some days, been severely challenged some days but learnt constantly,” concludes Kaker.

Year to March	Number of Events	Revenue
2016	4	495k
2017	6	756k
2018	8	£1.4m
2019	10	£2m
2020 Forecast	13	£2.6m