

# DEBATES & SERIES



## We Ask Young Entrepreneurs: What Did You Learn From Your Biggest Mistake?

We asked some successful young social entrepreneurs: "What was your biggest mistake, how did you overcome it, and what did you learn?"

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ISABEL MEDEM  
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO,  
X-RUNNER



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FIZA FARHAN  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,  
BUKSH FOUNDATION



### Don't Overwork Yourself

BEN SIMON  
FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE  
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NETWORK



## ALIGN EXPECTATIONS BEFORE HIRING

DIANA JUE

Co-founder, Essmart

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When my co-founder Jackie Stenson and I began building Essmart in the fall of 2011, we had no idea that by 2015 we'd both be in India, managing a growing team of 43 people. Our team is one of our biggest successes. My colleagues are the most dedicated, caring, and fun people I've ever worked with. However, we went through our share of HR headaches and hiccups along the way.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is to **align expectations before hiring**. Working with a social enterprise is not as glamorous as many people think it is. Yes, our work is making a real impact, but making that impact involves tiring day-in, day-out operations.

We work in environments that face challenges like power cuts, language barriers, and dealing with corrupt government officials. Prospective employees need to be aware of these obstacles, flexible enough to deal with them, proactive enough to address them, and committed enough to be productive despite them.

I failed to properly align expectations with one particular intern who wreaked havoc on the company by the time he left, after six months on the job. He was interested in our work, and he had an appropriate technology background. He claimed that he was fine with living in Pollachi, the small town where we set up our first operations, because of his developing country experiences in China and Taiwan.

During my first call with him, this intern said that he would be happy with Essmart as long as he had an Internet connection and time to work on other projects. I assured him that we had wireless Internet in our office and in our apartment and that he could work on personal projects after office hours.

Little did I know that our definitions of Internet were completely different. He wanted a high-speed, fiber optic connection, but our Pollachi office and apartment had a super slow connection offered by the state-owned telecom company, which provided the most reliable connection in rural areas. When combined with a regularly changing work routine, constant power cuts, south Indian summer heat, an intern's stipend, and a rigid, passive aggressive personality, we had a very unhappy intern who left in a very explosive huff.


These days, we always **undersell our company** to potential new team members. We're upfront about the difficulties of working on a startup, and we're honest about our relatively low salaries (for now), lack of a fixed routine, and the infrastructure problems we deal with. We only promise what we know we can deliver: a different kind of work environment that is great for flexible self-starters, fun colleagues, and a job that makes a real difference.

And, if we later find out that a particular hire is actually a mismatch, we **fire faster**. Although it's an unpleasant task, it's the better choice for the employer, who has to manage and pay them, and for the employee, who probably isn't a huge fan of their job anyway.

With that, happy team building!

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