

SULATA ISOFT: NAVIGATING STARTUP REALITIES IN PAKISTAN'S SOFTWARE INDUSTRY

M. Khan, S. Khan and S. Minhas

Forman Christian College, University, Lahore

INTRODUCTION

Sulata Isoft is a software house founded in 2000 in Lahore, Pakistan by a passionate young man named Tahir Barry trying to make a name for himself in the software industry. The idea to start a software house was planted in a young Tahir much before he actually went through with it. As someone with no formal education in the IT sector, Tahir, a self-taught young man, finally had enough preparation and knowledge of the industry to have the confidence to start his own software house. With no formal IT background, Tahir's motivation to start a software house purely came from his passion for software and his years of interest in the IT field, which also encouraged him to be completely self-taught in the first place while also being competitive with any of his peers in the industry as a developer.

Initially, Tahir was running his software house primarily alone with some help of a regular office boy for chores such as advertising and running errands. For the first almost 2 months, he was the one doing all the coding and technical work, only after he acquired his first two young developers to help him with the code and to keep the business afloat. With the small team of 3 developers and one office boy, his company ran for a handful of years acquiring customers by advertising in the most old-fashioned ways such as newspaper advertising or even cold-calling people offering their services.

The key challenges this case study explored is how Sulata Isoft navigated in their early years, their primarily logistical hurdles and social hurdles including competing against the demand for the usage of expensive technology vs. their own open-sourced technology, navigating through the negative reputation Pakistan had as a whole in that era of early 2000s. Despite these obstacles, the software house succeeded in establishing a trustworthy name and lasting for long 25 years in the global tech industry.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the dynamics of starting a software company in a developing country as an individual with no formal IT background, highlighting both the opportunities and difficulties that tech entrepreneurs face. It is particularly relevant for aspiring founders in the emerging markets, as it provides insight into grassroot-level growth, bootstrapped innovation and the importance of self-learning and motivating. By examining Sulata Isoft and its founder Tahir's strategies and setbacks, this case study aims to

inspire, educate and prepare future entrepreneurship, especially the ones who have aspirations to break into the IT industry but lack the formal education that is expected.

Company Background and Funding: Tahir founded Sulata Isoft in the very early 2000s after spending years teaching himself everything that he'd need to work as a primary developer in his own software house. As someone not from an IT background, he always had an enormous interest about starting his own software house and breaking into the industry, which also motivated him to be a self-taught developer in his early years, building up a strong portfolio for himself. He noticed the lack of software houses in Pakistan even with all the skilled developers around, which further motivated him into taking on this venture in life.

The initial idea development happened very informally as Tahir was a solo self-taught developer trying to enter by that point a relatively new tech market in Pakistan with open-sourced technologies such as PHP as his primary focus, since that's what would require the most minimum amount of initial funds. He came to the conclusion that web development through open-source technologies would be the service he could maximize into giving without committing most of his initial funds.

Funding was the first major hurdle, as for any startup, as Tahir was primarily self-funded initially, also relying on some funding from his family like his father. He invested X amount of his savings into the company and managed to acquire an amount through the help of his own father. He bootstrapped his setup, starting with secondhand computers and renting out cheap locations. As for the first initial two months, it was just Tahir and his office boy who started to market themselves in local newspapers, primarily online, which helped them to acquire their first customer. In the meantime, Tahir was doing all the development work himself and growing the company just by himself, turning in enough profit in the first few months that he had enough funds to acquire two more developers to help with his ongoing web development projects.

The initial team was small but highly committed, as Tahir being the founder and the head developer of the company took charge, going above and beyond to provide his services and keep his company afloat. Initially, his primary strategy was to build connections and get a loyal set of customer base before he turned in a profit. Often the core team stayed way past beyond office hours just to provide that much extra for their customers, giving them

worth way more than their payment. A strategy that ended up being extremely beneficial as Tahir is still being contracted by his customers from his initial days of giving above and beyond services.

The beginning of the software house was not without its major struggles. Since a lot of Tahir's clients were foreign clients, he had acquired through the internet, the reputation of not just his but also his country mattered a lot to keep the business afloat. Major global turmoil's like the 9/11 incident happened soon after Tahir started his company, which gave Pakistan a lot of global scrutiny and Tahir's back-then small startup was also affected by it. Back in the early 2000s, all major global companies would prefer to use expensive technologies that were Microsoft based but Tahir stuck with his open-sourced technologies to provide his services, which helped to keep his company afloat but also was a major hurdle to break into the global industry.

Despite a rocky start, Tahir remained agile and very adaptive. Since he started his company back in the very early 2000s, he kept up with the flow of time, providing services based on the era's demand. Initially starting with web-based technologies, transitioning to native software, and now in past few years offering services related to Python-based AI technologies. Since 2000, the studio has finished many total projects navigating through time, adapting to technologies of that era, slowly building a reputation for going above and beyond for clients, becoming a reliable part of Pakistan's growing software development industry.

Originally in the 2000s, Sulata Isoft started with web-based applications. With the shift of time, they moved towards client-side applications. They've always primarily stuck with open-sourced software, PHP being their primary language of choice. As they transitioned to more native-based software, now in 2025, for the past 2 years they've engaged in AI-based software and are also planning on transitioning their native applications into a more convenient and profitable model of a cloud-based system.

Sulata Isoft's primary customers are business and safety defense organizations, not limited to cybersecurity.

Customer Acquisition and Growth strategy: This business redefined success by putting customer's loyalty above of all, and the outcomes were remarkable. They poured their heart and soul into crafting an exclusive circle of clients through mind-blowing service—while barely glancing at their bank account, spending more time and money enduring their trust. Because of their unconventional approach, which included being available after hours, consumers were guaranteed committed assistance whenever they needed it. What really made them unique was their defiance of industry standards—meaning they didn't just ignore the rulebook; they set it

on fire and built something better from the ashes. While everyone else was stuck in a race to the bottom—churning out the same tired accounting software that flooded the market—this company zigged when others zagged. They didn't just avoid the crowd; they built something so specialized, so uniquely valuable, that their clients couldn't even compare them to competitors. Organic growth was achieved solely through word-of-mouth. They do not produce typical kind of products. For instance, they don't produce standard software like ERP, accounting, or financial solutions. Instead, they make exceptional software. Most of their software is made for industrial use and covers many complex tasks. One of their main products is business process automation software. In this way, company can work faster and better. The software they produce is not available from any of their competitors that make them unique. They have an advantage because of this distinction, which also helps their company stand out in the marketplace.

The Core Business Challenges: One the major problem that had been faced so-far is work-life balance. While working straight for 12-14 hours in the office, it was difficult to spare time for family as well. But over time, people got used to the routine. Eventually, it became easy to manage family and time. It is important to take care of both your family and your-self to stay healthy and happy. Another big Challenge is to find right people at right cost. There were not much IT graduates available when the company first started, the few that were available got some of very great qualities. They were eager to learn and modest in their expectations. Not six figures' salaries were their goal. They were eager to learn something and grow. They worked tirelessly, pouring their souls into every line of code, staying up late just to perfect a simple program, and showing a level of dedication that made them feel like co-founders rather than employees. The money was not even the concern for them. The only money they had was knowledge and they wanted to learn everything they could. They were passionate about gaining experience and learning new skills. But now things have changed so much. The roles have changed. They were considered "trainable" because they were open to feedback, willing to work long hours to understand the technology, and committed to personal growth rather than instant rewards. However, as the time passed this collection of skills has been changed significantly. The current generation who is looking for job is more focused on what they can get instead of what they can contribute. Many of them demand high salaries from the start with no exceptional skills or knowledge to justify such expectations. When their tests are taken. They leave tests half-complete, scratching their heads as if logic were optional. It is confusing. The hunger to learn something has completely been vanished. It is replaced by an obsession with perks, remote work, and rapid promotions.

Without showing that they are even capable of recognizing a simple algorithm, they demand startup-level flexibility and multinational-level salaries.

Today, there are only a few people who are passionate about learning and studying. Around 20 years ago, it was very easy to find hard working who are passionate about their doings at a fair price. The young graduates were eager to learn and did not care about the money at all. The people who were non serious and capable were removed during the training period. In this way, bad workers were rarely hired, and projects were not affected by these workers.

Now, things have become more difficult. People ask for handsome salaries even they do not have good skills. It has become a challenge to find someone who got some real skills and is affordable. It is risky to hire a wrong person these days because the whole project can be harmed in this way.

Another issue is that freelancer world has changed a lot. Websites like Fiverr and Freelancer used to be simple and less crowded. New users could easily make a profile and get their first job quickly. But now there are a lot of freelancers, so it becomes difficult for new user to even get noticed. It has become difficult for them to get their new order as soon as possible.

That is why it is advised to stay patient and stick on the plans. If you start working on a platform. First decide that how much time you are going to give it maybe six months or a year. If you keep jumping from one website to another because nothing happened in the first few months you would be lost. Success doesn't happen overnight. It takes time, effort, and patience. Stay focused, keep learning, and trust the process. In today's world, being consistent is more important than ever.

Technology and Innovation: The main technology that this business relies on are open-source tools and PHP. On this platform, their large part of work is built. They are skilled in PHP and still use it for most of their backend and web development projects. Along with this they are also making progress in the field of artificial intelligence in addition to this. They mostly use Python, a well-liked programming language in the data science and AI fields, for their AI projects.

The team is currently particularly interested in generative AI, a system that may produce text, graphics, or code. They are working on updates in generative AI by combining different modern tools and technologies. This means they are not just sticking to one method but exploring various advanced solutions to improve their work. By doing this, they are making sure they stay current with the latest trends in the tech world. Technology changes quickly, so it's important for companies to keep learning and adapting. Their efforts show that they are serious about improving their technical skills and keeping up with the fast-moving world of

artificial intelligence. This approach helps them stay competitive and deliver better results to their clients.

According to the team the best to remain up to date about the technology is to be active in the market. In real-world projects, the customer becomes your teacher. When you work with the client, they know exactly what they want and sometimes they know a lot more than developer about the product and service. The client's input and specifications force you to pick up new skills, concepts, or frameworks that you might not have otherwise learnt.

In this way, each new project becomes a learning opportunity. You are compelled to grow since you must deliver on the client's expectations, which requires you to master and learn the necessary tools. This practical technique improves your intelligence and keeps your abilities fresh. Staying connected with clients and the market allows you to continue learning, remain relevant, and grow in the tech industry.

Vision & Strategy: If you can detain client, you're a successful businessman. If they talk about themselves, they got some clients in their first year who are with them till today which is obviously a success. They did not face any financial issues, so they did not care about finances, orders and ticket values. They just wanted to make clients satisfied.

They even did some work of clients under price, sometimes at low cost and sometimes even at loss but it always helped them in the long run. After some time, they got their permeant client, on whom they accordingly later.

The cloud-based software-usually we install a software and then use it, but the cloud model is a bit different. Every month you must pay user cost or storage cost. What are they working on are the few products that would be subscription-based, and they will be starting a cloud-based company on it. They would be giving cloud services related to businesses. Still, they are running a CRM which is one of their services.

They are developing 2-3 pipelines too, so hopefully it is going to work for next 4-5 years. But cloud is their next mission. They say that they are already too late to enter. Another vision that they have is working 4 hours a days and 4 days a week and whatever time is left they will their team to spent it with their families. They expect their growth to be 500 percent in the next five years. There is a challenge, as you know it is the decade of AI, so you need to have such combinations that your Ai work as your assistant or team. Your team should not be Ai dependent but only takes the support from AI. There are many people whom foundation is not strong, so they take help from Ai. So, finding a good resource has always been a challenge.

Another challenge that is being faced by them is getting some work related to business as a Pakistani from abroad. There are many reasons for that apart from

Pakistani economy. One of the reasons of not finding the work is that there are many competitors now as compared to two years before. Even now countries like China, Indonesia have also taken part in this competition now. Some of these businesses does not even know that what they are providing, eventually client suffer because he is giving cost for nothing. Basically, there are two clients, one is cooperating client who knows what kind of company he wants to hire, and he has plans what to do in future with them. There is another kind of client who is the end-user, for example if you want someone to make you a software and you want to company, there one person tells you that your work will be done in 500 while other tells to do it in 200. That is where the client and the person with actual business both suffers.

Key failures and lessons learned: Being an It company, they had done a lot of IT projects. Out of which 10-12 projects had been done by the owner himself. Out of these projects, two were successful but they had to wind up other projects for some reasons. It is advised by the company owner to aspiring entrepreneur to not to worry about earning a lot of money in the beginning. If you need to worry about something, then it should be earning a reputation. If you must invest from your own pocket and you can afford it then do it and just make your own profile.

People learn from their mistakes, and you will meet many clients who teach you new lessons. You should not have to keep the mindset that you know a lot more than client. The client always knows more than you do. When you work for a client, first you understand his business then you develop products for him. Business is very tough to understand but if you won the trust of client by understanding his business, he would not choose nobody else for his work except you.

Revenue: The company has not agreed to share revenue with us, despite our contributions to the project.

Analysis of the Company's Work and Methods

- 1. Customer-Centric Approach & Organic Growth:** Commitment to the customer's satisfaction is one of the reasons that this company has make success. They focused on developing exceptional services instead of making quick profits. This approach helped them grow organically through word-of-mouth, proving that deep client relationships can be more valuable than aggressive sales tactics.
- 2. Work-Life Balance:** Initially, the team experienced 12- to 14-hour workdays, but they ultimately adjusted. However, their most significant operational

challenge is finding experienced talent at a fair cost. Unlike early employees who prioritised learning over salary, current customers want high pay without corresponding abilities. This transition requires the organisation to manage a more competitive and less passionate talent pool.

- 3. Technology and innovation:** However, their path has not been without difficulties. Long work hours were frequent in the beginning, but the team gradually achieved a better balance. Today, the challenge is to hire qualified individuals who are both capable and priced. Unlike their early employees, who were willing to learn and progress, many job applicants now expect a high salary without matching qualifications, making hiring more challenging.

Analyzing it from a psychological point of view, loyal customers offer more repeated business. The more emotional stability a brand provides, more trust is built which triggers such repeated business. A few loyal clients tend to be more valuable than many indifferent ones.

Disclaimer and Acknowledgements: This case study was written with the complete consent of Sulata iSoft's founder Tahir Barry. The name of the company and founder have been used with their permissions. No confidential information was disclosed without approval of Tahir Barry. The Data and insights presented were directly taken from the founder. No personal information of the employees, clients or any other 3rd party involved with Sulata iSoft has been included. Any critical statements made were either directly taken from the founder or were being made about the anonymized market or workforce trends. This case study aims to uphold absolute transparency and integrity to ensure that it restrains from exposing any sensitive information that might bring troubles towards a third party while sharing a real-world entrepreneur's journey to inform and inspire others.

This document has been prepared in a format suitable for publication on academic platforms, business journals or thought leadership portals.

No external datasets were being used, so formal citations are no needed. However, if any secondary data or statistics are added in future version, APA referencing style will be used.

The language and the formatting have been adjusted for clarity, readability. Special thanks to Tahir Barry for patiently providing us with his life experience and taking us through the inner workings of his company.