

A Weekend with Warren Buffet

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BIZ INDIA



September-October 2006

The Award-Winning Indian-American Magazine

BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS | AFFLUENT LIFESTYLES

ALL WORK

*and plenty of
play!*

***Rahul Shukla
is a poet,
a philosopher,
a hands-on
mechanical
engineer,
and a brilliant
strategist...
find out what
makes him so
successful!***

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ALL WORK... *and plenty of play*

By Chitra Pillai

You may not have realized it but you have indirectly been in touch with the dynamic and passionate Rahul Shukla. Whether you are flying on a Boeing 747, driving your mini-van, undergoing a biopsy, an MRI, Lasik procedure, or orthopedic surgery, Rahul Shukla's touch has been there.

"Rahul Shukla is that rare combination of head and heart", says Brian Parlato, VP of Sales and Marketing for S.S. White Technologies. "He is a poet, a philosopher, a hands-on

S.S. WHITE'S MAIN PRODUCTS TODAY:

Over 50% of the cars produced in the US today carry one or more of S.S. White's flexible shafts to move their power seats.

98% of the aircraft produced in the world have at least one S.S. White Flexible Shaft on board.

A large number of orthopedic surgical procedures utilize S.S. White's state-of-the-art Xtract-All hand-held surgical instrumentation for the removal of orthopedic implants.



mechanical engineer, and a brilliant strategist. He is a wonderful blend of emotion, logic and intuition" adds Parlato. When you meet him for the first time, Rahul eliminates all notions that a corporate head needs to be ruthless to lead a successful company.

S.S. White Technologies is a rare New Jersey manufacturing success story. In today's climate where manufacturing jobs are steadily moving to states like North Carolina and then to China, S.S. White Technologies is thriving in New Jersey. When you visit their 90,000 square foot plant in Piscataway, you see something that is a rare sight in New Jersey; wire-winding machines, punch presses, state of the art CNC machines, water jet cutting machines, and plastic extruders. Yes, it is an old fashioned manufacturing plant managed with the most modern manufacturing practices. One notices right away the graphs and charts all over.

The floors are painted white, computer screens everywhere on the shop floor- and an energetic hustle throughout the plant. The Piscataway plant had 100 employees 10 years ago. Today it has 203 employees. S.S. White's competitors in the USA are complaining about not having enough new business. They are laying off people and down sizing. S.S. White on the other hand is steadily growing. Their annual sales have grown from 18 million five years ago to 27 million currently- "and the future looks much stronger" says Shukla. He quickly adds, "I don't take credit for growth in sales. It is all because of our VP of Sales and my good friend Brian."

S.S. White is one of the oldest manufacturing companies in the USA. It was founded by the legendary dentist Dr. Samuel Stockton White in 1844. Its old catalogs are auctioned off on e-bay and its products are displayed in the Smithsonian in Washington DC. A wing of the Philadelphia museum is dedicated to S.S. White himself. How a student from India ended up as the head of such a historical company, injecting it with new life is a fascinating story in itself.

To understand why this NJ

THE EARLY YEARS: INDIA

manufacturer is doing so well when other USA manufacturers are struggling, one has to understand the make-up and the philosophies of their charismatic leader, Rahul Shukla.

Born in Wadhwan in

THE EARLY YEARS: USA

Gujarat, Shukla was exposed to art and literature early in his life. His father has been a renowned journalist and a writer in Gujarat.

Rahul started reading books when he was 2. He says he read thousands of books by the time he was 12. He entered collage in India at 15, where he edited the student journal, led the college debating team, published short plays and fiction, won the "Best Student of the Year" award, and ranked first in Gujarat University in his final year of Mechanical Engineer-ing studies. During those years, his short stories were published in famous Gujarati magazines. Later, a collection of his short stories- *Tran Jindgi Ne Sallam* was published to rave reviews.

Shukla came to the USA in February 1971 to study Industrial Engineering at Rutgers University. "I had no immediate family here," he remembers. "My cousin drove me to my rooming house in New Brunswick on a Saturday. I cried for hours afterwards."

"It wasn't an easy period of my life," says Shukla. "I felt bright inside, but I did not come across as a bright person." He laughs at the memory of going to see the foreign student advisor for the first time and talking in 'fast' English to impress her. She stopped him in the mid sentence and asked him if he spoke English! "That is what I thought I was doing" says Shukla bursting into laughter. He soon realized that the key to success was being able to articulate ideas effectively.

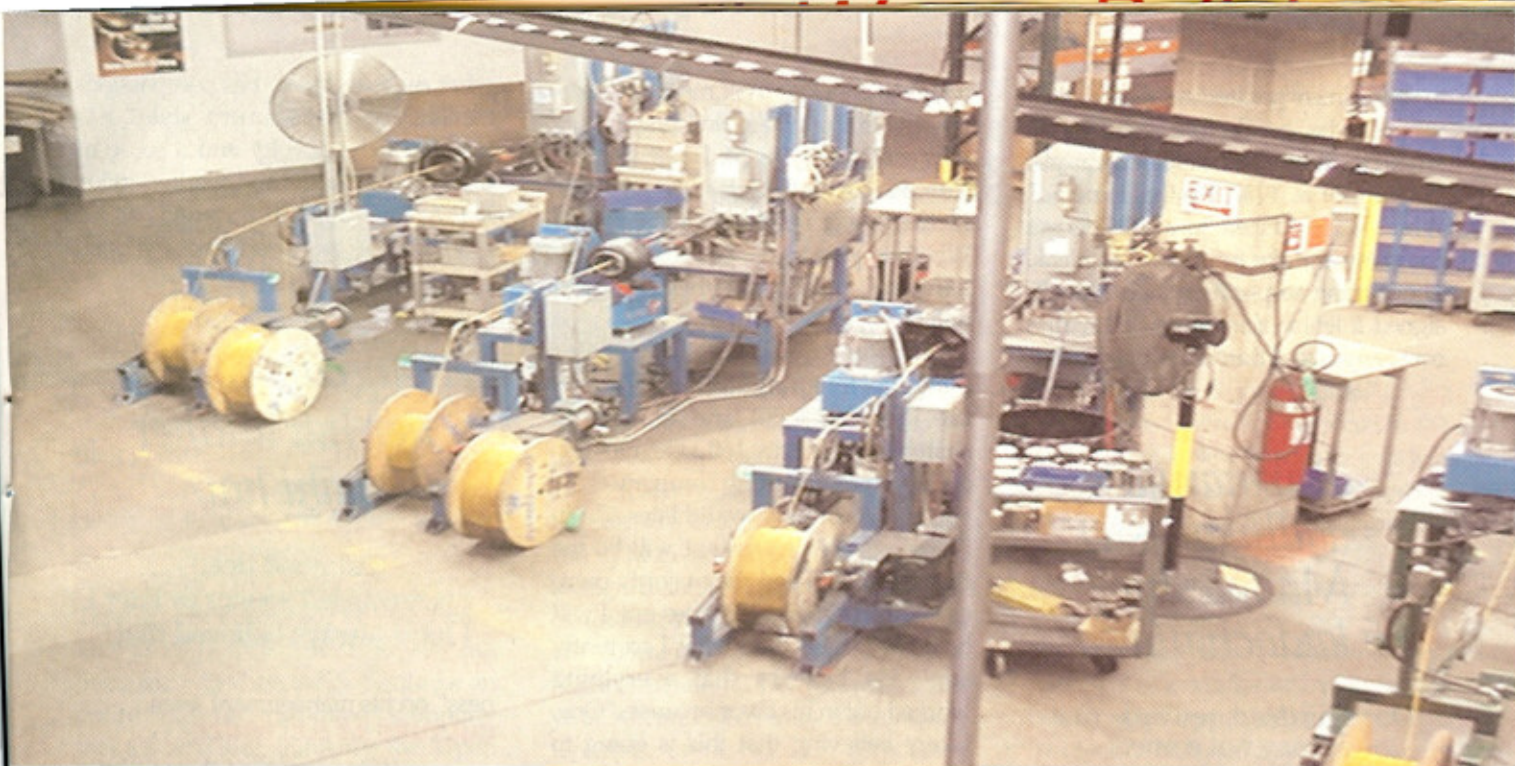
He knew he needed to improve his communication skills. He started reading local news papers cover to cover. He purchased an old beat-up TV for \$30. "I would lock my doors and watch shows like *Mission Impossible* and *Hawaii Five-O*. Every sentence I heard I would repeat out loud. It was silly, but I needed to speak in a way where others understood me without too much effort. Still, to this day- I can authentically say 'Book Him Dano!'", laughing as he quotes the famous last line of every episode of *Hawaii Five-O*.

Shukla received his MS in Industrial Engineering. While studying for his PhD he ran out of money and was forced to take a temporary job at S. S. White Technologies (then a subsidiary of Pennwalt Corporation) as Quality Inspector in 1973. Rahul worked his way up to Draftsman, to Methods Engineer, to Manager of Industrial Engineering, to Director of Research & Development at S.S.

*"I believe that
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to make your
boss happy."*

Rahul Shukla

White. "I was very fortunate to have run into many kind people at S.S. White, people who took me under their wings, encouraged me and helped me. There were many angels in my life. My boss, Bill



Bogan, my mentor Dave Sleeper, and many more."

At work, Shukla also observed that no definitive scientific formulas existed to design the century old product, flexible shaft. This void inspired Rahul to come up with his vision of creating the science of flexible shafts. He obsessively carried out tireless calculations, countless experiments and lengthy research studies throughout the 70s.

It all bore fruit when Rahul hired a senior research engineer named Adam Black. After five years of exhaustive investigation in the field of the mechanics of flexible shafts, Adam created the science of designing the flexible shafts and was awarded a PhD by The Stevens Institute of Technology.

Based on this research, S.S.White introduced 'Perflexion', a proprietary software for designing Flexible Shafts.

Even today, S.S. White S.S.White is the only company in the world to use scientific formulas to design flexible shafts; all others use trial and error methods.

"Bosses promote those they trust, not necessarily the most qualified people."

Rahul Shukla

When asked how he explains his success in the corporate world, Shukla says- "I believe that you do whatever it takes to make your boss happy. In my early years, I never left work at 4:30 pm. If a report was due Monday, I worked all weekend to finish it. And I never lied to my boss. If I screwed up something, I'd admit it and ask for his guidance to fix it. My bosses always knew they could trust me. Bosses promote those they trust, not necessarily the most qualified people" he says. "When I was a senior engineer, if my boss

asked me to sweep the floors, mow the lawn, paint white lines in the parking lot, I would do it with a smile. Anything to make the company successful as long as it was not illegal, immoral or unsafe."

Once the President of S.S.White told Shukla that his church got a Radio-Shack computer as a gift. But in 1984 there were no commercial programs available for purchase. Shukla offered to write a custom program for their church to manage their pledges and contributions. He worked from 6:00 pm to 11:00 pm every night for next 3 months to prepare a custom software. The president was happy that Shukla did this *gratis*, and added "You are not even a Christian!"

"My friends joked that I buttered up the bosses. But buttering is done with words. What I did was always solid actions. And I did not do it to get somewhere. Listening to all of this, you slowly start getting the essence of Rahul Shukla.

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL BREAK

Rahul Shukla's rise from a virtually penniless inspector to company President represents a strand in the rich fabric of immigrant Indian American entrepreneurship. It reveals, in microcosm, how Indians are making

in roads in corporate America.

The break for Rahul came when S.S. White Technologies was put up for sale in 1987. By that time S.S. White was reduced to a 100 person company and the future looked bleak. The parent corporation had already signed a letter of intent to sell with a company called Blue Tee Corporation.

*Geeta preaches
Karmanye
vaadhikaraste
Ma faleshu
kadachana.*

*(Do your deed, rewards may
or may not come.)*

While others were dusting off their resumes, Shukla, true to his core belief, offered whatever help the new company would need during the transition. As a result, Blue Tee asked Shukla to handle a variety of pre-purchase tasks such as the appraisal of the building, appraisal of the inventory, getting clearance from state environmental agency and to resolve a variety of issues with the union. "My support was unconditional. I said, I will do whatever makes their life easy" says Shukla.

As luck would have it, the deal fell through just six days before the closing date. In the process, Blue Tee had trained Shukla superbly on the intricacies of buying a manufacturing company!

Shukla gathered his colleagues, put together a business plan and started contacting banks for a loan. His colleagues were not as confident. But Shukla knew an opportunity like this will never come his way again. "For me it is always Mind over matter" he says with a dreamy confidence. "If I lose my car keys, I don't get upset. Because I *know* I'm going to find them. That *knowledge* creates a positive energy which helps me find my car keys; which improves my confidence; which in turn prepares me for the next challenge." Then he adds with a

naughty chuckle, "Ask me if I want to buy the Empire State Building. I'd say why not? Ask me if I can get Bill Clinton (or Bill Gates or Michelle Pfeiffer!) over for dinner. I'd say sure! Whether you think you *can* or you think you *cannot*, in either case, you will be right."

In August 1988, after nine months of tough effort, Shukla became the President/CEO and a majority shareholder of this 160 year old legendary manufacturing company.

As Shukla would later admit, "I said, hey, if it works, I will be the President/CEO and the majority owner of this company. If it does not, I will be no worse off than what I currently am." He believes that everything worked out in his favor because, "One, I kept believing that this is going to happen, and, two, I maintained my sense of humor. My ability to find something funny in a hopeless situation kept me going against many odds" states Shukla in the modest style that has become his trademark.

THE NEW S.S. WHITE TECHNOLOGIES:-

Ten years after buying the company from Pennwalt, Shukla and his team acquired the Medical Products Division from Snap-On Inc. S.S. White Medical today manufactures surgical instruments for the orthopedic surgery. The Indus Business Journal recently rated S.S. White as the 12th largest manufacturing company having an Indian American as the principal owner.

In 2003, S.S. White started a wholly owned subsidiary in Noida, India, to manufacture automotive parts for the USA market. The India plant has 75 employees and is expected to reach 500 in two years. According to Shukla's plan, the India facility will allow the NJ operation to get involved in more sophisticated applications in the USA, fueling further growth. This strategy should increase the number of employees in the NJ facility over the next three years. Ask him to explain his success and with an earnest look in his eyes, Rahul Shukla says, "Find people smarter than you and leave them to do

what they do best." His compassionate "macro management style" has inspired fierce loyalty and a sense of pride in his officers and workers alike. He never tires of boasting about "some of the brightest people in busi-

*From a Hindi song:
Bhagvan ke ghar
der hai andher
nahi hai.*

*(All good deeds
get rewarded sooner or later.)
I have always believed that."*

ness" on his management team.

CULTURE AT S.S. WHITE

When you visit their website and read about what the company does to attract and keep good employees, you realize that something special is happening at S.S. White

In one of his letters to his employees Shukla asked, "Why do we work at all?" He went on to answer the question by saying, 'everyone works to take care of their family and loved ones. Since God has not put switches on us to change from Work to Home, I therefore believe that a happy person is happy at home, happy at work, and happy when stuck in traffic. An unhappy person takes his or her unhappiness everywhere they go.'

That is why the underlying philosophy at S.S. White is to try very hard to blur the distinction between work and fun. "If we have fun at what we do here, we will make quality products; we will willingly jump as high as our customers' want, and we will go home less wound up and more ready to enjoy our loved ones."

To that end, S.S. White goes out of its way to create a fun atmosphere for its employees. Hardly any American company goes as far as S.S. White in creating a fun atmosphere at work. It is an ideal blend of 'work hard- play hard' concept. The company hosts numerous activities all year round. Their flagship event is a six-hour dinner cruise around Manhattan



S.S. White plant in Piscataway, NJ

able at the company. The "Buddy Program" assigns a buddy for the purpose of introducing the new employee to other fellow employees and showing them the ropes. The "New Employee Lunch" helps all new employees meet

the top management team and also the other new employees.

Every July, the company participates in a Corporate Challenge- a 5K run in Morristown. The company pays all registration fees and all other expenses- totaling \$10,000. "Our goal is to make our colleagues health-conscious," says Archana Dhingra, HR Manager. This year, 90 employees from the company ran at the event. No other corporation had a higher percent of their employees participating than S.S. White. Another benchmark tradition at S.S. White is the "Book of the Month Club" where some 40 employees select one professional book each month. The company buys 40 copies. Then they meet over a company lunch to discuss what lessons from the book would be relevant to S.S. White.

Once a year, the company celebrates a health awareness week, where the company arranges for local hospitals to come on premise and offer health tests for cholesterol, blood sugar, blood pressure and the like. It is a week long focus on employees' health. "We do not know a better way to tell our employees how much we care for them" says Shukla. In addition, all personal events in an employee's life such as weddings, baby showers, etc. are celebrated by the company.

Every year the company gives out the coveted "Rahul B. Shukla Presidents Award" to the 5 top employees who best represent the values of the company. The award includes a trophy and an invitation for the winner and a guest to join the top management team for an all expenses paid trip to a

Caribbean location. This year, a team of 23, award winners, top management and spouses, just returned from beautiful Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic!

"When we say we value our people- those are not just words" says Shukla. "The parking lot is full at quitting time. No one is in a rush to leave. Every employee is on a mission."

And there lies the secret to the success of this New Jersey manufacturing company. Rahul Shukla delights in taking visitors around the facility in Piscataway. He interacts with every person on the shop floor in his characteristically friendly manner. Little wonder then that some of the workers that were members of a Machinist Union for the last 60 years approached the government early 2006 and requested that the union be thrown out. "This is unheard of" said the labor attorney who came to counsel S.S.White.

On the personal front, Shukla is an avid reader. He believes that every book has the potential to open hearts and bring about transformation.

A born storyteller, a DVD of his motivational speech "Success Is a Journey and Not a Destination", published in 1998, is available free of charge by visiting www.sswwhite.NET.


Rahul married Meena Rawal in 1976. "She is a go-getter and a problem solver. She is my not-so-secret weapon" he says with pride. "30 years of marriage- and we have managed to still keep our romance fresh" he says with a wink. Their son Akash, 20, a second year Mechanical Engineering Student at Drexel shares his Dad's interests in photography, music and engineering.

One of the best compliments he can receive comes from Carolyn Ketcham, Director of Corporate Quality and Policy, "When I am faced with a tough decision I imagine what Rahul would do and I know I will not be wrong". Then you talk to Rahul and he cannot stop praising his top management team and the bright employees. Then you finally figure out why this company is doing so well. It is because it is made of people who genuinely like one another!

each August, for all employees and their guests.

"A lot of activities are designed to allow employees' families to understand our company better." Says VP of Operations Jim Rappolt. That is why every year at "Take your kids to Work Day", all employees can bring their children to S.S. White for an entire day of fun-filled company themed activities. Similarly, the 'Open house' is designed for families to understand the operations of S.S. White. Once a month, all employees are invited to a company sponsored outing in the evening. It could be a night at a local bowling alley, a laser tag game, or a night at the Somerset Patriots baseball park. Every employee, from VP's to punch press operators, are invited. Ongoing monthly events include "Town Hall" meetings where the safety, quality, delivery and cost issues are discussed with every employee. The VP of Operations and the HR manager host a monthly Birthday club where all employees with recent birthdays get to interact with top management and fellow employees in an informal way, asking questions over cake and juice! In summer months, every 4th Friday is an 'Ugly Hawaiian Shirt Competition' where employees are encouraged to wear the loudest and the ugliest Hawaiian shirt. At 3:00 PM, employees in Hawaiian shirts parade through the company, after which a winner walks away with a bag of pineapple and coconut.

A lot of activities are designed to make new employees feel comfort-



S.S.White running team at Corporate Challenge.