

Distinguished Alumnus 2005, OMID KORDESTANI

Senior Vice President, Global Sales and Development, Google, Inc.

SJSU Electrical Engineering, Class of '84

By Laura Bernell

“Thinking about anything these days in a narrow way is not applicable.”
-Omid Kordestani, 2006

At 42, Omid Kordestani is the man Time Magazine calls the “main brains behind Google's innovative and aggressive push to reach deals with a multitude of partners and make big money through advertising.” What made Kordestani able to accomplish turning the world’s internet search engine into a giant revenue-generator?

In part, it comes from Kordestani’s habit of thinking analytically while envisioning broadly, a habit he’s spent his life developing. “I always had an interest in sciences analytical questions and puzzles. But I was also always interested in applications of technology to other things, to medicine.”

How did he acquire this dual thinking process? His father was a civil engineer; his mother was a nurse. “I got influences from both sides.” He has honed and refined this inclination into a habit of looking across the widest span for unlikely connections, and applying technical knowledge to non-technical arenas. **“Thinking about anything these days in a narrow way is no longer applicable,”** he says.

He grew up viewing more than one world.

In his birthplace of Tehran, Iran, Kordestani entered first grade in an Italian Catholic School and attended until he was 14, at which time he lost his father to cancer. His mother emigrated with her family to the United States, settling in San Jose in 1979.

In his new country, Kordestani’s dream was to become a “Citizen of the world,” he says.

“My interests in music—from opera to rap—represent my insatiable desire to learn everything. When I came to San Jose State, I wanted to squeeze every element out of a day or an experience.”

His appetite for a rich mix of stimuli can be seen in the contrast between his favorite SJS professors: Art Davis and Michael O’Flynn. He admired Davis for his preciseness, for his drawing of circuit diagrams on the board. [Davis] teaching was “like a precision race car.” O’Flynn, in contrast, inspired through his flamboyance and passion. “Professor O’Flynn exuded personality, as he walked down the halls with this bolt of emotion and passion for what he was teaching. These two teachers were on both sides of the spectrum. Each set the mold for how to learn and to explore the world.”

His advice to SJS students and educators stays true to his theme: “Education, to be relevant, must embrace the world more than ever. [SJS teachers and administrators need to ask themselves, how does today’s global emphasis change the teaching? How does it change the experiences that students need to have?” He advises a more interdisciplinary approach, integrating computer science and math into the engineering department.

It is important to point out that Kordestani is not advocating breadth at the expense of depth. “There are a lot of changes today. Focus is very important.”

As he stands on the summit of his accomplishments and views his future, he sounds something like Ulysses in the pen of the poet Tennyson. Upon his return from decades of adventure on the high seas, Ulysses looks over the cliffs down to the sea and thinks: “how dull it is to pause. To rust unburnished.”

Neither does Kordestani want to pause, or rust: “If I’ve reached a sort of summit, I ask myself: How do I continue learning? How do I continue being excited? I still want to have that sense of hunger to explore, to take risks.”