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## **Hyderabad Chronicle**

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# Network for professional help

Confused about which university to join? Have an idea for a business but not sure how it will work? Well, go join a network. Networking has been going through an evolution of its own, moving from look-up-a-long-lost-friend to levels where you can discuss possible careers or find mentors who can actually fund your brilliant idea.

SiliconIndia is one such website that offers professional networking for Indians worldwide. It started in 1997 as a content portal, but it is its professional networking avatar that has proved to be a huge hit in the few months since inception. With over 70,000 professionals, entrepreneurs and students as members, SiliconIndia has grown as one of the largest content and community networks.

"The idea was to do at a more professional level what social networking sites like Orkut and Facebook do," says Pradeep Shankar, managing editor of SiliconIndia. Besides offering the usual mix of news, magazine and events, the website works because it has a very interesting mentor-apprentice system, where someone who wants a kick-start is linked to someone who wants to give one. They are matched for three months and longer if they want to. So you can simply ask an online question or two to your mentor and move on, or you can stick with him/her till you have found the right study stream/job/career/business for yourself.

Interested? You are not the only one. In a survey reported in BusinessWeek, SiliconIndia figured as one of the top five business networking sites of the world. How does it work so well? Says Pradeep, "One constantly needs mentors on the way up the professional ladder. Mentors on our sites have spent about 20-30 years in the US and want to give something back to their community. It is this link that we bank upon when we connect them with apprentices."

One such mentor is Shankar Bhaskaran, director and Asia-Pacific head of the US-based company MetricStream. "I found it very interesting to be the mentor that I lacked when I first started my career 17 years back. It is great to support ideas, validate someone's views and help provide examples for them to emulate — that was the catalyst for me to join SiliconIndia," he says.

Among those who have benefited from having a guide is Ravi Shankar, a graphic consultant with Infosys Technologies, who says that his mentor Kishore Chavali, QA Manager at Satmetrix, guided him in both professional and personal life.

"I was in a dilemma to choose between various courses to pursue for my post graduation. This is where he stepped in to direct me. After completion of my course I was receiving offers galore. He again advised me about the virtues of patience and perseverance and to strike when the right opportunity came along."

The intent doesn't stop there. The website has a larger vision for India, helping bring back or retain professions who would otherwise have moved to foreign shores. Says Pradeep, "This is a professional network for global Indians and a bigger collaboration to build a new India. There are many successful people who want to contribute to the economy. Likewise, MNCs in India are also looking for people with a global experience. Beginning with the US, SiliconIndia will cover Indians everywhere providing job search and other professional services."

CEO Harvi Sachar says, "Our vision for a new India is a world leading knowledge economy and we see the role of siliconindia.com as a platform that enables global Indian professional community to share their knowledge, and as a result increase the knowledge quotient of the Indian professional workforce. The interaction works by building their professional network on our site, by blogging and offering training videos and by mentoring to offer one on one advice to juniors."

Shankar Bhaskaran agrees that the site is making a sizeable difference already and the claim is a tangible one. "People listen to one who has already spent a number of years in the US. So whether he is a college kid or an entrepreneur, each person needs help in personal or professional growth, and the site has worked very well in conveying the larger message to people."

And if you had any doubts about how this kind of professional networking compares with social networking websites, Ravi Shankar has the answer. "Social networking sites just act as a platform for fun, friendship and perhaps silly banter. Professional networking sites such as siliconindia.com on the other hand have a sense of purpose and a focus and hence members can get connected with the right kind of contacts." So if you wish to move to the next level of practical and focused networking, just hope that someone sends you an invitation soon. Until then you can while away your time socialising on other networks.