

Spreading my wings to spread science: a story of a science communicator- cum-entrepreneur

Ms. Suchitha Champak
Founder, SciRio



Suchitha Champak is the founder of SciRio, an independent enterprise working on building support of science communicators mainly on the lines of capacity building and exploration of opportunities. She has a Master's degree in Human Disease Genetics and has worked as a Cancer Biologist at the Indian Institute of Science and the Centre for Human Genetics for two years. In the pursuit of exploring science beyond a PhD and after many experiments and learnings; Suchitha is currently building SciRio.

SciRio envisions to be the backstage of science communication efforts by helping science communicators and science engagement professionals in two ways. One, build the skillset they aspire for and two, complete the cycle of purpose by assisting them to create and find opportunities that put their skillset to use. Every effort made at SciRio is thoughtfully crafted based on the feedback loop of the community it builds.



TWITTER
@biopatrika



FACEBOOK
@biopatrika

CEO/FOUNDER INTERVIEW

Tell us about yourself.

I am a super-optimist and I believe that it's a double-edged sword. With that, I want to introduce myself as a graduate student in science with a specialization in Human Disease Genetics. After I quit academia about two-and-a-half years ago is when I realized how big a role science has in my life. Career, life decisions, everyday conversations, and simply the way I think. Everything I perceive, experience is through the lens of science. When you see a beautiful flower in the market, your first thought would probably be about how beautiful it is but for me, I think about how it might have been on the plant, how it is pollinated or how the shape is structured. A lot of times, I don't know the answer to it but I wonder, make some educated guesses and I find out. THIS temperament of awe and wonder is exactly what I want to impart to the world. Blend with the environment and think like it does. SciRio is a means to it.

How did you come up with this start up idea?

After I finished my Masters and conducted research full-time, bluntly put, I didn't like it. For various reasons internally and externally. I realized for the first time that I want to talk to people about science, think in this language, and create that awe for science in people's minds. I couldn't do that sitting across the bench taking readings on how many cells lived and died in my petri-dish. Having studied and worked at Centre for Human Genetics, Bengaluru, I was surrounded by people who were trying to solve problems in the realm of Human Genetics. From diagnosis and prevention to care and treatment. So, I wondered how best I can talk about a particular disease condition to people and I chose to do a bird's eye-view approach by including the different stakeholders for a particular condition. I interviewed scientists, doctors, patients, technicians, patient support groups, industry stakeholders and tied them together to make a story. I enjoyed it. I wanted to make it a full-time job only to realize that I also had to support myself and this way I cannot become independent.

Hence, after many pivots, SciRio is here today to make a difference with a different approach but to achieve the same goals I once envisioned.

What was it about a career in biotech that appealed to you?

I grew up helping my father sometimes at his pharmacy and I simply loved exploring and understanding biological processes. South Asian families are inclined to educate their kids to become doctors or engineers. I didn't want to become one either! (My mom still reminds me that I had the grades I needed to do MBBS!). I was that rebel kid who wanted her own way out. I was fascinated to know the stories of scientists who made discoveries that we read about in school the way they took their approach from problem to solution, unknown to the known I wanted to be that scientist. I had hence decided to become a scientist. I discovered other prospects of building a career beyond research much later in my college life.

At what point did you realize you wanted to be an entrepreneur?

I realized quite early after my Masters that academia is not for me. The system in academia is broken in many ways and I could not have survived longer. I started as a researcher with a stipend of INR 12,000 after my Masters and it nowhere did justice for what I had learnt and what I was bringing to the table. Over and above, I received my stipend for the 8 months I worked after a year which was simply unacceptable. Through the course, I had a glimpse of the lives of my fellow researchers who were into academia longer than I had been - days, nights and weekends in the lab, no regular pay, being judged for taking a day off. I had no control over my life and didn't see progress in the near future. I had to look for other ways. I had to explore and find myself, re-evaluate my decisions from the past and see what I wanted to be in the next five years. Being independent from the system yet staying grounded and connected to people in academia was the only way out. I never really thought about becoming a business owner until that point. I understood that I had some skills that I can base myself on to

become an entrepreneur and then I began.

What would be your alternative career choice if you weren't a CEO/Founder?

A dancer maybe!

Who were your inspirations and mentors, both professionally and personally?

I haven't idealized one or few people to get inspiration from. Every little thing that happens in my life, I reflect and see, what have I learnt from it, how I can be better. I could be having a conversation with a friend and that conversation might have inspired my next big move at SciRio. Every single person and thing I interact with, I seek inspiration and learning. This is very different from proactively seeking inspiration and mentorship. Very recently though, I have realized that I am not good at this. So, now I proactively reach out to friends, and make new connections to learn from them.

Do you have any fond or interesting memories from your professional life you would like to share?

I was at my first workshop for science writing and communication in 2018. It is called The Workshop for Women in Science Journalism jointly conducted by British Council, India and the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Pune, and supported by India Bioscience. It was fascinating to find out that there were more people like me and the kind of prospects I can explore. It was truly an eye-opener. It was a 4-day workshop and had amazing women, mentor a whole bunch of inspiring and wonderful women. On the last day, after dinner we all sat reminiscing about our time at the workshop while also talking about our future plans. That was the first place I publicly discussed my idea and vision for SciRio. The whole bunch was quiet while I discussed, appreciated my vision and were clearly fascinated by the idea. We were of course discussing how practically feasible it could be. At that point, I didn't know either. One of the participants then told me that I was risking my career by soon quitting my full-time job to

CEO/FOUNDER INTERVIEW

explore this uncertain opportunity by myself. I have come a very long way in these three years and that conversation has always pushed the rebel in me to strive for better, show the world that I can make a difference, my way.

What were the most important, funny, or weird things you have learned over the course of your career?

The most important lessons I've learned over the time are:

1. No. Passion does not put food on your plate unless you have a plan and your passion makes you money.
2. It takes more effort as a woman to make it personally and professionally.
3. Financial literacy and independence are the first thing a girl should be taught.
4. If you don't have a to-do list with a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly view, you are wandering.
5. Reading, listening to podcasts or any habit that allows you to learn or discover something new should become your soul food.
6. Consistency and discipline are the only two things you need for your plan to work.
7. Ideas are nothing unless they are executed well.
8. You can learn something from any-one or any-thing. Seek inspiration, be inspired.

What is something your friends and colleagues don't know about you?

I get bored very easily. During a class, in a conversation, while reading a book, anytime. If there is no awe or curiosity, I might be listening to you but I am not there mentally.

What's something unique you keep on or around your workspace?

I always need a pen and a book by my side while working.

What personal/professional advice have you received that has stayed with you?

The two advices that I heeded to the most are:

1. Reach for the sky, but stay grounded and humble.
2. With great power comes great responsibility.

What were your greatest professional challenges along the way and how did you get past them?

SciRio is the first of its kind. An enterprise being built to support creators and communicators in science. I have no model or framework to replicate or evolve from and I started with no capital investment. With no background in business or management, zero exposure to how a corporate entity works, I am working on building this private enterprise. I sometimes feel that I am chewing too much more than I can but, every day I push myself to be better, do better. I learn from books, online courses, interacting with people who have different domain expertise, to get a new perspective, think differently and build an innovative solution. I haven't figured it out fully but it is everyday learning.

Tell of some situations in which you have had to adjust quickly to changes over which you had no control. What was the impact of the change on you?

I can't really point a finger at a situation but I know and have seen myself being exceptionally calm during times of crisis or change. I sit back, evaluate on why it happened and what the best way forward can be, and act accordingly. The result is usually a shift in mindset, and a new learning.

Looking back, are there any career moves or decisions you've made for which you'd like a second chance, so to speak?

I probably would have wanted all the time, effort and money I spent in applying for PhD positions, to be invested in building SciRio. I knew I didn't want to do a PhD but just kept going because everyone did it and I did not know another way out.

Do you think networking helped you in finding the right career opportunity? If yes, can you explain how you approached it?

Oh yes! Networking has opened so many opportunities for me. After the first workshop I attended, I realized there are so many people like me and so many opportunities that I could explore. I then found out about this

journal club Siddharth Kankaria from NCBS was starting called the SciCommSci Club where I connected with so many wonderful people in the field of science communication. It gave me so many new perspectives, ways to think, innovate and collaborate. These were the only two notable in-person events I have had so far in this field. After the pandemic it was all online that I met many more. I can't wait to meet them all soon. Networking is how I get everything done. Find contributors for SciRio, collaborators, friends and so many good conversations and learnings.

What advice would you give to others looking to get into the industry/entrepreneurship or move up the ranks?

It takes more than just knowing your science to become successful in the industry, become an entrepreneur or move up the ranks in your company or lab. Adopt new habits and skills; interact and learn from people outside your professional networks or domain expertise. The quality of leadership and teamwork is paramount irrespective of the position you are in.

What do you think are the challenges associated with this career?

I am in the field of science communication and outreach. A field that is categorized as an "alternate career" by people in academia and something that is not understood by people outside academia. Over and above, while we don't communicate science itself, we are in the niche where the system is expected to fill the gap—build an ecosystem for science communicators. Not just that, while building SciRio, I always have to approach anything we take on at two levels – first, create awareness about what, why, how we do what we do, and then present a solution that can either make science communicators more seen, skilled or equipped with better opportunities.

How do you cope with the challenges and keep your passion afloat?

When I am faced with a challenge, I first go back to why I am doing what I am doing, remind myself that I can do

CEO/FOUNDER INTERVIEW

it, reminisce why it is important for me to achieve my goals and vision, inspire myself, and then start deconstructing the challenge to solve it one step at a time.

