

**INTERVIEW WITH  
NITIN NOHRIA  
JUNE 25, 2013  
Sloan Oral History Series**

N: Nitin Nohria  
A: Alan White  
B: Bob McKersie  
G: George Roth

B: What attracted you to MIT? What was in your mind as you sorted through other alternatives in deciding to come and study at MIT?

N: The truth of the matter is that when I graduated from IIT Bombay, MIT was the mecca for anybody who was graduating from the Indian Institute of Technology. If you were truly spectacular, you might get to MIT. And I was not a truly spectacular graduate of IIT Bombay, so it was almost impossible to imagine that I would get into MIT, certainly not in engineering because I was not a great engineering student. I was the top quartile of my class, but I was not the number one student and usually the history of IIT had been that you have to be the gold medalist as it was called in IIT, to have the opportunity to study at MIT. But I had decided early on that I was unlikely to be a great engineer, so I was going to pursue a career in business. My father was a businessman so that was my interest. So I decided to apply to MBA programs with the hope of becoming a practical businessman. And then someone told me, "You should apply to PhD programs in business because you'll get scholarships." At that time, growing up in India, even though I came from a relatively well off family, there were currency controls. It was actually very hard, unless you had wealth abroad, to come study in the US unless you got a scholarship. So I applied to a handful of PhD programs and about ten MBA programs. If there was one thing that IIT taught us, it was to be a good test taker, so I absolutely aced the G-MAT. I had close to perfect scores on the G-MAT.

If I'm being truly honest, I didn't think I was going to become an academic. I thought this was an advanced MBA and I was very young, straight out of college. I said, "What's the difference? Four years? Two years? I'll finish that." At that time, the World Bank used to be a very popular career for Indians, the young professional at the World Bank. And that program actually favored PhDs, relative to MBAs, so my initial hope was that maybe if nothing else, if I got into a PhD program, I'd finish the PhD, I'd join the World Bank and then I'd progress with a business career.

It was probably the happiest day of my life, and I tell this story often at Harvard Business School. We have a fellowship dinner every year and I'm always moved to tears every time I stand up in front of that group because I remember receiving this letter from MIT. The first part of the letter was itself an extraordinary delight of congratulations. As soon as hear the word congratulations, it's like, "My god." I was so confident that it would be a rejection because nobody had thought that someone with my grades from IIT, it was unprecedented for someone with my grades to get into MIT. But the first part would have been pretty much an empty victory if there wasn't a second paragraph which said, "We are willing to give you a fellowship to study

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at MIT.” And that’s how I started. As soon as the letter came, it was not even a close call about what... there was no other choice, this was the place to go. I got into Cornell, I got into a few other places, so it’s not like I had no choices, but MIT was such a dominant choice that it was not even that anything else was close. I had so overachieved in getting in that it was quite an amazing experience.

And then of course, once I joined the PhD program, MIT gave me the second gift, which was to help me discover what my real passion was, which I didn’t know entering that I ever wanted to be an academic, or to really commit myself to a life of scholarship and research. So two gifts rolled in that one admission.

B: George, who is a PhD product like yourself, of the Sloan School, wants to chat with you about the inside of the program and a little bit more about how the program impacted you. George, say a word or two about what you’ve been doing since you got your PhD from Sloan.

G: I think perhaps the last time I saw you formally was when you and Mike hosted the Code of Change Conference, which has been my area of work ever since then. Looking at primarily learning as a change process. I’ve worked over the years and continue to work closely with Peter Senge, who just last week, by the way, met with the President of the World Bank. So there’s some really interesting connections about learning, change and sustainability and the role of the World Bank. But that’s not for today. I came in ’87 and I think you graduated in ’88, but we did have a chance to read your lab report. John Chalykoff and Brian Pentland were closer friends of yours and associates of mine. I’ve stayed as research staff at MIT and right now I’m teaching at the University of New Hampshire.

I joined Bob on this oral history project because I’ve been using oral history methods as a way of capturing change in organizations and trying to diffuse it by actually having people read the stories of others that have been through changes and promote that. More of a Theory O than a Theory O approach to change. Just as a little bit of context for our interviews, we primarily did these based on Eli and Alan getting together and trying to capture the recollections of faculty about what Sloan was like. And we had been doing that for a couple of years when the 2014 project came along. Alan, for a period, was in Hawaii and not here, so Bob and I have primarily partnered and we’ve interviewed about 35 faculty and staff, including some people you know well, including Don Lessard and John Van Mannen. We were talking this morning that we haven’t interviewed Mike Piori yet, but the idea is to capture and have, in perpetuity, an archive of the stories and history, rather than just achievements of people in the school. In that context, I think what would be great to hear—and you were going there—how your career evolved as a scholar. That could include coming to the PhD program, and maybe some of the people there that had an impact on you, if you can narrow down a couple of influential individuals.

N: I was admitted to the international business concentration, with finance as my, basically international finance. Don Lessard was my first assigned supervisor. In many ways it was great that I had someone like that, who was assigned to me, because I had chosen finance partly because I was an engineer and it felt like it was distant from being engineering but it was not too distant. I was still grounded in something that felt technical. For me, the thing that changed my entire perspective on education and doctoral education was the breadth requirement that was a part of the PhD program at MIT. I don’t know if it was still true George, when you came...

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G: The first year, other than the two research courses, was almost all with MBA students...

N: Yeah, everything had to be across the board. So the two research courses, the Lottie Bailyn course on exploratory data analysis and research methods. Then there was the quantitative course that John Van Mannen. And then John Carroll used to teach the course on scientific method. And then we had this practical requirement of course. John Van Mannen had a course in which he was assigning recent books that had been written by a number of faculty members. They would come and so it was an introduction to the work of the faculty and through that it was like a pro seminar type of series.

It's in that pro seminar series that I met Eleanor Westney, who was working at that time on her book on imitation and innovation during the major restoration in Japan. It's when I met Mike Piori, who was working with Chuck Sabo on his book. And suddenly I found, through that seminar, people whose voices and intellectual energy and animation felt like, "This is what I really want to do." To Don's credit, he didn't say, "What's that got to do with international finance?" He was running international business, he had become quite eclectic, so he was an amazingly eclectic human being by himself, and so he was very encouraging. He says, "If you want to switch out of finance and economics as your minor and take organizational studies as a minor, go for it. Ultimately you have to find your own voice as an academic and if that's what speaks to you, that's what you should do." So I ended up with over time, probably the dissertation committee that reflects the eclecticism of MIT and I can't imagine any other place that would have probably created a dissertation committee of that nature. My dissertation committee ended up being Eleanor Westney, Mike Piori, Don Lessard, John Van Mannen and Mel Horowich.

B: What a blue ribbon committee!

M: But just think about what they each were. It's five people, so there's a sociologist in Eleanor Westney, who was also a historian. There was Mel Horowich who was a technology/strategy/historian. There was Don Lessard who was finance/international business. There was John Van Mannen and Mike Piori who defies all characterizations. I think the most remarkable thing about my experience at MIT was that it surely did feel like it was an apprenticeship. On the one hand, you learned the craft as you do so. I've learned about, so I'm deeply grateful to John Van Mannen. It's not like you didn't learn things that you have to learn. But it's like you got a little bit of a tool kit. But in the end, who you have to be as an academic was entirely left up to you. You could choose any topic. I ended up choosing something that none of my advisors actually had particular personal interest in. So it was not like a topic that anybody could predict from who any of these people were. And yet they all bought on, they were all committed to it because I was excited about it.

I'm deeply grateful to Mike Piori because he gave me the original idea. He went to this thing called "The 128 Adventure Group" which met every second Tuesday in Boston and Newton at the Newton Marriott. He said, "I don't know. This may be something, this could be nothing. It feels like a weird thing but I don't know whether it even works. Why would something where people meet every second Tuesday actually be productive? And yet people

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seem to keep coming. So why don't you go and check it out?" Nothing else to do so you might as well go out. And that led to my thesis.

And then in the same spirit, Mel Horowich said to me, "I've been studying Eastman Kodak." Because he was studying the technology strategy at Eastman Kodak that was wrestling at that time between the shift from traditional film to digital. And he said, "They've created a venture group too. So why don't you study what a venture group looks like inside a company, relative to one that looks like in a more market setting?" And that comparison ended up being my dissertation. They both were literally these chance conversations that I had with people. But everybody else was engaged because it was qualitative methods and of all people, Eleanor Westney was my chair. Until today it's hard to understand why would she be the chair of this dissertation committee? But it didn't matter because in the end that particular role was...

The other thing that I got very fortunate about throughout my time at MIT was it really did feel like you knew everybody. I got to meet Bob. So there was something about the fifth floor. I don't know whether it still feels that way. Maybe it was because of the pre-computer days that there was much more of a sense of community because you had to actually have conversations with people.

G: ...and it was smaller.

N: It was smaller. There was a big round table on the fifth floor in the middle and there was endless coffee that was right there. If I remember, the ILR used to fund the coffee because someone had to fund it. It was interesting that even those things were like precious. It's not like coffee was free. Now it seems like coffee is free everywhere, but at that time it was much more of a big deal. Because there were these three or four computers and you had to book time on it, we used to sit at that coffee table endlessly. Late into the night, early into the morning, and it was this group of other doctoral students who were as important to my education as any faculty member at MIT. It was Sumantra Goshal and Joel and Brian Pentland and Elaine Yakura, Fred Fienberg. It's not like we were all from BPS, we were from different parts of the school too. So the sense of feeling small, feeling intimate, cross connections across different faculty members, a willingness to be oriented towards the problem and then bring whatever intellectual ideas or theories seemed to be important, as opposed to feeling like you had to go out as a doctrinaire about a particular theoretical perspective. Those were the things that I got from MIT that have turned out to be permanently useful for me.

At one point I used to be deeply distressed. So when I got tenure at Harvard Business School, Dwight Crane, who used to run our appointments process at the time, said to me, "Nitin, you'd have made life much easier for all of us if you'd simply deleted one third of your CV." And he was saying it in all seriousness. At that point he could have said it as a joke too, but he was quite serious that I had done things that were so different. I'd done projects on multinationals. I'd written a book, *Beyond the Hype*, I'd worked on networks, so my work was quite eclectic and so it defied easy categorization. What is Nitin a great expert on? I don't think that even now I know how to actually answer that question. But it was good work that was in multiple areas and I think that that reflects maybe partly who I was, partly what my early socialization at MIT ended up being. I finally came to peace with it. I wrote an essay about Isaiah Berlin. I don't know if you read this essay, *The Fox and the Hedgehog*.

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It's one of the most extraordinary essays of all time in my view. It describes two different types of writers. He was actually focusing on literary genres and he described Shakespeare as a fox, someone who is interested in multiple things. And Tolstoy as the archetypal hedgehog, he takes one problem and just studies it deeply. And he does it as a way to not make any value judgments about those two types, but to just say that those are very different types of intellectual treatise positions. Done well, they can each lead to very different forms of creative expression. I said, "OK, maybe you fool yourself but it's better to call yourself a fox than to call yourself a dilettante!"

A: Could you say a little bit more about how the experience at Sloan has influenced you in your work as Dean?

B: And while he's thinking about that, tell him about yourself.

A: I've been at the school a long, long time.

N: You used to run Sloan Fellows when I was there.

A: That's right. For a dozen years. And I was a Sloan Fellow myself. Worked a lot in cross-cultural training and University of Hawaii and then went to MIT. Then got kicked upstairs into the Dean's office and I've been working on the international programs, the collaborations that we have, particularly in China, but in other parts of the world as well. And I've had many of the jobs in the school over the years.

B: Very big trouble right now. There's a big reorganization taking place in our Dean's office because of Alan's departure, retirement.

A: And they're hanging me on and still have a part-time appointment there. And I have been working on this project with Bob and George.

B: He has emeritus status now.

A: Yes. I have a faculty appointment. So you alluded to this, but we'd be quite interested if you could say a little bit more about how that experience has worked for you in your work as Dean.

N: I do think as Dean, in part, one of the things that is helpful to have is a genuine curiosity and interest in the research of every faculty member. So I find it perfectly easy and comfortable to read a paper in finance because I took classes in finance at MIT. I find it perfectly easy to read a modeling paper in marketing because I took classes. John Little used to be right across the way. So that capacity to feel intellectually capable of and interested in a wide range of things, which was something that very much came to me from MIT. In fact, the job that I had before I became Dean, the major administrative job that I had was to run our appointments process. I thrived in that job because I actually was genuinely interested in the work that all of these people were doing. And in essence, you have to just manage the process and make sure that we're evaluating

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people's work fairly. So I think that that capacity to intellectually connect with my colleagues is an important part of what it means to be Dean. Even though I'm the leadership guy, it's not like they feel disconnected. If you're a finance person, it's not like you would feel disconnected from me. I hope not. At least that's one thing that has certainly worked well.

I think that equally the intellectual range was married with methodological range. The first set of courses you took at MIT forced you to do quantitative methods. Quantitative methods is just broadly to think about methods very openly, rather than saying, "Here's a class of methods that you have to be attached to." So that helps me in this job immensely as well.

I don't think it's true for everybody at MIT, but it's true from my experience at MIT. I connected to our business school because I was fortunate to have advisors who were deeply interested in the real world. If you notice, even the two examples of curiosity that I was asked to engage, it's not like someone said, "Why don't you go read that paper and come back and let's talk about it." What people said is, "Why don't you go out and spend a couple of weeks on Route 128. And go out and spend a couple of weeks, I'll set you up with someone in Eastman Kodak. And then let's talk about what you've learned and what theories you're hearing might actually be relevant." And that commitment to the world of practice, that commitment to understanding and generalizing from cases. I'm not sure everybody at MIT gets that but certainly having moved to Harvard Business School, it turned out to be something that I got from MIT that was enormously resonant with what is needed. I mean the commitments of our business school, which have so much to being grounded in practice, being able to talk to and have an interest in managers and leaders, to be capable of both focusing on cases, but then thinking more broadly about how they're generalize. These were all capacities that I developed at MIT, that at least for me, have turned out to be even further developed. So it was the right initial stuff for me and I honed those capabilities much more when I was here.

B: This emphasis of getting your MBA students into the field.

N: Yeah.

B: We call it action learning. Is that a connection back to your hanging out with the 128 people and hanging out at Kodak? Getting the students away from cases and actually into real practice situations?

N: There too I think the idea of labs as a place in which ultimately whatever you learn you have to see if it works in the lab. And that may not be as close to the full, real world as it might be, but it's at least closer to practice than... So the MIT mens et manus, actually have to make, "does it work?" You never know part of what makes institutions work for you as well is there's a fit between you and the institution and therefore it works better. Or whether it's the institution that shapes you. It's hard to tell which comes first. I think these are chicken and egg kinds of problems. But I have so deeply resonated with that idea always, from my earliest days. And I love that about Harvard Business School. I think the case method was one effort to try and do that. But I always felt that it fell just a little bit short. My sister is a doctor and I always wished that business had the equivalent of a hospital, in which you could actually go in and apply. It's very clear to me that, just like in medicine, and probably even more so than in medicine, the nature of business is such that the specifics of the case to which you have to apply whatever

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knowledge you have, are even more important. Situated judgment or contextual judgment, which forces you to think hard about the context and then you bring curious framework or you bring theory or concepts as vocabulary or as honorific leverage that you get to understand the problem. But in the end, it's not like it solves the problem. You still have to bring judgment to the specifics of the problem. That's what the field method is all about, which is to help our students get good at that. Which is to say, and now I've read 200 cases, but that doesn't mean that this specific case that I'm going to get the opportunity to work on is like any of them. So what have I learned from all of these that I can bring to bear in this particular, specific case and make real? And I have to do that repeatedly in my life, so if I can create that opportunity for people to have a few of those reps while they're here. I know that in some ways that's action living and those ideas were there at MIT in the fifth floor a lot.

When I came here, we had my peer who was quite committed to action learning. So it was an idea that Don Schoen used to be at MIT, one of the earliest proponents of this idea of the reflective practitioner. There was reflection, but on the other hand, there was this commitment to saying, "In the end, you actually have to do something." It was striking that Dewey Library was right next to MIT and Dewey was the founder with William James of the tradition of pragmatism as a philosophy, which I have deeply believed is the most useful philosophy of epistemology as well as action to inform and guide management. It says that part of the value of ideas is how can you put them to work, and once you have an idea, does it change how you would act in the world tomorrow? It's a provisional idea because if by acting on the world it doesn't work, then you search for another idea. It's a different way of thinking about what makes something scientifically develop, which is you try to... I found that entire nexus of ideas very powerful, and so I've always been committed to an approach in which you test what you do in the field.

B: Alan, you want to push into another area?

A: I think from what you've said already it's pretty clear that you're very excited about directions you see in management education and opportunities with action learning and things from the classroom and seeing how they work. Would you say a few words about concerns you have about the field of management education?

N: I'm not even sure how many people think of themselves as being scholars of management any more. One of my greatest anxieties is that we're at great risk of becoming a field to which people come from other places, as opposed to being a field unto ourselves. More and more I find that all schools, including ours, are attractive to people who have their PhDs in a discipline and then bring that disciplinary orientation to what you do. So it's almost at the margin a preference for the economist, as opposed to a person who went to a PhD program in a business school. Or for the psychologist or the sociologist, as opposed to the person who prided themselves on actually first having grounded themselves in a general management perspective, and then developed an area of interest, a specialization that they study. We used to, for example, have in our doctorate program when I first joined Harvard Business School, in all our doctorate programs it was a requirement that you finish the first year of the MBA. That's gone. We cannot get anybody to be willing to make that commitment again because it feels to onerous relative to the expectations they would have in any other PhD program. So I think we're operating more

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and more with faculty members whose connection with the people that they have to teach is becoming thinner and thinner.

I even worry that their genuine connection with the phenomenon that they're supposed to be studying and interested in is becoming more abstract as opposed to real. So the irony is that as we're getting our students to be more focused on the field and the real world, we're having faculty members who are becoming more distant from their real field. You can solve the problem in the short run, as many schools are trying to do, by having a research faculty and then an adjunct faculty or a practice-oriented faculty, who provides the teaching that the students need. But I don't think that's a great sustainable model in the long run because for an academic field to be vibrant, there has to be a connection between its research and its teaching and its practice.

We're at some risk of having that linkage getting weakened. One of the things that I always found very powerful about the education I got during at least that time at MIT was, as I said, I had never worked formally for a day. I'd had lots of work experience in summer programs and other things before I came to MIT. And during MIT I ended up getting a lot of experience by actually being out in the field, even though I'd not worked. So when I came into my MBA class, I never felt alienated from my students. I understood them, I understood who they were, they understood me, they felt a connection to me. Just last year I had a conversation with some new faculty member at the school who was just getting ready to teach. At Harvard Business School we have endless coaching on how to teach a case and so on. And finally one of these faculty members said, "Look. I'm actually very excited about the number of teaching plans I've gotten, but it would be great to have one of my accounting colleagues teach me how to read the exhibits at the back of the case." I wonder how many people across any business school would pass what we would consider to be a one-on-one test on business fundamentals. Like what's a debit, what's a credit? What's the difference between a balance sheet and an income statement? What is a minimum economic order? What's a bottleneck analysis? If you just took the eight or ten concepts that you thought would be foundational concepts that you would need to know in every field to just understand the vocabulary of business, forget being an expert. If you just designed a test like that, the 100 questions that you would think are elementary questions that people should know, I'm not sure how many faculty members would pass that test. And I say that as a metaphor, not as a thing that we should do, but as a metaphor for where I worry the most, which is are we losing the connection between...

I remember Tom and Bob and other people who really understood the field and what they were talking about. I was very lucky to have faculty members who I felt were actually talking about business and were actually talking about management. And now I'm not sure that that's what is the central focus of many faculty members.

B: If I could just say a few words on that. When I was here in the 50s, most of the people who got the DBA had already done two years as an MBA. And we had names that are legion. Fritz Roethlisberger, Malcolm McNair. People who really understood the territory. And then there was the Gordon-Howell report, disciplines, we need that. And maybe what you're saying is there needs to be the kind of balance that you achieved at MIT.

N: That was not progress. I do think that management needed to have a greater focus on bringing in the habits of mind that come from being trained in a discipline. But I think that that's now gone too far. We need to find some way because otherwise we're a professional school.

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We're not some applied math school. In the end, business schools are professional schools. Unlike other professional schools where you have the advantage that many of the people who are teachers are also acting professionals. So you take a medical school. While there are a few people who are pure MD-PhDs and have no contact with patients, it's very rare. The vast majority of people actually have real contact with patients on an ongoing basis. You take law schools. All of them have a JD. There are few people who come there with PhDs in economics. The vast majority of people actually have a real connection with their profession, the people that we're training. And we are at risk in business of now having faculty members who are educating people, and executive education is becoming more important to the economic enterprise of business education everywhere. Most business schools would collapse if they didn't have an executive education arm, just from the economics of the business school. How do we hope to keep doing that work which, in my view at least, if you're a school, in addition to doing research you have to find ways of translating that research into things that are of value to the people who you're going to teach.

G: I think the labs in some way have done that. Integrating experience by having students go out in teams and are advised by faculty who can bring disciplines and tools to show that. But you don't have the faculty that can teach across the breadth.

N: I agree. So I think the students are going to get ahead of us even more with the labs and with the field work and everything else. I'm trying to find ways to make sure that the faculty remains global, for example. So we're getting all our 900 students to now go out and have experiences in the emerging markets. Our students are becoming extraordinarily global. But if you have faculty members who have never seen anything in any other part of the world and don't understand which ideas are universally valid and which ideas are deeply contextually and institution-bound, students will outstrip them very quickly. You can always replace, you can always fill in, as so many schools are doing, by having this other class of faculty members that do the teaching. I think in the short run that's OK, but I don't think that that's a great model for business education. So if you say, "What's my greatest anxiety..." And if we're facing that pressure at Harvard Business School...

B: Because you've always been seen as more applied than most business schools.

N: We are! If they need to face that pressure at Harvard Business School, you can just imagine how much the rest of the field has already moved to a different place.

G: I was going to ask you to make a comment on that from the perspective of leadership. I know your focus has been how do you address teaching leadership?

N: It's a real challenge. We have this conference on teaching leadership. If you think about it, it's the most non-tenure-track faculty taught course. Entrepreneurship and leadership are the two courses that are taught across business schools the most by people who are not on the regular faculty.

B: Would you add ethics to that too?

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N: Yes, and I would add because I pick something, I'm just going to pick it up as part of the leadership plan. But these are the things that are least like to be taught by traditional tenure-track faculty members. And, in fact, even tenure-track faculty members, when they get to the moment where they have to teach and worry about what this means for whether they'll continue to be seen as... Take Deborah Ancona whom I've had long conversations with at MIT. She worries whether by having moved more towards becoming a faculty member associated with leadership, whether she has diminished the credibility that she used to enjoy at one point when she was more narrowly seen as a social psychologist studying teams. When that was her definition of who she was, she felt she had a lot more mainstream legitimacy now than when she describes herself as someone who studies leadership. So the idea of that really could be if you read the mission statement of every business school—and I've done that—show me on in which the word leadership doesn't appear.

B: It's the hot label.

N: What's striking is that it's in the mission statement. It's not even in some marketing material. It's right up there on the mission statement of every business school is the word leadership or entrepreneurship. Take MIT. MIT cloaks itself in the celebration of entrepreneurship more than anybody else, for good reason. It has a great track record of producing entrepreneurs, but that's how it differentiates itself from Harvard. It's the way it differentiates itself from many other schools, such as Stanford. What's ironic is that at MIT, author Ed Roberts a coup really is an entrepreneurship faculty member. Eric Von Hippel maybe but he kind of enters into this broad way and it's not really that he studies entrepreneurship. He studies the origin of ideas and where they come from.

A: Now we have Scott Stern also.

N: But he was very complicated. He's now tenure track, but if you know the history of Scott Stern, it was not an easy history. If you look across, you'll find one or two faculty members who anchor these areas, who are tenure track, because you always need that. But the vast majority of people who do it are adjunct or practice professors or something else. So to my mind that's an example of what I think is one of the real challenges we have, which is how do we make sure that the core problems that are associated with our missions, with what it means to be a business school, with what we hope to develop our students into, don't become marginal problems that we study. They have to be the core questions that we're interested in because if they're not interested in them and we're not devoted as scholars to saying, "Even if they're hard, intractable problems, we've got to make them researchable and we've got to make them credible problems to study through research." And not just say, "Oh well, that's too hard to let me just move off and study something that I can, even if it's got nothing to do with my mission and nothing to do with the claims that I make about what I'm supposed to be doing as a business school."

I think there's drift away from being rooted in business leadership, entrepreneurship. The roads that our students will take, the vast majority of them are not going to go out and become scholars. They're not going to become flight mathematicians. They're going to go out and

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practice. And the fact that we are getting disconnected from that as the scholars who teach them, it's deeply troubling. In the field of leadership that is even more so than ever.

G: I raised that because I see that as exactly as you said. That's probably the greatest area of challenge and also the greatest area of need in business. A question that I had, that kind of builds on what you were saying and would be very interesting to the colleagues that are working on this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. From your position, looking back at the MIT Sloan School and how it has changed, because it's changed a lot since you were there 20-25 years ago.

N: This year 25 years.

G: What do you envy when you look back from your position now? What Sloan has done and what it has accomplished, because it has changed quite a bit.

B: Would you compliment our Deans?

G: It's more than the Dean, but the school and how the school...

A: Orientations.

N: What is still admirable about MIT is I don't know it as well from the inside as... it still feels like a place that is more nimble about being experimental than most other places are. So the series of labs that were done, G-lab, this or that lab. There's a much greater willingness to say we're going to try some things out and if they work, they work. And if they don't work... Which I think is an overall ethos at MIT which has been also infused in... Certainly that was my experience even as a doctoral student. I didn't feel like anything I had to do there was such a big weight to it that, "Oh my god! Choose carefully because if you don't choose carefully, you're going to be in the wrong path forever." It's like, "Go study this for a month." If this turns out to be a dud, all you've lost is a month. Start again. That was the general attitude that I had. And I think that remains. Whereas if I compare that to even us, I'm trying to bring a little bit more of the willingness to say we should be more willing to do more experiments at Harvard Business School. But we've tended to, partly because of scale, partly because of a lockstep approach to doing things. Everything is taught the same way in our entire post degree curriculum. A need for consistency. Experimentation has always been taken with more weight here. "You'd better get it right. You can't screw it up." And I think that inherently limits the experimental nature of MIT.

I also think that in terms of internationally, this approach—and who knows what the right answer would be for anybody in terms of how we all approach globalization. Different schools have taken very different paths. There are people who have taken the multiple campus part. The people who have taken, as MIT has, this partnership path. There's the people who have taken our approach. Chicago is a little bit in our area too, which is to create these research centers around the world, that ends up being lean. So they're not like campuses, but they do create your own presence in different parts of the world. I don't know which one of these will end up being the most successful model. But here too, I've been impressed by MIT's openness to partner with others. I know that at Harvard, the brand dilution question absolutely bogs us down. We have never ever been comfortable partnering. So if partnering ends up being, in the long run, a

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strategy that is important, then I think MIT has made a lot of progress in learning how to build a network of these partnerships. So if that turns out to be a good strategy, it's not easy to develop that capacity over night. Partnering it not just like that.

G: You have to let others lead in some ways.

N: Yeah, and you have to have this willingness to do a bunch of stuff that doesn't quite work with other people. And you're well down that learning curve relative to anybody else that I know. Even though I know Wharton tries and Kellogg tries a little bit of it too, I think MIT is by far the leader.

B: And Alan was instrumental.

N: But I credit you. At least you've gone... So in those two areas, I think MIT has shown, relative to others, more openness, more experimental nature. And I think that that's a good capacity to have. If I had to say, "What have I seen since my time at the Sloan School?" These are the two things that I watch and I say, "Humm, that's pretty impressive."

A: What you said about experimentation and the lab orientation in Sloan really helped a lot in doing these collaborations. It was tried to see how they worked.

N: And then meantime we can unwind if we need to. It's not like MIT's reputation is going to go down the tubes if even one of these things goes wrong. But that openness to saying... it's not like failure is fatal. We suffer a lot more from this belief that if you fail, there's really egg on your face. That's one of the things we need to get past.

G: You don't like failing if you can't learn from it.

N: The question is for us, is the scale. I do think that trying to do things lockstep on scale is a very different problem. If you teach a first year course in strategy in the Sloan School, and depending on which class you go to, you'll get the experiment of that particular faculty member. Here, you go and you take our first year strategy course and yes, you might see some differentiation across faculty members, but you can be pretty confident that you got a strategy course that was roughly comparable to the other one.

So there are strengths that come from our approach too. I believe that the coherence of what it means to get an MBA from Harvard is much stronger than the coherence of what it means to get an MBA from the Sloan School. And as a result of that, the alumni affection, for example, that we have is infinitely greater. And it's because there is a much greater sense of their shared, coherent experience.

B: I was taking him through Spengler. Dick Spengler was a classmate of mine. We don't have much time left. Did you want to ask a question about EdX Alan?

A: Just interested in what you see as the impact of the new learning technologies and how that may change things.

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N: I think the new learning technologies will become inevitably a very large part of the education landscape. So that is for sure. The question is, “Will it crowd out everything else? Or will it coexist with other things?” That’s the only meaningful question to ask. To my mind, doubting that this will be an important part of the educational landscape going forward is just silly.

B: It’s a love-hate approach.

N: Right. That’s not the case. But in many, many fields things coexist quite happily. It’s not like in a world in which everything is moving to Amazon, the demand for luxury goods had increased. The stores in which you can have the experience or even you can buy an Apple just as well from the net. But yet everybody wants to go an Apple store. There’s something about the experience of being in the Apple store where you meet other people and you have a genius bar and you have all of these things. It’s very special. So you can create face-to-face experiences and human contact experiences that are quite remarkable.

I’m betting on coexistence and I’m betting on the fact that it’s not just coexistence with no traffic between the two. But it will be coexistence in which we will have our versions of what we do online that will attract a niche of the online market. And the online people will create their versions of face-to-face. You can already see it in University of Phoenix where they have places where people can gather to come for tutorials or classes or other things. And that will appeal to a different niche, and so these market segments will still exist. And this idea that Clay Christensen has, which is that in the end the inferior technology always captures the superior technology, the higher end of the market. It’s true that functionality is a scalar vector. The functionality that the user wants is on a relatively straightforward scale. So you can see that being captured up. But if the functionality is multi-vectored, “I actually care about...”

As a colleague of mine at Harvard College said very nicely that, “We just want reasonable face-to-face interaction in a college still remains - sex.” He was saying it semi-jokingly, but if you think about it, it’s a very important thing about people at that age in life. You think about what you have to do between 18 and 28, you’ve got to navigate many other aspects of self beyond what it is to simply learn. Who can think of college and thinks of college as simply an experience in which they went to class? That’s such an impoverished, self-definition of what college means. To me, education is a far more multi-vectored space than traditional things that have been written up and we talk about these disruptive technologies. I don’t think we’ll end up with a unitary solution, we’ll end up with a solution in which there will be different niches that will be occupied by different kinds of players. But none of us should be either cavalier or casual or disinterested in how technology unfolds. And I think that we should be as interested in the technology for the opportunities it presents, than for the threats it might pose. Actually, the opportunity spaces for us are massive relative to the threat. And are massive in ways that are completely compatible with the idea of being institutions that are focused on excellence and not necessarily being institutions for all, but the very carefully selected. Those very carefully selected, without losing the commitment to excellence and production. And that it your point. It is huge shoes...

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B: And, shamelessly, I have to give you something. When I left here with two degrees in 1959, I went to Chicago, and instead of being a faculty member, I got involved in the civil rights movement. And, I have written this book about the Civil Rights movement in Chicago...

N: How wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW