Forging Fellowship: Abner Oliviera, SF ’08

MIT Sloan Fellow maps out his future in business

Scott: Abner Oliviera, welcome.

Abner: It’s a pleasure to be here, Scott.

Scott: Abner is in the MIT Sloan fellows program, which is a one-year, full-time program. And you prepare to graduate in June, you’ve been here almost a year. What have your impressions been?

Abner: Well this has been an amazing year. Talking to my colleagues I like to refer to it as a journey to the future because we are here having a glimpse of what we can be as business leaders or where companies could be. And I think we have the mission to, going back, put all this in place. The, we don’t know the path, but we sure know where we should be as professionals, as business leaders.

Scott: So you’re looking forward to jumping back into the private sector?

Abner: Sure, sure I can’t wait. There’s so many things going on in my company in Brazil. Brazil’s going through an amazing period right now. The economy is stable, the politics is also going fairly well for our standards. So the country is growing. A lot of investments are going on. So I’m really looking forward to going back.

Michelle: Can you talk a little bit about the position you’re going back to and maybe how what you’ve learned during this year you could apply that?

Abner: Okay a few weeks ago I wouldn’t be able to answer that question because I think all the fellows are going through the same process. We are negotiating with our companies, what we would like to do, what they would like us to do. And being here, I think we have a pretty good vision on how we could help our companies. So it’s a fantastic process to go back and discuss this. Right now I’m looking to a position of developing the international exposure of the company that when I first joined I brought this vision with me, but at that time we weren’t ready for that. So we took a long time to start establishing contacts and trying to figure out where we would work and what are the resources that we needed to tap. The most interesting thing for me was that while this vision was brought to the company a couple of years ago, it just blossomed during this time that I was here. I think that the fact that I came here, just gave this very strong message to everybody in the company. Okay this is serious, we are considering going global or establishing global supply chains very, very seriously. So everything started to align to that vision to a point that now we need a very good coordination of all those efforts and I’m looking forward to helping the company accomplish that.
Michelle: Has the exposure you’ve had to your Sloan fellows colleagues who come from a variety of backgrounds and places, has that helped you in terms of some of your goals for going international, going global?

Abner: Oh definitely. The first, the main barriers when you go global is to understand who is sitting in the other side of the table and by living with my colleagues for almost one year now, I got the dimension of their cultures, their understanding of business making, their sense of humor, the hobbies that they like to have. And we have about, this year we were so fortunate to have 26 nationalities. So it was an amazing exposure, I feel much more well rounded as a global business maker than I was before.

Scott: So you’d mentioned a very diverse class with a lot of nationalities represented, does that make up, along with the Sloan Fellows alumni, a network that you might be able to draw from as you move the company internationally?

Abner: Sure, not only the fellows, but also the regular MBAs. I first knew about the Sloan Fellows program through a Sloanie, a graduate from the regular MBA, a close friend in Brazil. And he was the one who introduced me to the program. By that time I was looking for a regular MBA to a year MBA, but I couldn’t figure out how would I do that and still be involved with my company? I really wanted to continue with them and be knowing that he first spoke about the program to me.

Scott: I wonder if we might get into that. We were speaking before the podcast about your company and it’s really a fascinating company. Can you tell us about what the company does and how you ended up at the program?

Abner: Sure, sure. Well the company works with a very specialized kind of engineering service, which is the mapping and serving set of services. What we do is we provide very precise, accurate geographic data for the most diverse applications that you can imagine. So we are helping governments accrue land taxes, we are helping farms plant the crop and going along with regulations and minimize environmental risk, we are helping cities plan their future. So there’s a lot, and mainly in Brazil, I can forget to cite this, Brazil’s going through a phase of development now and there’s the need for infrastructure. So this kind of data is crucial to infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, ducts, harbors. So the company provides that kind of information. We own the production method, which is a very specialized aircraft with a sensor. So what we do is that we fly over the areas of interest and take pictures in a certain setting so that you can recreate that environment in 3-D and in the offices with very high precision we can measure the height of a person that would be walking in the area if by the time we, yeah, we took the pictures. So this kind of very precise data goes directly into planners departments or to designers of people trying to make sense of an area geographically.

Scott: And so have you been primarily doing that in Brazil and now you’re looking to expand the service?
Abner: Yes, yes. Brazil’s a big country, there’s a lot to do there, but when I first arrived at the company I noticed that we were so exposed to political and economic risks that the revenues would just vary immensely from year to year and that bothered me a lot. I didn’t want the company to be facing cyclical problems like that every time government would change. So we started looking abroad. And the first thing that we accomplished was deciding of a global supply chain. So we started working with the best suppliers in the world, we buy equipment from them, we buy services from them, and we were very successful in setting this support supply chain, whatever the best and lowest cost resources were. Further down the line we started working in Africa. Brazil has a close relationship with a couple of countries in Africa including Angola. Angola just went out of a very long civil war, the countries completely destroyed, no roads, no infrastructure whatsoever. The whole population of the country lives in the capital. So they moved from the inner country to the capital because there is nothing else in the inner country. So the country’s been rebuked. And they found oil, so they have the money to invest. So we went to Angola, we started working there and suddenly a lot of other countries around started asking for jobs. So Africa is a big focus that we have right now.

Michelle: Have you been to Africa?

Abner: I’ve never been to Africa, I was about to go and I suddenly I had to cancel the trip. We know a lot about Africa because in Brazil we have a lot of African related populations, and actually my grandparents were African. So the culture is not so unfamiliar to us, but the social settings, the social contracts that they have there, and the urban organizations, it’s a challenge to us. It’s very, very, very different.

Scott: So it sounds like a great product that you’re offering. The company starting to look at expanding into Africa and other international horizons and then you come to the MIT Sloan Fellows program. Why did you come, you’re sponsored by the company so it’s more than just a personal decision, the company had to buy off on it as well.

Abner: Yeah, well it was a tough sell, not because of the program but because I had convince a small company, we’re just in the beginning, to let me go for a year, a year that I would not be working so close to the projects that I was working before. So, but I was so fortunate because, it’s a beautiful story, I got this call from this Sloanie friend and he says you have to be in São Paolo the next day because the director of the Sloan Fellows program is coming in, I think this is perfect for you. So I hang up the phone and I go to my boss’s desk and I say to him out of the blue, I never had discussed this before with him, so I say to him okay there’s a guy from MIT, this is something that I would like to look into. And I think either this guy’s going to, you know, kick me out of here or something else will happen. And he jumps out of the chair and says, how can you not go, you have to go there. And I later knew that it was his dream to come to MIT as a young engineer in the first place, I didn’t know that and this was what was thought of the whole thing. I came to São Paolo, had a wonderful meet- ing with Stephen Sacca, the director. And I hear people saying that all the time, and I had this experience, when I sat to discuss with him what the program was and what could I do here, I immediately hit it off with him. I felt very comfortable, it was like an
old friend. And actually he is a friend now. And I had had interviews and visited other business schools and it’s nothing, nothing like the environment that we have here at MIT Sloan.

Michelle: How is the environment different?

Abner: Well I think we have more down to earth people. People that are more accessible that really put some effort to make you feel comfortable. After a couple of weeks here I felt like I was home. It was, I felt like I knew everybody already and everybody was so accessible and friendly. When you go to other business schools they have, I don’t know if that’s the right word, but there’s an attitude to it, okay we are special. And you come to MIT and you think my God this place is special, but people are so accessible, so friendly that maybe I can come here and feel very comfortable.

Scott: So you arrive here in June and I know the summer program is very intense. Does that help build relationships among classmates and does that help solidify a bond that carries through and establishes a sense of camaraderie and friendship?

Abner: Sure, sure. That’s the moment for every, these bonds are forged. We are assigned to a four- member study group and these members, they are as diverse as they can be. So they’re going to be really different from you. They’re going to have a completely opposite backgrounds and different views of the world. I was very fortunate to be assigned to a study group that just became friends from the start. It was not easy because you have to work out all the differences, but it was an amazing experience. It was something that I would never have had before, so I consider myself very fortunate to have that experience because it taught me the value of teamwork. It is really, really a hands-on approach to how teamwork can work in your favor.

Scott: And where did your teammates come from, where are their backgrounds?

Abner: Oh it’s very interesting. Well I come from Brazil, there is this very bright young executive from India, she works in sales and marketing for an American company. We had a Singaporean executive from the economic development board, which is the main organism that, in Singapore, works for the country’s economic development. They visit companies all around the world and sell their country. So this guy’s very knowledgeable about the country and reality in southeast Asia. And the fourth member is, let me see if I get this right, he’s a Swiss-Mexican-Austrian, descendant from nobility. He is actually a, he’s a baron. And we joke that he’s a baron of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, which was a fantastic empire, but it’s no longer there, he has to work for his living. But aside from that this guy is a very young entrepreneur. He was out there when the dot.com bubble started to grow and he has these amazing insights about everything that happened. And each one had different personalities. We had a lot of work to do in the beginning, but in the end, we became so productive and the discussions were so interesting that we are getting together again in this last summer, although we’re not required to, to work on the project together because we just wanted to revive that and leave with a good work in the end to remember.
Michelle: Now is this your first start living outside of Brazil for an extended period?

Abner: Yes, yes, I never lived outside. And it was a challenge at first because everything is so different. First of all the language is a barrier, you spend a couple of days trying to tune things up. And I brought my wife with me, so it was. At first, when you just dive into the program and the summer is so demanding, it was a challenge at first. But then things got so much better because this is an urban campus, you just cross the street and you’re into one of the most amazing cities in the U.S. I think. It’s a city that’s big enough to have everything, but also small enough not to have to big cities’ problems.

Michelle: So has she been able to mingle and get involved with the significant others from your group?

Abner: Sure, that was something that I did not even expect at first, but the program put a lot of effort to get everybody together. So she has close friends amongst the other partners now, which is very important for me.

Scott: Are you different as a result of the program and if so how?

Abner: Well I think I’m, well I feel very, very different. I have a deeper understanding of the business making in general. It’s, to give you an analogy, I, when I was in engineering school I had a lot of friends in the architecture department and they would be these artist guys and we’d be the number crunching people. And once I was walking with this friend and he told me, can you look at the trees and see the different shades of green in the trees? And I looked at the trees and at first I didn’t see, for me it was just green, and then he started pointing me out, okay this is darker, this is lighter and I’m standing looking this is the same tree, the leaves are all the same color. And after a couple of moments of discussion I started realizing oh my God, there’s thousands of shades of green here. And I feel that way about business right now. At first it was this, you know, far away view of what it was to do business, to lead business globally, the program has a big focus on doing business globally. And right now I can see thousands of different shades and why one is better than the other, why one is applicable in the situation and not in the other one. So personally I think that the tools that I got are inevitable, it’s just amazing. And secondly I think we had contact with amazing business leaders. They come to speak to class so it is an amazing opportunity to measure up to these people and try to learn how they were successful, their ethics, their personal ethics, it’s very interesting to analyze these people. And they come to class, they enter the classroom with closed doors, and they’re allowed to say whatever they want. Nobody’s going to ever comment what they said outside the group. So it is such a close moment with people like Jack Welch, Jeffrey Immelt and others, so it is pretty amazing.