

SHIGERU

I was asked to serve on a faculty committee back in year 2000 by then president Chuck Vest.

MIYAGAWA:

And the charge to our committee was to come up with a new strategy for e-learning for MIT. Everyone else was doing e-learning, MIT wasn't. And so the president felt that we should come up with a new and bold idea for MIT.

Of course, year 2000 was still the era of the .com days, and so the assumption going in was that we would create an MIT.com and enter into some kind of venture. Maybe take up the materials that faculty created and sell them. That was one idea.

But as we got into the discussion, there were maybe seven or eight of us, it got smaller as the months went by. It became apparent to us that the idea of MIT.com was not the right idea. There are a number of reasons for it. We interviewed about 60 organizations that were doing e-learning, and from those interviews the one thing that we learned was that this is really a tough area to do business in.

That was one question that we had. We did try to build business models. We had Booz Allen Hamilton people helping us. And we worked very hard at creating a number of business models. We did lots of surveys to get credible data.

And the business models that we were able to create, the most credible one had us starting year one, and about year five we'd break even. Which is not unusual for a venture, but the problem with that business model was that after year five, it was sort of flattened. There's not this sort of hockey stick uptick in revenue.

And we thought if we're going to do something, we wanted to see at least the potential of having a major source of revenue that could help MIT. It didn't seem to be there. The most important reason though, was that we interviewed about 60 faculty members who had already put up their materials on the web on their own. And we wanted to see what their motivation was.

If we're going to do MIT.com we need to understand the faculty's motivation. And so we interviewed every one of them. And without exception, they told us one, they were doing this to try to improve their classroom teaching. Two, they were not getting compensated. And three, that they were sacrificing their own time, research time, time with their family to do this.

So this is where you find MIT faculty's real commitment, real commitment to teaching. And that's what we found. And when we discussed this in the committee, it was October of the year 2000, this was the last meeting before we had to start writing a report to President Vest. We said, you know, it doesn't seem right we would take teaching materials from these faculty members who are committed to teaching, and taking that and turning it into business.

And so that was pretty much the final thing we needed here to say no MIT.com. But we had to report to the president and give him some bold idea for MIT in the e-learning space. And particularly based on what the 60 faculty members told us about the MIT faculty's very deep, very deep commitment to teaching.

We said, why don't we create a system that's exactly the opposite? Exactly the opposite of what we started with, and what the rest of the world was doing, and say we're going to just give it away. Just give it away so that anyone, anywhere in the world can take advantage of MIT faculty's commitment to education. That's how we started with OpenCourseWare.

If you look at OpenCourseWare and see why it's been so successful, and why it has resonated with the faculty. I remember just a few days after MIT announced OpenCourseWare it was front page article in New York Times, a young faculty member came up to me and said that the day MIT announced OpenCourseWare was the proudest day of his career at MIT.

Why did he say that? Why did it resonate so much with the faculty? The reason, I believe, is because OpenCourseWare is not just OpenCourseWare separate from MIT.

OpenCourseWare is very much a mission that MIT has as an institution.

If you look at the MIT mission, not the OCW mission, MIT mission on the web, it says that MIT is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge. And to bring this knowledge to bear on all of the great challenges of the world. MIT has traditionally fulfilled that requirement, that mission, with basic research. But now with OpenCourseWare, we can also fulfill that mission with our teaching, by disseminating and preserving our teaching materials.