



My tech repair firm started life in the garden shed

HOW I MADE IT

Askar Sheibani
Founder of Comtek

AT the age of eight, Askar Sheibani was already an entrepreneur. He saved his pocket money and bought a chicken, which he kept in the back garden. He sold the eggs to his mother and used the money to buy more chickens, selling the eggs to neighbours.

Then disaster struck. All nine chickens died. "At the age of 10 I experienced bankruptcy for the first time," recalled Sheibani, whose telecom and network repair service Comtek, based in North Wales, turns over £11m and employs more than 100 people.

One of six children, Sheibani was born and brought up in Tabriz, Iran. At 16 he decided to move to England on his own to further his education. His parents raised the money he needed from relatives.

Sheibani arrived in London in 1972, taking a bedsit in Kentish Town while he studied English. After a year, a friend suggested he move to Leeds where he took his O- and A-levels before winning a place at Liverpool Polytechnic in 1976 to study electrical engineering.

"My parents always told me to get qualifications," Sheibani said. "They said it was the best capital anyone could have." So after graduation he took a one-year professional engineering qualification at Gwent College in South Wales.

As a student, Sheibani had visited America several times on exchange programmes and had spotted the potential of takeaway and home delivery pizza businesses. "At that time, there were only two American-style fast food places in the UK that I knew of, and they were both McDonald's," he said.

He wanted to open a pizza takeaway in Reading, where he had moved with his new wife, but could not borrow enough money. "One consultant told me it would never work here because the British liked having a pizza in an Italian restaurant with a candle on the table," he said.

He took a job with an electronics firm but felt out of place. "I was stifled, demotivated and discouraged from pushing myself forward," Sheibani said. "My boss told me, don't try to climb the ladder too fast, you will burn yourself out."

Frustrated at his inability to borrow any money to start a business, Sheibani struck out on his own with a venture that required no start-up capital, repairing communications products such as modems.

The timing was not ideal. His wife had recently had a baby and his friends thought he was mad to give up the security of a job. But Sheibani was convinced there would be a demand since new modems cost up to £1,000 and manufacturers usually took a month to repair them. He could turn them round in a few days.

Sheibani bought a second-hand shed for £50 to serve as a workroom in his garden. Friends in the industry put work his way and soon he was so busy he was employing someone to help him. Within three months Sheibani had moved into an industrial unit and expanded into repairing all kinds of data communications products such as network cards and multiplexers.

When the recession hit in the early 1990s Comtek — an abbreviation of communications technology — found itself in

demand as big companies such as Siemens and ICL started to cut costs. By 1996 Sheibani had 40 people working for him and relocated the operation to Deeside.

At this point, Sheibani made a couple of mistakes. He bought the Dutch arm of a big Canadian company, Gandalf, in the hope of turning it into a service division for Comtek.

However, he could not resolve the cultural differences. He bought the company

for £400,000 but had to spend another £1.1m to unite his two ventures. "I did not do enough due diligence," Sheibani admitted. "I did not have the experience."

In 2001 he acquired the French and German repair departments of Vanco Euronet for £250,000. He discovered that the French operation was run so badly he had to close it within a year.

These projects — he had also opened an office in California in 1999 — soaked up management resources he did not have. So in 2005 Sheibani realised he needed to restructure the business. He closed the American operation and made 10 people redundant.

From then on the business started to grow again and its focus on repairing products rather than scrapping them gave it an environmental aspect.

Now 54, Sheibani explained the secret of his success: "I have a passion for adventure, I am a risk taker and I am extremely optimistic. And I am extraordinarily ambitious."

His ambition comes, he thinks, from the influence of his brother, a successful scien-



tist in America. Sheibani said: "My brother always said that we as humans underestimate our own brain capacity. And that anything we want, we can achieve. And I genuinely believe that."

Sheibani, who stills owns 100% of the business, offered this advice: "Believe in your own ability and don't worry about the risk. You will fail sometimes but that's okay. Failures and mistakes make you stronger."

Rachel Bridge

GABRIEL SZABO



Keen eye: Askar Sheibani, the owner of Comtek, which has £11m turnover