

USAMA FAYYAD

Usama Fayyad, at 35, considers himself "one of the most fortunate people on the planet" because he's always loved his job.

In 1989, Fayyad founded the [Machine Learning Systems Group](#) at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory of the California Institute of Technology and ran it until 1995. Initially reluctant to leave, he took a base salary cut to create a data-mining research group at Microsoft.

Microsoft wooed Fayyad—who had received five undergraduate and graduate degrees and authored more than 100 technical articles—with free rein to "lock myself in a room for a year and just think, if that's what I wanted to do." Instead, the Tunisian-born computer scientist invented scalable algorithms and customized them for Microsoft's SQL Server. He grew rich on stock options and kept two offices on the Redmond campus.

But he got antsy.

"The scenario looked rosy," said Fayyad, also editor in chief of the Association for Computing Machinery [newsletter](#). "This may sound weird, but I didn't like that...I kept thinking, even if I failed at the biggest project I had, my life wasn't on the line. I wanted to face doom on one side and benefit from the good times on the other hand. I wanted the risk."

He resigned in March 2000 and founded [DigiMine](#) with fellow Microsoft alums Nick Besbeas and Bassel Ojje. By June 2001, the data analytics firm had offices in New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. It has about 120 employees and counts Crayola, J. Crew and Microsoft among its customers.

"Whenever you get off your butt and learn something new, good things happen as long as you're reasonable about your expectations," Fayyad said. "As long as I'm not dangling out of some tree, worried about where my next meal is, I'm happy. I'm so far from that situation that it's going to take a nuclear bomb to make me unhappy."

—R.K.

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