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IP lawyer's podcast explores failure

■ PAT MURPHY

As an intellectual property attorney who represents clients competing in the frequently unforgiving hi-tech and bio-tech sectors, Boston's David J. Powsner has seen his fair share of hits and misses.

That experience may help explain why the 64-year-old shareholder at Davis, Malm & D'Agostine would produce a podcast that explores the taboo subject of failure.

Powsner co-hosts "Failure – The Podcast and Innovation Blab." The latest episode, Number 84, features Suman Lal.

Lal tells his story about intending to make medicine his career. And, in fact, he became an emergency medicine physician more than 20 years ago.

But then he shares the secret that he realized in his second year of med school: He wasn't meant to be a doctor.

During the interview, Powsner's co-host Mark Thirman playfully asks Lal: "How did that conversation go at home?"

Lal answers, "After 30 years,



The 'Failure' podcasters hard at work

my dad is still complaining I'm not a doctor."

Today, after earning an M.D., MBA, Master of Science in molecular genetics, and Ph.D. in oncology, Lal finds himself making a handsome living managing the Technology Innovation Studio at the Cambridge Innovation Center in Kendall Square.

Lal provides students and others access to a high-level network of movers and shakers in various tech sectors through events he organizes. For those prime networking opportuni-



David J. Powsner

ties, Lal says he charged one young wannabe entrepreneur a tidy \$10,000 a month.

Other recent podcast guests sharing their tales of perseverance in the face of adversity include Sydney Robinson, CEO and co-founder of the Ontar-

io-based startup Vessl Prosthetics, and Milind Sawant, who at Siemens Healthcare leads a team of 50 engineers working to integrate artificial intelligence systems into medical systems.

Thirman is a computer science guru who works at IBM in Boston as “Global Cloud and Edge Leader.” He’s also a former client of Powsner.

The podcast’s third co-host, Jeffrey Champagne, is in product development, working as the senior director of MedTech, a part of EPAM Continuum in Boston.

Powsner, Thirman and Champagne liven up the podcasts with humor, competing to outdo one another in delivering one-liners and snarky comments as guests sometimes struggle to get in a word edgewise.

“It is light, at least in tone,” Powsner says. “But on the flip side, a little like ‘Columbo,’ we seem to stumble our way into insightful questions that bring the interviewee to talk about things they otherwise might not be inclined to delve into themselves.”

Powsner says he started doing podcasts about 15 years ago, with “Failure” his third. The idea originated with programs he and several colleagues used to present at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Forum.

“Around 2010, we decided we would begin recording these programs for technology entrepreneurs,” Powsner says. “That evolved in 2013 and 2014 into the first podcast series of about 30 episodes called ‘The Tech Entrepreneur.’”

Meanwhile, in his IP practice, Powsner had begun working for “angel investors” – wealthy individuals who invest in startups.

“In 2017, I decided that failure was not a topic that was discussed enough,” Powsner says. “And yet, among angel investors and the companies we launched, [failure] was the predominant end result because most startups fail. So I started this podcast with a friend who was a member of an angel investor group. He dropped out, and that’s when Mark [Thirman] joined. We ran about 70 episodes.”

When COVID hit, he and Thirman took a break, restarting in 2024 with Champagne coming aboard as a co-host.

“Now, the podcast is a little less about failure and more about talking with people about whatever we and they want to talk about,” Powsner says. “There’s no preparation, and it’s very informal, but we try to be somewhat insightful.”

Powsner says he sees himself and his cohosts as sort of

“tech-entrepreneur adjuncts,” gleaning insights from innovators who are “in the thick” of the tech industry. He adds that they’re on the lookout for new guests with interesting perspectives.

“There is a lot of interest in this,” Powsner says. “This [tech sector] is an ecosystem that generates a lot of money. There’s a lot of people who want to rub elbows with or meet somebody who might be able to get their business started.”

While 30 percent of the startups he sees may be destined to fail from the get-go, the remaining 70 percent have a chance so long as the “moon and the stars align” in terms of market interest, entrepreneurs maintain energy and focus, and, most importantly, financing is sufficient, he says.

“Those three things don’t align that often, so the number of businesses that actually succeed is amazingly small,” he says.

But those who fail are not necessarily worse off from the experience.

“Failure is an essential learning tool,” Powsner says. “It’s by weathering those difficult days and sleepless nights that you get attuned to either things that are going wrong or things that are going OK as the business grows. It’s life.”