



CFA Society
Vancouver

CAREER INTERVIEW

Salman Ahmed, CFA
Portfolio Manager

Steadyhand Investment Funds

Interview by
Sahar Sharafzadeh, CFA
October 2020



“What I value most about the designation is the Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Conduct.”

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

My father was a civil engineer, so I grew up in various spots around the world. We would often shuffle back and forth from Saudi Arabia depending on what project my father was working on. Therefore, when it came to selecting a university to attend there was no obvious choice. I started at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), a highly ranked business school in Pakistan, originally established in the '50s with support from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Southern California. The program there was great with only one hundred students per year, which allowed me to get to know the other students well. After attending IBA for one year I transferred to Concordia in Montreal where I completed my Bachelor of Commerce and I also passed my CFA Level I exam.

How did your interest in finance develop?

I was a math and physics nerd in high school. My business education teacher, Mr. Burke, would have every student complete an internship. Like most students, I wanted to do the internship at a company like Sport Chek or Sport Mart but Mr. Burke, likely as a result of his intuition,

suggested I try my hand at a brokerage firm instead. I remember the experience of walking into a brokerage firm in Cloverdale clearly— I was not entirely dressed appropriately, wearing my father's oversized shirt. I sat down with a broker, who was putting together a pamphlet that included a Warren Buffet quote, and I remember how astonished the broker was when I asked who Warren Buffet was! That was it—I was hooked on the finance industry. I even got involved in a few stock-trading competitions for fun during the tech bubble in the late 1990s and I remember winning one, even though my portfolio just broke even, simply because I had not invested in any tech names. My experience throughout all of this created my passion for finance.

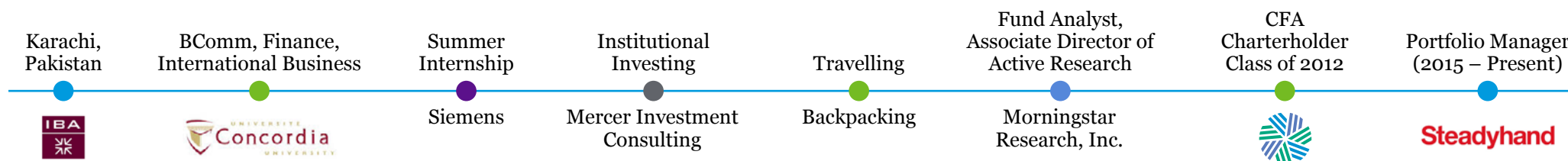
What was your first job when you started your career, and was it the position you had hoped for?

When you're a finance graduate you may somehow incorrectly get into your head that there are only two career paths that follow: to become an investment banker or to become an investment manager. I so desperately wanted to follow those paths. However, no one tells you that there are so many other opportunities available such as: treasury, corporate finance and lending, to name a few. I was fortunate

enough to get my first gig at Mercer, a large, global consulting firm, and given the opportunity to learn a great deal. I worked with institutional investors such as defined benefit pensions, endowments, and foundations across Canada and learned about the objectives and challenges of different types of investors along with thousands of varied investment strategies.

Did you follow a specific career path, change jobs within the same company, and what prompted any job changes?

My career has not followed an obvious or traditional trajectory. My time at Mercer was going well and I was thoroughly enjoying the work. However, a family matter arose prompting much introspection and as a result, I decided to take a leave of absence. I always dreamt of travelling the world and I knew if there was a time to do it—it was now. In some ways my leave was a calculated risk as the finance job market wasn't great due to the GFC and by then I had also developed a solid network. My travels offered a completely different and important type of education for me; I ended up backpacking for eighteen months and visited many countries in Europe and Asia along the way.



Throughout my travels, I was able to nail down certain aspects of where I wanted to take my career upon my return. I determined I wanted to focus my work on individuals, instead of institutions. I also wanted to continue to work at a place that values diversity of thought, where people learn from one another, and where I would have alignment of interest with clients. These cultural traits led me to Morningstar in Toronto. I was hired as a Fund Analyst and worked my way up to become an Associate Director of Active Research. While at Morningstar I learned about Steadyhand, a company in Vancouver that embodied all the attributes I value. I have been working there now for close to six years as a Portfolio Manager.

How do you view the career opportunities in your sector? Any advice for someone who is thinking of joining this field?

I will concede that I find some aspects more competitive than when I started. I was an outlier at the time because had already completed the CFA Level I exam during university before looking for my first job. Nowadays this is a common accomplishment for many individuals. Even though it is a competitive industry, there are many opportunities if you are willing to keep an open mind to the type of roles you pursue and if

you are able to avoid being too rigid on obtaining your dream job right out of the gate. Though it may seem that it has gone out of fashion, working your way up at a great organization remains a worthwhile approach. This was how I pursued my career at Mercer; I wasn't too sure about the original position, but I demonstrated that I could do the work well, so I was given more responsibility.

I have mentored many individuals who feel apprehension about certain roles that don't fit their definition of their dream-job. Or they think a position will have a detrimental impact to their career path. This is often not the case—even though social pressures to find an "ideal" job continue to exist. What I find consistently important is that personality matters and developing relationships is key. There are a lot of smart people out there, but few that you want to spend eight hours a day with. If you can demonstrate you have skills that can be developed and if you are an enjoyable person to work with, it makes a difference.

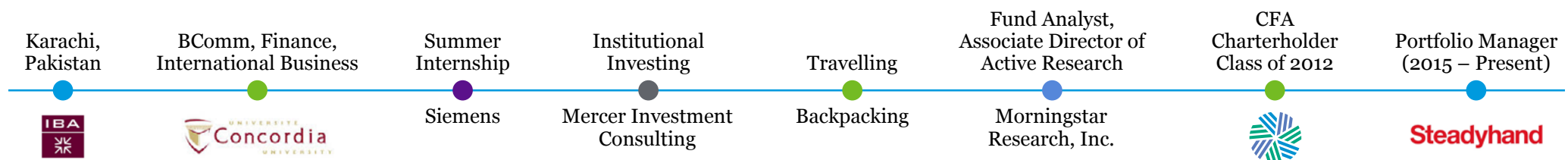
What impact has the CFA designation had on your career path?

The CFA designation opened up doors for me. Without it I likely wouldn't have landed the

interviews I did when I moved from Montreal to Toronto. Completing the CFA Level I exam while at university distinguished me from many in the crowd. Returning from my travels having passed all three CFA exams put me in a position to muscle my way into interviews that perhaps I had no business being at! I should also add that I do not view the designation as a be-all and end-all of education; the body of knowledge certainly gives you a foundation, but it is incumbent upon you to build upon that with skill development and continuing education. What I value most about the designation is the Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Conduct. When I am conversing with young candidates or charterholders I look for how they think about the Code and Standards. We are in the business of trust and I have carried forward an emphasis on the ethics aspect of the CFAs teachings with me.

What would a typical day look like for the position you currently hold? What do you enjoy most about your job – what do you enjoy least?

My day really depends on the specific time of year or the projects that I have on the go. Generally, what I strive to do is break down my day into blocks. I've come to this approach through trial



and error from days in university. We are an employee-owned firm so I spend time thinking about different aspects of the business. I also do a lot of outreach to people, because this is a people business. I reach out to friends and colleagues to collaborate in any way that I can.

As this is a highly regulated industry there are many compliance related requirements and the documentation not always fun to complete. There are however, two aspects to my job that I enjoy the most. One is when new and unfamiliar problems arise - they become a fun challenge to solve. This occurs frequently in the markets and in the industry and I enjoy thinking outside the box and attacking issues from different angles. The other is the immense satisfaction that I feel when helping clients gain peace of mind - when they walk out the door feeling better than when they walked in. I enjoy supporting the development of others and was given mentoring responsibilities early in my career, still maintaining a great relationship with most of the individuals I have mentored. Many of my mentees have accomplished more than I have!

What challenges or "favourite failures" have set you up for later success?

A couple stand out. The first was, while at

Morningstar, I pitched a fund to our committee to be added to our 'pick list' and I was absolutely annihilated in the process. I had not taken into account competing funds in the market. In hindsight, it was great to have experienced that defeat because I learned that I cannot always think in absolutes and that I have to also assess peers. Another anecdote, though not work related, resulted from when I was traveling in Vietnam; in talking to a local I asked about his family's experience during the Vietnam War. Puzzled, he looked at me and asked if I had meant the American War. This completely caught me off guard, as I had not realized that someone else would view that historical event any differently than I did. After that realization, I strive to obtain different viewpoints on issues as well as to be mindful of how to frame questions as responder's may have a different perspective.

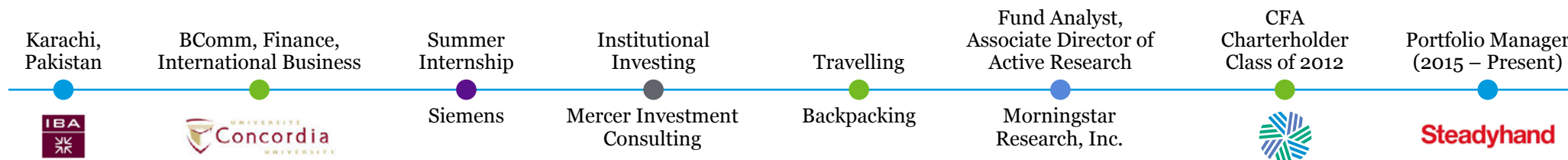
Do you have any advice for younger professionals who want to access a mentor but do not know where to start?

When considering whether to work at any given company, identify the possibility of strong mentors who could help guide you to succeed. I have been fortunate to have had individuals take an interest in mentoring me and this has been

a big contributor to my career. To find a mentor, sometimes all you have to do is ask. You would be pleasantly surprised how many people are willing to help. I have rarely turned down a request to have an introductory coffee meeting with someone. You also do not have to limit yourself to mentors in the finance industry; seek out mentors in different industries such as in marketing or real estate, as it will give you a varying perspective on challenges or decisions you may be contending with. Mentors can help with more than just your career. Also, don't constrain your idea of a mentor as being someone who is always older than you. Mentors can be in the same stage of career as you or even junior in their career. Different people will have diverse perspectives and can even help you in some areas you may have lost touch with. Expand your definition of a mentor!

What book(s) have you most recommended to others?

The "Risk Revisited" and the "Dare to be Great" memos by Howard Marks of Oaktree Capital. I have also recommended "How the Economic Machine Works" by Ray Dalio of Bridgewater Associates, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" by Patrick Lencioni and "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie. There is also a free



course on Coursera I recommend called "*Model Thinking*" by Scott E. Page of the University of Michigan.

How do you develop yourself outside of work? Are you involved with any organizations or extracurriculars?

I have a ten-month-old and a four-year-old so my extracurriculars aren't what they used to be! I have been very involved with CFA Society Vancouver. As well as other organizations like Mosaic, which helps newcomers to Canada to settle and find jobs; my family were newcomers twenty-five years ago so I have an appreciation for these challenges. Outside of that I am quite active and I love to read. I also take non-finance courses because I value diversity of thought and want to develop that within myself.

What advice (not just career but any advice) would you have for your 20-year-old self?

Don't be a douche bag! I had this idea of what a person in finance should act and look like, which was coloured by popular culture. However, most individuals in finance do not fit that stereotype. I knew a lot less back then than I do now—it is hard when you are in your early twenties to appreciate that fact. I would also say "shut up and

listen more"; just because you had good grades in university it does not mean that you know it all. Do not be too rigid. Being too rigid about your ideal, dream job or what the future should look like can be crippling. You cannot control everything. There was no way of knowing back then that I would be working in Vancouver at Steadyhand and even now there is no way of knowing where I will be in thirty years' time.

Humility in our career is essential—even great investors are wrong a lot of the time. Sometimes you get the outcome you want for reasons that are different than you think and sometimes there will be a bad outcome with decisions you thought were correct to have made. I would also tell my younger self to be more relaxed and that it is not worth it to get worked up over trivial things.

