

Um, like, a Microsoft contest could earn this Drexel speech-coaching start-up \$100K

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If Drexel University students Danish Dhamani and Paritosh Gupta land the top, \$100,000 prize this summer in the Microsoft global student-technology competition known as the Imagine Cup, it's to be expected that their acceptance speech would be flawless.

You could argue that their business credibility is riding on it: The whole point of their app, Orai, is to help users become good public speakers.

That's something Dhamani, who is from Pakistan, and Gupta, from India, were not when they came to the United States for college in 2013. English not being their primary language was not the entire problem, though.

"For me, it was stage fright," Dhamani, 22, a mechanical engineering major graduating in June, said of his unease as a public speaker — especially acute in high school, when he was running for student council president. "My palms would be sweaty. Your heart would always be in your throat. Shallow breath. The usual stuff."

Gupta, 21, a junior and computer science major, referred to it as "that anxiety that just grips you." His struck during violin performances and when he was competing in trivia contests throughout India.

Assigned to the same dorm at Drexel, the two met, shared some classes, and soon realized they had entrepreneurial interests and complementary skills. So they started teaming up for hack-athons. Their idea for a public-speaking app was hatched at one.

"You have so many beautiful minds in this hack-athon, people that are creative, can build things, but it's really hard to free those creative sparks from within," Dhamani said. By *sparks*, he means the words behind the work. These masters of great ideas were often bundles of "ums" and "likes" when presenting to judges.

Dhamani and Gupta started building out their idea in the middle of the night, finishing about 20 hours later. It was virtual-reality based, where users wearing headsets would be able to practice on a stage in front of an audience. They called it "Say Um" — and it placed in the top 10 of that contest in September 2015.

"It sat on a bookshelf for some time," Dhamani said, noting that despite "really good feedback" he and Gupta also recognized, "there's a big difference between a side project and a business."

"Ultimately, we realized this is our passion: to solve real problems, and especially a problem we faced ourselves," Dhamani said.

Lots of research — reading blogs on effective communications, talking with speech coaches, even joining Toastmasters — led to a mobile app "that anyone can use anywhere and become a better speaker," Dhamani said. That was summer 2016, which brought two more competitions, in which they netted two first-place finishes and \$17,000 in total winnings.

By fall, a beta version of the app was being used by 50 people. From their input came improvements, such as prompts on topics to talk about, progress reports, and ways to make the user experience more intuitive. A name change came, too: Orai, a combination of "oral" and "artificial intelligence." Through AI, recorded speeches are analyzed for clarity, filler words (such as "um"), pace, and energy.

Work was done at Drexel's Baiada Institute, an incubator where Marv Perel is a mentor. He is also vice president at

Ebix Health, where he sells "high-tech services that are often hard to explain and difficult to understand."

"One of the main frustrations of training programs is that many salespeople go back to their bad habits after training," Perel said. "This tool is an excellent way for companies to protect and improve upon the investment they've made in their training programs."

In all, Orai has won about \$170,000 in prizes, including \$5,000 last month in the Microsoft Imagine Cup U.S. finals. Placing in the top 12 qualifies Orai to compete in July's global finals.

In March, Orai launched a free app for iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch use. It has been downloaded about 1,000 times, said Dhamani, who is chief executive officer and is bypassing a final co-op year at Drexel to work full time for the company. Gupta, chief technology officer, will be serving his next co-op at Orai, which just hired four other Drexel students (three software engineers and a designer) to work part time.

Offering nothing but praise for the Orai app is 11-year-old Maya Singhatat of Malvern, a fifth grader at Sugartown Elementary School.

"I actually really liked how it gave you advice in a really friendly way, and it wasn't judgmental," said Maya, who used Orai to prepare for a debate – which she won — and a school play. The app told her when her voice was too flat, too loud or soft, too fast, and when she was using the dreaded two words.

"I kept saying words like 'um' and 'like,' " Maya said. "I also use it for fun. I like seeing how energetic or boring I am."

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