

# Nhat Pham

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## Immigrant Pursuing Purpose, Passion, Family, Legacy

He may have been only a few days shy of four years old, but Nhat Pham still recalls the most impactful day of his life - April 30, 1975 - as vividly as if it were yesterday.

He remembers the rush of standing on the footrest of his father's Vespa as he whizzed through busy city streets and alleyways, gripping his mother's hand as they worked through throngs of South Vietnamese fleeing their homeland. He saw the looks of fear on the faces of the dozens of emigrants packed around his family in the hull of a ship crossing the South China Sea. He didn't understand at the time that his family was on the run, nor that their journey would take months and end in a new land.

That journey and the balance between his early upbringing in his home country of Vietnam and his adopted homeland of the United States, however, laid the foundation for every aspect of Nhat's life.

"It changed everything about the trajectory of who I was going to become," Nhat says. "The language I was going to speak, and the culture I was going to grow up in. I spoke Vietnamese at home and English in school. I had to adopt one culture and keep the other. It has changed my perspective on so many things."

The process of acclimating to a new culture, learning a second language and carving out a space for himself in a land far from home wasn't always an easy one for Nhat, but relentless dedication and a never-ending pursuit of his passions and purpose have led him to his current role as Founder and Chief Strategist of SUCCESSWERKS.

Born of Nhat's boundless fascination with the components of success, SUCCESSWERKS began as a vehicle for training courses he provided during the early days of widespread internet adoption but has since morphed into a way for

Nhat to pursue his true passion: coaching and training executives looking to hone their message, develop and execute organizational strategy and break through personal and professional barriers.

"I always say: I don't always have all the right answers, but I usually have the right questions," Nhat explains. "The answers usually come from within. Forcing the answers upon people doesn't work, and they don't own it. Clarifying their vision and keeping them accountable to that vision is my purpose. Those who have the willingness to give the best version of themselves, I help them get there."

Nhat was an early believer in the world-altering potential of the internet dating back to the 1990s, and his early business was more hands-on. Piggybacking on his own success with early blog posts, Nhat consulted for companies on social media usage, developed marketing campaigns and built websites from scratch.

Over time, however, he realized he was more interested in the people behind the brands, particularly those at the top who had found success in their field. Helping those people take their business to the next level is what drives Nhat today.

"The real genesis of it was a book by Pat Riley, *The Winner Within*," Nhat says. "It made me think differently and look at things at a high level, a championship level and do things at my best. It started a whole pursuit of understanding how success works. A lot of folks I run into have a new vision, and they don't realize it. They've gotten to where they wanted to be. Like the Marshall Goldsmith book says, 'What got you here won't get you there.' They've gotten to a certain place, but the next place, they can't really envision it with the people, process, systems and vision that they have now. Sometimes, they're scared to let that go. That's often a challenge."



Not that Nhat nor his family have ever backed down from a challenge. Their daunting departure from Vietnam's most populous city just shy of his fourth birthday coincided with the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, in which his father had served alongside U.S. Marines as a battalion captain in the South Vietnamese army.

"He went to the embassy a couple of days before, and they said, 'You need to get out of Dodge. They're taking over. Saigon's going to fall. You can stay and experience the mayhem, or you can leave,'" Nhat recalls. "He knew he had to leave, because he was on the hit list after capturing some of the Viet Cong."

The fateful morning of April 30, 1975, Nhat's father moved his family stealthily through the city and sent Nhat and his mother ahead with instructions to board the first boat out of the city that they were able. When the time came to cross a small plank hanging above the sea to board a boat, though, Nhat's mother couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I remember very clearly holding my mom's hand and looking at this 4-inch plank, maybe six feet or so long," Nhat says. "There were people scurrying up that plank into the boat. I was holding her hand and looking down maybe 12 or 15 feet into the water. For a 4-year old, it felt like a mile long. My mom was pregnant with my brother. I remember thinking, 'I don't know if we can do this.' In my mom's wisdom, she said, 'We're not getting on this boat.' We might not have ever seen my dad again. We finally got on the boat we ended up going down the Mekong River on."

After stops in the Philippines, Guam and a couple of U.S. naval bases, Nhat's family made their way to America in December of that year via sponsorship from a Methodist church in Richmond, Virginia. Though Vietnam was majority Buddhist, as was Nhat's father himself, he encouraged his family to be involved in the church upon its arrival in the States. Nhat took a natural interest in faith, bringing a fresh mind and many questions to church each week. The more he learned, the tougher it was for him to separate the two worldviews to which he'd been exposed.

"I came with a very inquisitive mind," Nhat recalls. "It allowed me to ask all these questions that most kids took for granted, and I think when you have to figure out these things, you learn a little bit deeper. That's where I started really exploring faith and discovering my purpose.

Even as a young person, I used to ask, 'Why am I here? Why was I put in this situation?' I always envision the yin and yang with a cross in the middle. I live in these two worlds – East and West. I have this Eastern culture, but I was raised in the Christian faith. Every east has its west, every north has its south and every longitude has its latitude. There is so much duality in Christianity, as well. Blending those together made my faith even stronger."

Once settled in Richmond, Nhat and his family faced many challenges familiar to many immigrants: learning a new language, adjusting to a new culture and finding work. His father started by bagging groceries, and his mom worked odd jobs to help pay the bills. His father later landed a job for himself – and much of the rest of the family – at C&P Telephone. By happenstance, much of Nhat's extended family had also settled in Richmond despite securing sponsorship from different churches.

While his family was far from wealthy and he encountered his own early struggles in acclimating to life in America, Nhat's childhood ultimately was not entirely different from that of a child born in the country. Surrounded by cousins near his age, they became experts at finding ways to entertain themselves on the cheap, from playing hockey with yardsticks to using books as paddles for ping-pong games on the dining table.

"We wound up living in a brownstone," Nhat remembers. "My older cousins were upstairs, and my little cousins were across the street. It was very tight and family-oriented. We always had good food and good education, or at least the best education that they could provide. We were lower-middle class, for sure, but I was happy as could be. Every day I got to go out and play football with my older cousins, who I idolized since I was the oldest. I would ride my bike around the block. Life was great. Everything was new and novel and exciting."

Nhat became a rabid football fan and picked the Cowboys as his preferred team after watching Roger Staubach lead Dallas to a victory in Super Bowl XII. He dreamed of playing pro football himself one day, that is until his mother discouraged those dreams after discovering the toll the sport was taking on young Nhat's body when he played football in middle school. Still, Nhat considered the lessons learned from playing

football and basketball at a young age a vitally important part of his childhood.

"In the US, it's important to be part of something," Nhat says. "If not sports, maybe the Scouts. But it's important to be part of a unit, part of a team, and understand those dynamics."

Though his parents prioritized education over all, Nhat also found time to work through high school. He made his first dollar selling magazines for a school drive, which ultimately was good preparation for a later role selling books door-to-door where he learned one of his greatest early lessons in business.

"It was the school of hard knocks. It taught me a lot: how to handle rejection, how to manage emotions. It was a roller coaster. It's easy when you practice but very different when you go out. The very first day, I had zero sales. The second day, zero sales. I was going to give up. I was like, 'Send me back home.' The third day, it was raining and 9:00 PM when I knocked on a door. They had the first three volumes, and I said, 'I have Volume 4.' They said, 'Come on in,' and I sold them one book. I felt like I'd sold a million dollars' worth. That helped me stay on. If I hadn't knocked on that last door at 9:00 PM, I would've given up. I just needed that little bit of confidence, little bit of success. I ran out of there into the rain screaming, 'Yes! Yes! I got a sale!' To this day, it's the best sale I ever made."

Nhat enrolled at Virginia Tech after high school looking to follow in his cousin's footsteps and major in engineering, joking that in his family, "You are either a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, or a disappointment." But after learning he was not passionate about engineering, he instead majored in communications with an eye on pursuing a sales career after graduation.

He began his career in car sales before joining a high school friend's startup IT business as the internet began to emerge in the 1990s. Nhat then took the bold step of striking out on his own for the first time, his new company a bet that the internet would one day move to mobile devices.

"That was my first company," Nhat says. "It was called Beam Sync. I thought everything was going to be beamed and sync. I was right, but I was early."

Nhat by that time had a wife and three young children to support, and he made the difficult decision to give up the endeavor and return to a more reliable paycheck at T-Mobile.

Though ultimately unsuccessful, Nhat's first endeavor encapsulated his leadership style of taking big swings and living with the results.

"Be passionate about what you do and keep pushing forward," Nhat says. "I'm OK with mistakes, but I don't like inaction. Fail forward fast."

After landing at T-Mobile, Nhat focused on producing content and quickly found a knack for it. He began to write blogs that generated massive reach online, leading others to pick his brain for tips and tricks. Thus, his next endeavor came to life.

"In 2008, people were asking how I did all these things with the blog," Nhat says. "It seemed like I had content everywhere. That's how SUCCESSWERKS was born."

After he'd found professional success through SUCCESSWERKS, Nhat encountered personal adversity in 2019 by way of a divorce. He doesn't shy away from the pain of the experience but also stresses how it was a defining moment that taught him much about himself.

"It was one of the most challenging times of my life, but it taught me the lesson of being a buffalo versus a cow," Nhat says. "Cows, when they see a storm coming, they run away from it. Buffaloes run into the storm, and I like to say it's so they can see the sunshine and rainbows faster. Even though I knew it was the thing that needed to happen, mentally, it was a failure. It's part of your identity. It's a scarlet letter in some ways. I just went right through the storm and faced all the things, the anger and frustration and everything."

The experience - among others in Nhat's life - also informed the advice he gives to young people: to never stop working on yourself and improving, even if it's no fun in the moment.

"Get a PhD on you," he says. "You need to really know yourself. You think you know yourself, but you might only - maybe, if you're lucky - get a Master's. I'm still learning about myself. All the things that have happened to you are part of who you are and how you tick, good and bad."

Many of the lessons Nhat has learned about himself throughout his life, both personally and professionally, are featured in his book, *ElevatE<sup>X</sup>*. He admits he wrote the book selfishly in a format that he would like to read: short, digestible sections with anecdotes that keep the material engaging. All of the concepts are built

around Nhat's Five Pillars: Faith, Family, Fitness, Finance and Future.

"It's about getting to not just incremental change, but exponential change," Nhat explains. "It's a book that will help you understand where you are, where you want to go and how you can become the best version of yourself. There's both personal and professional sides to it. Leaving one out is a misstep, because you don't operate in siloes. A lot of the lessons that I've learned or been taught through mentors or life experiences, this is my roadmap to getting to the best version of yourself."

Nhat also credits much of his recent success to the positive influence of his partner, Lisa, who he met in late 2022.

"She's my guardrail," Nhat says. "I go so fast, and she is so detailed. You need someone different enough in business, so she's helped me look at things from a more detailed perspective. She believes in my mission and my business. She has my back and challenges me. I hate it and need it at the same time."

Of all the influences in his life, however, Nhat ties so many of his lessons back to the first: his parents. His mother instilled in him the importance of family, his father the value of hard work and preparedness. The object of greatest personal importance for Nhat, an unassuming tactical pen, underscores those lessons. Having been gifted from his son, Nhat feels it ties three generations together.

"It's very adaptable," Nhat explains. "I use it more than anything. It signifies my dad's mentality. He's very practical and always has a pen on him. I used to get scolded all the time: 'Why don't you have a pen on you?' It took me until I was older to realize the significance. And the fact that it comes from my son, creates a chain of three generations."

The pen also serves a deeper meaning to Nhat, a symbol of yet another lesson instilled by his father: be intentional and sign in ink, leaving your mark on all you touch while leaving no doubt in your conviction.

"When you write, he wanted you to be sure of what you were doing, saying or executing," Nhat says. "He asked me once why I was doing my math in pencil, and I said so that if I made a mistake, I could erase it. He said, 'You don't make mistakes.' You have to temper that, but you want to be so confident in what you're doing. It's like a great athlete's mindset: 'I'm going to win. I'm going to do it right. Every single time.' He was pushing competence and confidence. Be competent in what you're doing so that you have the confidence to execute without any doubt."

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*Retired Wealth Manager, Mentor, Board Member, Speaker, Philanthropist, and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders and Buen Camino: What a Hike through Spain Taught Me about Investing and Life, Gordon built a successful fee-only registered investment advisory firm that provided financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, joining Modera in 2022, and retiring in 2025, he and his team were focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information about Gordon, visit [www.GordonBernhardt.com](http://www.GordonBernhardt.com).*