

# Instagram co-founders are young, widely praised -- and very, very rich

April 12 2012, By Peter Delevett

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When word broke Monday morning that Facebook was buying a tiny San Francisco startup for \$1 billion, many asked: "Who are these guys?"

Instagram, which makes a wildly popular app to turn mobile-phone photos into mini works of art, has a staff that barely tops a dozen. And at the top of the org chart are a pair of co-founders just a few years removed from their Stanford undergraduate days.

Kevin Systrom graduated from Stanford in 2006 and has worked at [Google](#) and the forerunner to Twitter. Co-founder Mike Krieger is even younger, a 2008 Stanford grad from Brazil who, before Instagram's launch, had only held one full-time job, and that for less than 18 months.

Both men, through a Facebook spokesman, declined an interview request. But people who have worked with them say they benefit from a winning combination of technology chops and people skills.

"You could see how passionate they were," said Rob Abbott, a former adviser at San Francisco startup accelerator Dogpatch Labs, where Systrom in early 2010 launched a location-sharing service called Burbn. Abbott remembers being struck by the hours the young Stanford alumnus put in long after his peers had gone home.

Burbn attracted a small but devoted following of techies, including Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, who later invested in Systrom's startup. Back then, subscribers to the service had to post photos via email, an

unwieldy workaround but nevertheless one that occupied an increasing amount of Burbn's traffic.

"Kevin came to me one day and asked, 'Rob, if I just focused on photos, would that be a good idea?' " Abbott recalled. "I told him, 'I need a [Twitter](#) for photos, and if you don't build that product today, I'm going to start working on it tomorrow.' "

Abbott became the first public user of the [Instagram](#) service and helped write some of its initial HTML code. Systrom offered him a job, but Abbott, who was focused on building his own mobile-design agency, Egg Haus, declined-a move that as of Monday had probably cost him tens of millions of dollars.

But rather than admitting regrets, Abbott said he's delighted for Systrom, who he called "the hardest-working person I've met." Systrom taught himself to develop apps for Apple's mobile operating system and focused constantly on tweaking the product. Abbott praised his intuition and decision-making, which he called key to Systrom's ability to land \$500,000 in seed funding from Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen and Steve Anderson, a Microsoft and eBay alumnus.

Yet as skilled an engineer as Systrom is, he brought in Krieger to be his "more technical" co-founder, Abbott said.

"Mike's fantastic with people, and he's fantastic with technology," said Elaine Wherry, co-founder of startup Meebo, which lets users bookmark information from around the Web, find new items of interest and share them with friends.

Krieger was still an undergrad when Wherry visited Stanford to help judge a student technology competition. Krieger stood out in the crowd. "He really had insightful things to say about other people's projects,"

Wherry said. Over coffee, she invited the youngster to join her startup, which was then just a few years old.

Once he started, Wherry said, "It was quickly apparent that he was more talented than anybody, even with zero experience. He's the kind of person who thinks deeply, and he's always thinking about product." She wasn't the least surprised when Krieger eventually broke the news that he was leaving to co-found his own company.

Wherry and Abbott both said they expect Instagram's founders not to be content to rest on their laurels at Facebook but to found new startups down the road.

"Whatever Kevin does next," Abbott said with a laugh, "I'll say yes if he asks me to join him."

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