

Prolific SVCEians: Profile of TNC Venkata Rangan

This feature is a spotlight on prolific SVCEians. What do we mean by 'prolific'? A fellow SVCEian who has established himself and achieved something out of the ordinary; A person from whom we can learn something. FOS recognizes the merit of these individuals and wishes to present them to the Alumni community. Here we feature a young entrepreneur from Chennai: TNC Venkata Rangan. This is a man who has started his career as an ECE graduate, gone on to start his own venture, and is today the Managing Director of a 50 people company. T.N.C. Venkata Rangan is an alumni of Sri Venkateswara College of Engineering. He graduated from SVCE in 1996 with a degree in Electronics and Communication. Here he shares with us his journey from an ECE graduate to a successful entrepreneur.

A short bio:

T.N.C. Venkata Rangan is Chairman and Managing Director of Vishwak Solutions Pvt. Ltd., a software technology firm based in Chennai. He is the Microsoft Regional Director, Chennai for the fourth consecutive year. Venkat has been designing and architecting several solutions based on Microsoft technologies. He is currently involved in developing solutions for MSN India & Hutch for their new mobile portal. Venkat enjoys working and talking on Microsoft's .NET technology especially ASP.NET. Vishwak specializes in building packaged software products that are sold globally from the site www.easytools.com



AN INTERVIEW WITH T N C VENKATA RANGAN

~ By Pallavi Aravind Narasimhan

1. Question: What made you set out on your own?

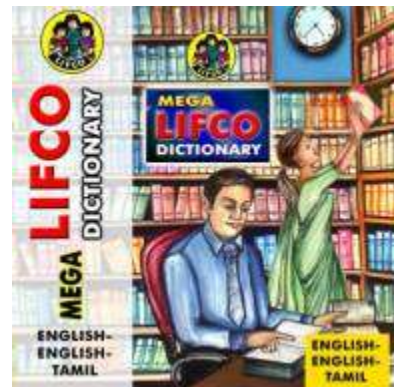
TNCV: It was a spontaneous decision. I did ECE in Venkateswara but knew I wanted to be an IT person. I read a lot and knew I wanted to do something on my own. I set out asking myself if I wanted to go abroad, or study further - but that one thing I knew was that I really wanted to figure out what I wanted to do with my future. I am from a business [oriented] family and so it came as no surprise to my parents when I told them that I wanted to set out on my own venture.

2. Question: Can you elaborate what you meant when you said that you come from a business-oriented family? Specifically, what is your connection with LIFCO?

LIFCO IS our family business. My grandfather started LIFCO, and my father handles most of the day-to-day operations. LIFCO's main focus are the various language dictionaries. In addition, LIFCO also publishes various spiritual and religious books rendering a community building service.

3. Question: Can you share some of your experiences from early on, when you were starting your company?

During my graduation, I fiddled around with PCs discovering, learning and teaching myself new things about PCs. This



continued even after I graduated in 1996, the time when India was getting into IT in a big way. Around then MCSD was introduced in India and I was among the very first to take the exam. I really like Microsoft; I have always admired Bill Gates and am quite passionate about Microsoft technology. Anyways, so I took up the MCSD, and I was passed this certification exams with top scores, I also followed it up shortly with passing MCSE exams also. This gave me a platform to base start and myself. I started out as an independent consultant. Fresh out of college one of my well wishers offered me a cool job - it was the beginning of the Internet era. My first project was on Visual Basic [VB4] and I worked on it for about 3 months. This was my only job experience before setting off officially as Vishwak Associates in April 1997. I learnt a lot on my first jobs - learnt skills that were core technical and realized the need for support skills as communication, documentation and presentation.

Vishwak started as a one-man show, myself, doing small projects and implementations. My biggest decision point in my company was when I decided to hire another person. This was critical in several aspects: First, I was suddenly responsible for another person - his career, his family. Second, I had to train myself to delegate - to trust another person. Third, I had to develop the patience to teach them, guide them through their learning process, watch them learn and fail, and try again - literally stop myself from interrupting their work and completing it myself! Since then moving from a 10 - 20 people company to a 50 people company [the current size of Vishwak] has been relatively smooth.



4. Question: What in your opinion was the biggest challenge you faced since starting Vishwak Associates?

The biggest challenge was firing an employee for non-performance. That was the toughest decision that I had to make. I take responsibility for my employees, and their welfare - and coming to terms with myself on this issue was agonizing. In fact, I do not have to rehearse to get up in front of a group of people and talk to them, but that day I had to rehearse to talk to my employee.

5. Question: Professionally, what are you most proud of? Or what is the best professional move you have made so far? What (knowledge, skills etc) enabled you to make that move?

This was way back in 1996, when I was asked to conduct a one-day intensive training seminar for working professionals. The audience was people with 5 years or 10 years work experience in the industry and there I was fresh out of college teaching people who were much senior to me. I got that opportunity because the people organizing that seminar had the confidence in me and my knowledge of Windows NT Technology. Thinking back, I wonder how I got that opportunity, and am very glad that I did get it.

6. Question: In retrospect, what is the biggest professional blunder you think you (might) have committed?

Hiring the wrong people - trusting the wrong people.

7. Question: On the subject of people, what do you look for in potential employees?

Attitude, strong fundamentals and communication skills

Attitude: Technology can be taught if the person is willing to learn. However, when a person has the wrong attitude it is impossible to work with that person. A person with right attitude can be molded and trained. Further, IP is a huge issue at all software companies. A person without the right attitude is considered non-trustworthy. There is no way I can hire or work with someone that I do not or can not trust.

Strong Fundamentals: I define strong fundamentals as core engineering skills and 'problem solving capabilities'. If your fundamentals are strong, you can learn any technology or work on any platform. It is very difficult to teach somebody whose fundamentals are wrong. And,

Communication skills: Guess that speaks for itself.

8. Question: Can you share with us your experience with government officials and local politicians?

Overall, it has been good. As often said, the best thing that the Indian govt had done to the IT industry is staying away from it! Having said that, I think that the government is helping in several ways - especially the Small Scale Industries and Export Divisions. The attitude is definitely changing [for the better]. Concerning local politicians, I have never faced any of them; a few individuals have come around asking for donations but nothing of any significance. Utilities are still a problem - telecom, power - the government needs to get out of running these industries and privatize them. There was a time when it was necessary for the government to actively involve itself in running trains buses and those kind of activities, but I think it is time for the government to get out of them.

9. Question: So, you think we should end the Nehruvian experiment?

The Nehruvian experiment was good for that time. In retrospect, it is quite easy to criticize and say that something would be better if so-and-so at such-and-such time had done this instead of that. Probably 2 generations later the decision I take today will be questioned. Therefore, I feel that there was probably a good justification for the Nehruvian course of action during the 50s and 60s, but not any more. We need to move toward greater privatization.

10. Question: What do you expect from the government?

The government should focus on growth opportunities for small and mid-size IT companies. There is a lot of potential in that segment, and the government should encourage those entrepreneurs.

11. Question: In what way - tax cuts, subsidies or more proactive involvement?

I would love a tax break! The existing tax incentives are geared more towards the WIPROs and INFOSYSs of the world - big companies and not towards the smaller ones. I definitely disagree with government subsidy. I think the government should open up and offer more government projects to smaller companies. Probably help with education, training and development [of resources]. Also with advertising and helping to gather greater exposure of the available IT resources in the state/country.

12. Question: What do you think needs to be done for Chennai to gain greater foothold against other Indian/Asian cities? How do rank Chennai (and TN) as an IT hub?

Chennai is the best. I was born and brought up here. (Pauses to continue in a more reflective tone) Chennai has a lot of potential. Probably even more than Bangalore or Hyderabad. However, we are always perceived as a poorer cousin to Bangalore. The Karnataka and AP governments have very aggressively marketed themselves and succeeded in capturing key business contracts. Chennai needs to create a greater awareness in the global IT community, as an IT destination. Chennai has the potential and marketing Chennai will result in more business coming here.

Indian IT versus international competition - Well, the Indian IT companies are gaining a name for quality. Initially it was all about cost - India was considered a cheap[er] option - and that was all. Now that is slowly changing - Indian IT companies are being recognized for speed [of delivery] and for the uncompromising quality.

The one blatantly missing thing is an Indian IT product. Our engineers produce software that is integral to IT solutions all over the world, in fact, most IT products are partially developed in India - but until today, we have not gained recognition for an IT product. That is a very sore spot!

13. Question: You mentioned that the government should focus more on training. What do you feel about Indian educational institutions, and the training offered by their programs? Do you feel Indian educational institutions sufficiently prepare students to meet the growing demands of a global IT audience?

About engineering schools - I have a mixed opinion - Indian students are considered smart and good, and our engineers are appreciated all over the world. Therefore, we must be doing some thing right. But at the same time, we need to look at the percentage of people who are doing well. As a society, we need to develop greater awareness of diverse interests.

There is so much importance on learning technology and absolutely no importance on soft skills such as communications and presentations. At school and college, no encouragement is provided for the student to develop these softer skills. These needs to be changed - educational institutions must recognize, and foster student's skills in extra-curricular activities instead of focusing entirely on curricular and co-curricular activities.

Personally, I never really gave skills such as - accounting, banking, documentation etc much credit. I thought that if one wrote great code then that was all that was necessary. However, I have learnt that it is the non-coding or non-Software Engineering aspects of running a Software company that make or break it. I think if the curriculum emphasized the importance of learning how to read a balance sheet, teaching students how to maintain basic accounts, and manage finances - I feel those skills are very important to professional success and our technical education system does not include any reference to these at all.

14. Question: Comment on the immediate future of/long-term trends in the Indian impact on world IT industry

The Indian IT industry is slowly maturing and coming of age. I compare the Indian IT industry of today to the Japanese automobile industry [of the 80s].

15. Question: What about the popular opinion that Indian it workers are over-worked?

Yes. That is true - again one of the problems of being an emerging industry. We need to learn how to differentiate from our professional lives and our personal lives. We must learn how manage our time and resources, and apply ourselves. I think that this will slowly evolve as the industry matures.

16. Question: Your advice to engineering students?

'Well, I do not want to give *advise*!!!'

OKAY! :o) To re-phrase the question: if an engineering student were to come to you and ask you how s/he should apply her/himself, what would you say?

Well I say, concentrate on your academics, but make sure you enjoy what you do. Follow your interests, and concentrate on developing your talents. Think carefully, weigh all options, do not do anything that you are not comfortable with. Do not be afraid of failure - keep trying and believe in yourself. It is good to be careful, but it is very important to be bold and dare to try new things.

17. Question: How should a current student weight academics versus practical experience (internships)

Internships are good and they give the person more exposure, but I think focusing on academics is more important.

18. Question: How must a student plan their career?

In my experience, I have noticed that people tend to take their first job very lightly. I caution students to think thoroughly about their career right when they are still in college. It is good to have a job when you graduate or in the first 6 months after you graduate. Make all attempts to secure a job - prepare a resume. Moreover, this is what I tell all fresh graduates - put only what you are most confident of on your resume. There is no point in writing volumes, and definitely no point in trying to say that you know every kind of technology under the sun. The interviewer has enough

and more experience to look through the resume and mark out the exaggerations. Never lie on your resume - the interviewer is trained to spot mistakes and fabrications. Keep your resume short and convey your interest in the job, and a willingness to learn. Use punch words that are sure to get the reader's attention.

19. Question: What about after a person gets the job? what should they focus on then?

Yes - the first four weeks on the jobs make the maximum impact. Your co-workers are judging you during this period, and this is when you want to appear your best. Remain your natural self; do not let others make a wrong or bad impression of you. Get to know people and make yourself accessible.

The other important thing to remember is - stay at your job for at least a year. People seen quitting a job in lesser time can be considered fickle and unstable. This will speak volumes about you. And this is why, earlier I spoke about how one needs to think their career through, weigh all options, decide that they are happy and comfortable doing what they are doing before embarking on their job.

20. Question: Can you briefly address the SVCE student and alumni community?

"After graduation, in your career and in your life there will be many occasions where you will be called to make tough decisions. In colleges we don't get trained on how to handle these. Some times the path you need to take will be very clear to you, some times it won't be. If it is not clear, think about whether you will have satisfaction in the path you are about to take. If you feel it will give you satisfaction, have full courage to explore that path - don't hesitate. Finally, whatever you do in life, ensure you enjoy it or else don't do it"

T.N.C. Venkata Rangan is the Chairman and Managing Director of

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This article has been produced as a result of efforts from the FOS core team and FOS web team. Please direct any queries to contact@friendsofsvce.org. This interview was conducted and scribed by Pallavi Aravind Narasimhan.