



Interview

"Mobile Phones will be the First and Only Computer for Many in Developing Countries"

T.N.C.Venkata Rangan (Venkat) is the Chairman and President of Vishwak Solutions, a tier one portal solutions company based at Chennai. An expert on web technologies, Venkat works with leading global portals such as MSN Japan and MSN India providing them a wide variety of content management solutions. Leveraging his tremendous insight in the Internet economy he is helping the portal units develop technology architecture that enhances their revenue model.

At Vishwak, Venkat has built an extremely successful R & D team, dedicated to developing products using the Microsoft .NET Platform. One such award-winning database management product "EasyStruct 4.5 Enterprise" that he built is currently being used by organizations like NASA as well as others worldwide.

Venkat is the current Microsoft MSDN Regional Director in Chennai for the past seven consecutive years. He is an active member of International Forum for Information Technology in Tamil (INFITT) and a member of Software Process Improvement Network (SPIN).

In an exclusive interview for Vision Vishwak, he shares his views on mobile phone applications, Vishwak's solutions and the socio-economic impact of mobile phone usage. Excerpts:

Access to information is creating new markets. What role do mobile solutions play in this segment?

In the knowledge era, organisations have become information-intensive. However, in a corporate environment, information is scattered everywhere - in spreadsheets, faxes, emails, and computer documents. We need information systems to collect and collate the information and make it available for collaboration. Access to right information at the right time is the key to take right decisions.

At Vishwak, we have answers as to how to provide the access? We think that mobile phone is the best channel to get people connected to the corporate network. With mobile phones, no matter, whether they are at office or home or traveling, information is readily available to them. Plus, mobile phone is a more secure way to access information.

What technology expertise does Vishwak focus on?

We build our expertise in offering customized solutions to corporates in content aggregation, management and distribution for new media. Many companies are addressing this mobile access market. However, we have a technology edge in making the integration work – that is, to manage the flow of information from computers to web to mobile.

This technology expertise across media is a critical success factor because we need to start our work first with computers, where corporate information are typically stored; then with central databases and intranet and internet before extending the accessibility to mobile phones and PDAs.

We have profiled over 300 mobile devices. This means, we can enable mobile browsing of content in so many mobile phone screens with web-like usability or accessibility. If the user goes back and browses the same content from the web, he will experience the same consistency in presentation.

Importantly, at the user access points, we need to leverage on the interactivity of the medium. Once the access to information is there, people would need to act on them. They must be allowed to alter, modify and value add the information in an interactive or collaborative manner.

Where are the markets? Which industry segments are adopting mobile phone strategies fast?

Mobile as a business device is first introduced in sales oriented functions. Hence, we see great opportunity for mobile web there. Another market segment is the supply chain of FMCG.

Enterprises are still investing in web-enabling information systems. They are ok if the information is accessed via a web browser.

However, since, convergence is a reality today, we are convincing them to extend the information access to mobile devices too.

Also, there are far more serious applications where mobile browsing is inevitable. For instance, in healthcare industry, mobile networks play a key role in healthcare organisations meeting the compliance requirements. Mobile alerts are the major selling points in many healthcare information management systems in the West. Paramedical staff and doctors representing different medical fields use mobile phones to update the patients' medical records.

How has been the change in the way corporates use mobile phones?

There is a huge change in the perception. They understand that mobile phone is not a piece of novelty just because teenagers dominate the customer profile. From voice call, SMS, music downloads, etc., the mobile applications too are gradually evolving.

Still a lot of these mainstream applications such as SMS are primarily non-interactive. I think what companies like Vishwak are doing is that we are making mobile access highly interactive and collaborative through mobile web.

As system integrators, we work with third party application developers and mobile enable their products. Enterprise users get an additional sense of comfort when they know that they can access information also from mobile phones and PDAs.

What are the challenges in providing mobile solutions to the global markets from India?

Currently, our primary international markets are US, UK and Japan. Enterprises are definitely convinced about the inevitability and sustainability of outsourcing. So, there is no great challenge in selling the outsourcing model as such.

However, technology wise, our challenges lie in understanding customer's back-end systems. Most enterprise data are not stored in open standards like XML. And to understand the customers' systems we need to work with their people. It is a people dependent task that demands high relationship management skills – we make sure that we assign best people at this mapping phase.

Why outsourcing makes sense for your customers?

The mobile phone market is highly competitive and is flooded with new variants and models. I just read a news item recently that says Nokia is launching 20 new mobile phones in India in the next six months. Individually, a single organisation will not see value in tracking new models and profiling them. The obvious advantage of outsourcing is that the cost of profiling is spread with a wide customer base.

Over 80% of our clients have an ongoing relationship with us for the maintenance, change management and enhancements in mobile information access. We anticipate the needs and keep working with new devices and models.

What is your take on the Indian market?

At present, 30% of our revenue comes from India. The local demand is huge and not many companies are focusing on it. Though, the dollar billing pays more for us, we understand the strategic importance of Indian market. Leading mobile-enabled websites, portals and corporate networks in India are powered by Vishwak solutions.

Do you intend to remain a service oriented company?

Though predominantly we are service oriented, we have in-house products like Mobile Content Delivery System (MCDS). The MCDS is used for delivering content to mobile from existing media vehicles such as print, online, radio etc. We have the advantage over our competitors here, because we have the experience of running the Mobile Web Portal for MSN & Hutch (Planet Hutch Mobile Portal) in India for last 3 years.

However, we are a technology company with strong expertise in content management and focus to provide right solutions.

You have expertise in .Net technology. What about Java or Open Source technologies?

We are a technology-neutral and end to end solutions company. We have competency in proprietary as well as open source technologies. We decide whether to deploy Microsoft or Open Source technologies purely based on the customer's requirements.

In fact, the last thing that customers have in mind is about the proprietary versus open source advantages. Because, today, all systems have a high level of interoperability that the choice in terms of proprietary or open source makes no big difference.

Instead, customers talk about ROI. They look at our competency – at the end of the day, a good developer develops good solutions whether he uses Apache or MS Server.

How upbeat are you about the mobile commerce, mobile education, etc? How the mobile phone usage impacts the society and economy?

Many promises made in the dotcom days did not come through mainly because of lack of PC penetration. Technology was there but users were not. In contrast, the rapid growth in mobile usage is mind boggling. Mobile phone is a common man's IT device.

In India, mobile-phone ownership outweighs PC ownership by a ratio of two to one. By the end of this year there will be more mobile phones in India than in America. A Gartner study predicts that the mobile phone users in India are expected to triple to around 300 million by 2009.

According to Vodafone, mobile phone use in Africa is growing faster than anywhere else in the world. The African countries with greater mobile use had seen a higher rate of economic growth and foreign direct investment. It is fascinating to note that a recent study by London Business School says that a rise of ten mobile phones per 100 people in a typical developing country boosts GDP growth by 0.6 percentage points.

Why do you see mobile as a common man's IT device?

The utility of mobile applications for common man is increasing. In India, you get school, college exam results in mobile. It is not surprising that the mobile has become the fastest selling consumer item – pushing bicycles to the number-two slot.

Worldwide, GSM mobile phones alone will be used by more than two billion people. This number is almost twice as many as the estimated number of users connected to the Internet.

Mobile Web is a disruptive technology and the "access to information via mobile" is only a tip of the iceberg. There will be several exciting applications of mobile web in commerce and in governance.

Thanks to its affordability, in countries like India the first and only computers will be mobile phones. Today's cell phone comes with more computing capability – I remember that when I bought my first computer, a 386 SX, 15 years ago, it had just 32 MB RAM. However, even an entry level mobile phone has 128 MB RAM. Further, mobile phones, unlike kiosks, need almost no power. Indians are resourceful that they share mobile phones. I have no doubt that m-commerce and m-governance will be the next big thing.