In The Life Of A Zillion Solutions

Thirty years in the making, ZILLIONe's Chief Executive Director, Tharmarajah Suresh tells Business Today about the many contributions his company has made, and is still making, to the ICT industry.

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Photography by Menaka Aravinda

ZILLIONe has been a longstanding pioneer in providing technology based business solutions. What are some of the products and services you provide to Sri Lanka's business industry, in both, public and private sectors?

We do have a few clients in the public sector, however, our focus is mainly on the private sector; the upper mid-market segments to the enterprise market

segments. We provide a comprehensive range of solutions to the ICT industry and are, probably, one of the very few companies that can provide for the entire suite of ICT requirements. For solutions in business, we provide; ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning), CRM (Customer Relationship Management), HRM (Human Resources Management).

We have a software development team that can develop very specific customised software. This is because some industry standard software solutions may not suit the specific needs. On top of that, we provide comprehensive IT infrastructure management solutions, i.e. your operating systems, networks, security and systems management. The entire infrastructure solutions part is handled by one of our subsidiary companies.

Your organisation had recently launched a new, state of the art, software- Sage Accpac- version 5.5. How might this type of technology be beneficial in providing business solutions?

Sage Accpac has been updating their versions every year. Version 5.5 comes as part of the annual upgrade programmes, where the functionalities and technology of each of selected modules are enhanced. Sage Accpac has 12 modules, which cover the entire operation of a company: the general ledger, purchasing, sales, inventory management. Accpac makes all of these areas more and more integrated to suit specific needs of companies.

Sage is the 3rd largest enterprise application company in the world, where we are the only premier solutions provider for them, which has been the highest level of the partnership in the whole of South Asia for the last 7 years.

What other 'software solutions' technology, on behalf of ZILLIONe have been contributed most recently, in support of the education sector?

Through one of the NGOs, we developed some software for physically challenged persons to facilitate their training programmes and facilities management such as scheduling of their classes and resources. We also have a small training centre, which is mainly for our customers, however, we also target outside students as well, for certain aspects. We also hire students from the universities on industrial placements.

Recently, we have been trying an approach where we will hire students who are

pursuing external degrees in the relevant field- on a part time basis or evening courses. ZILLIONe would directly pay for the degree course and have the student work with the company for three or four years while pursuing his/her degree. It's similar to a scholarship and students will also get three or four years of experience and a degree to show for it. We, on the other hand, get affordable human resources through such students, as we can pay him/her a nominal fee and the payment is made directly to the university. In this way, everyone benefits. This programme, initially, originated through SLASSCOM (Sri Lanka Association of Software and Service Companies). I feel that this is a very good programme, as there are many students who want to get educated, want to get a degree and they want the experience but cannot afford to pay for it.

India is booming in technological know how and advancements. Tell us about the business partnerships you have built, and the ones that you share, with India's IT empire.

In fact, we opened a branch in India two years ago. It was a joint venture with an Indian company. ZILLIONe has a vast experience in ERP implementation, which we have been building over the past fifteen years, like the product Accpac, which was introduced in India quite recently. We were encouraged to setup an operation in India due to our vast experience in it, and we were able to establish a joint venture operation in Chennai. Most of the back office implementations are done here in Sri Lanka and the front office work, like marketing, is done in India. India is focusing more on the international clientele. We have about eleven clients in the international market.

We Happen To Be The First Microsoft Gold Certified Partner In The Country.

Sri Lanka has come a long way, as far as IT is concerned and can be held in comparison to other countries in the global IT market. Can you elaborate on how this may have been possible?

We are one of the oldest IT companies in the country and we will be celebrating our 30th year. The configurations of the computers when we first started off had only a 64kb memory and a 128mb hard disk capacity, with only one workstation. Today, we're talking about gigabytes.

Within the last four years, Sri Lanka, has had a good growth momentum and A T Kearny has ranked the country, as 19th in the top 20 places for IT BPO or

outsourcing destinations. This means we are rapidly improving, visibly, as an outsourcing destination for IT. It's only a matter of time before the ICT industry becomes the number one foreign exchange earner for the country. Sri Lanka has a large potential to grow, provided we have the right strategies and action plans to capitalize the vast resources available in this regard.

In Sri Lanka, specifically where IT is concerned, we have ever rising competitiveness in producing the best options that supports the needs of the industry. Could you elaborate on how your organisation stays well within this competitive trend?

In terms of supply, currently, there are some private higher education institutions that conduct degree programmes. If you take India for instance, their competitiveness lies in the solidity of their education and usually they are very qualified and sometimes even have a masters degree by the time they're employed as trainees. Sri Lankans can compensate for this through the experience they get from already having worked hands on in the relevant field. We recruit many business analysts as we're aiming to provide business solutions. We hire CIMA as well as ICT graduates and train them to work with business as well as the solutions aspect of it. Sometimes we even equip these trainees with overseas training as well.

For a person with your experience, how did your education help you to pursue the line of work and the position that you are in now?

I began my ICT career very early and this will be my 26th year in the field. I was known as a 'techy'. In my field that's the technical terminology we used to describe each other's professional background. I had my basic education in Physical Sciences at the University of Jaffna, thereafter, I joined as a trainee programmer in this company. Ten years ago, I acquired the company through a management buyout and renamed it as ZILLIONe.

Now, we are focusing more on our own development, whereas earlier, we were focusing mostly on the foreign ERP solutions. We are focusing on developing a portfolio for our own solutions because we've understood how important it is to develop our own products.

Currently, we have good HRM solutions, which we call horizontal solutions, meaning, it fits to any industry. We, also, have a good foot in vertical solutions, for

the industries in jewelry manufacturing and retail, tea and poultry. We have developed our own solutions and we have a strong number of clients using it. In 1999 we had only 5% of revenue coming from our own developed solutions. Last year, we reached 28%. By 2015, we hope to bring our revenue up by 50%. At this point, we feel that the company will be more stable.

What are your plans for the future?

We are going to form a company in the Maldives through a joint venture, which will be our second overseas company. Also, we will be focusing our development more on the South Asian countries because we see these regions as potential markets. Bangladesh is also on our list of potential countries.

Do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share with us about the success of ZILLIONe?

We have survived as a technology based company for 30 years. IT is the industry where you need only a minimal investment. Technically, you would need, one person and one computer to start a company.

There have been so many technological changes and advancements and we are still here, serving the IT industry. We have a corporate clientele base, which is about 400 strong, 75 of them have been with us for over ten years. We began as an ERP company and over the years we've come to a level where we are providing comprehensive solutions over a large ICT spectrum; infrastructure, security, management, customisation, integration and so forth. I would also like to add that we happen to be the first Microsoft Gold certified partner in the country. Now there are many other companies with the same distinction, however, we are proud to be the first.