

Bala Mahadevan joined the ICT sector fresh out of BITS Pilani in the early '80s. He joined Tata Consultancy Services, which, at the time, had fewer than 2,000 people. On Mahadevan's desk was the one of the very first IBM's personal computer XT, running something called DOS from a start-up company called Microsoft. At that time, there were less than 10 such computers in the whole of India. It had something called an internal hard disk too. {K2Splitter} Bala Mahadevan joined the ICT sector fresh out of BITS Pilani in the early '80s. He joined Tata Consultancy Services, which, at the time, had fewer than 2,000 people. On Mahadevan's desk was the one of the very first IBM's personal computer XT, running something called DOS from a start-up company called Microsoft. At that time, there were less than 10 such computers in the whole of India. It had something called an internal hard disk too. I did not even know that it was one of the first PCs in India; for me, it was a toy," he said. Over the two years, he was the TCS resident IBM PC programmer in Bahrain and Dubai programming for banks and governmental agencies late into the night, "It was fun, I never saw it as a job."

His assignments took him to the US, where he lived for the next 17 years. He remembers his early appointments at Motorola's headquarters in Illinois as a QA engineer. One of his duties was to test a large, bulky piece of audio equipment that could be hooked to a trunking exchange network, on a PC network.

"We had to go around the campus and prove that these machines could talk to each other. We sold them to the Florida Police Department, he recollects. Little did I know at the time that I was handling the world's first mobile phone. That was when you could say that my fascination with IT began," he said.

Over the next few years, Mahadevan worked with Covansys, a Michigan-based company, in consulting and management roles, dealing with industry giants, in the sphere of applications such as GM, EDS, McDonnell Douglas Boeing, GAP, and Safeway. At Safeway, he was part of the team that implemented the first-of-its-kind point-of-sale systems. All of these assignments were based on the use of the Tandem Nonstop Machine, which was the online transaction processing engine of the world for a long time, and is still the backbone of a considerable proportion of financial data for the world today, although not by that name.

In 1996, Mahadevan returned to India for a year on Tandem deputation for the then Madras Stock Exchange project. India was moving away from floor-based trading and open outcry system trading to electronic trading. The government had mandated that all stock exchanges had to go through an electronic trading platform, which was all very new for the country.

The job not only involved project management, technical work but also physical labour. “I had to pull telephone lines in the middle of the night. I had to build a training room where I taught these brokers what a mouse was, what a computer did, and bring them to a level where they could deal in millions of transactions. That’s when I realised the power of technology. It was amazing to see them six months later, handling everything, right through to the predictive monitoring system and surveillance systems,” he recounted.

There have been many memorable moments in Mahadevan’s illustrious career. Apart from the Madras Stock Exchange, he recalls developing a defence hospital management service in the US. He was at Camp Lejeune, a Marine Corps training facility in Jacksonville, North Carolina, training Marines and Marine doctors on how to use computer systems. “It is unnerving now to think about it, but I never thought about it then, which helped!”

In the early 2000s, he returned to India for good and joined HP, where he stayed for six years in a variety of senior roles. He then proceeded to take over the reins of Computer Science Corporation for three years. For the past nine years, he has been at Orange Business Services (OBS). “In a way, life has come full circle. From working on the first mobile device, I am now working for Orange, which is the leading mobile operator.”

OBS is the B2B wing of the larger Orange Group, which is well known in most European countries and Africa from a B2C perspective for being a leading mobile operator. Orange by pedigree and DNA has been a network service provider, so it owns vast infrastructure above ground, as well as undersea, and has a satellite business. In fact, it has more than half a million km of undersea cables providing VPN service across 200 countries. But that is the Orange Group as a network player and as the mobile operator; OBS is the B2B wing. “In India, we do not do B2C, and we have no infrastructure, so we have B2B purely. OBS has transformed itself significantly over the last 10-12 years, and the transformation continues,” Mahadevan says.

Over the past few years, OBS has tried to embrace the changes in the digital space. “We call it ‘core’ and ‘more’. There is a lot of ‘more’ going on - the cloud, the internet, mobile proliferation, IoT, or the data journey,” he says.

OBS is very focused on the data journey - on how it uses the data journey of customers to impact the enterprises and their transformation. Mahadevan believes that the age of the

consumer internet is already here, in your house, in your hand, in your life. But the age of industrial enterprise is only just dawning.

“While we all think there is already a lot going on, I truly believe it is only the beginning. The day of industrial internet and enterprise is yet to arrive. I think that is what we should be looking at. That is the big transformation from a B2B perspective that we are going to see.”

Mahadevan says his weakness is data. “I am not very good with numbers, although I have become much better now by occupation and demand. Still, it is not my biggest strength, and I always make sure that I have people around who are great with data. For finance and numbers, I tend to rely a lot on the judgment of my team.”

Technology and change fascinate Mahadevan. The digital revolution happening at present did not occur overnight, he says. “It is the pace at which technologies evolve, the way we all think of something like the most significant change ever, and then how we all find out about the next big thing.”

As for the future of the telecom industry, he says, “The first rule is that no one company is going to do it all. I think that is going to bring several new players in the industry. I think that is a given.”

“The second factor is that telcos have a huge role to play. We can see the boundaries are all blurring - between who is an application player, who is a contact centre, who is a user, who is a buyer, who is a telco player, who is a systems integrator, who is an OEM. It is bringing all of these different parties to the same place,” he said.

Therefore, with the vital role of telcos, Orange is very keen to expand its boundaries in the midst of this whole melee. The best example that Mahadevan cited was that of Orange now being a bank. It is a full-fledged bank in France and Africa that does not merely handle payment gateways but is also beginning to provide consumer loans.

“This is a telco bank, not just a digital bank. It is a telco bank because it has a unique value

proposition. After all, we have hundreds of millions of Orange consumers especially on the mobile platform, and they are our capital,” he says.

The question for Orange is how can it use that platform and the trust that it has built up over the years to offer consumers banking services, which was once confined to traditional banks. “That, you see, is redefining banking. A telco is now a bank. These are the types of things we will start seeing. I think we will start seeing more and more collision of the traditional industries brought together by digital,” he says.

When it comes to managing people, Mahadevan follows a few simple rules. He believes if you have to be a successful team, no two people should be the same. Having a bunch of superstars who are all alike is a recipe for disaster. I think everybody has got to have complementary skills, and I also believe there has to be a healthy level of constructive conflict. In the absence of both of these, it is not going to work in the long run,” he explains.

Mahadevan reads people well and can discern what makes a good team. He says he owes his management style to Som Mittal, who taught him that a leader has to be apolitical, fair and show integrity at all times. Some things, he says, are much more important than how smart you are, and honesty is one of them.

Apart from Som Mittal, who is his professional mentor, Mahadevan mentions Michael Jordan (from when he lived in Chicago) to be a huge inspiration. He also credits his father for teaching him the importance of always taking the direct route, no shortcuts in life. His father worked for the Department of Telecommunications, where he managed the telephone exchange in Matunga, Mumbai, in the 1970s.

“I had seen him go missing for three days during the monsoon season because the things would get flooded and in those days we used different kinds of cable technologies. He would come back after three days of working on shifts, to ensure repairs were done on time during the monsoon. He was a very hard worker,” he said.

Mahadevan is married to Chitra, who he calls his pillar of support. Their son, Utsav, works for a medical software company in Boston, while their daughter, Vedika, is still in school. When home, he loves to watch cricket or basketball. He likes to cook, and given a chance, he loves

“hanging on the stage especially in rock and roll bands”.

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