

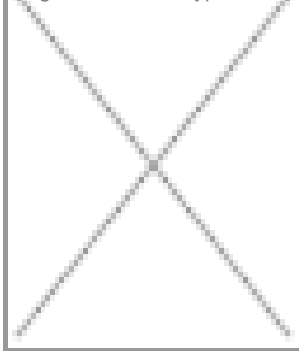
"Indian bioinformatics segment set for growth"

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life sciences, Persistent Systems, Pune

After extending collaboration with a host of prestigious universities and institutes in the North America, Pune-based Persistent Systems is now looking at replicating the same in the burgeoning Indian life sciences market. In an interview with BioSpectrum, Dr Abhay Jere, associate vice president – life sciences, Persistent Systems, throws light on the recent initiatives of the company in bioinformatics space.

Q What are the focus areas of Persistent within the life sciences sector in India?

Dr Jere: Life sciences has contributed about 15 percent of our business. We are ready to grow and ready to expand. We have a team of 500-plus people and are always on the look out for ways to contribute more to life sciences, especially in a country like India. Our focus areas are bioinformatics, clinical informatics, instrumentation and LIMS. In the area of research, we are looking at systems biology and data analysis, especially in next-generation sequencing. We will venture into

personalized medicine space.

Q Could you throw light on the recently introduced BioCrats Connect?

Dr Jere: At Persistent Systems, we realized that interdisciplinary interaction within life sciences is hardly happening. For example, a physicist will hardly talk to a biologist and comprehensive interaction was missing. So we decided to come up with a platform, BioCrats Connect, where people, interested in contributing to the life sciences space can interact with medicos, biologists, pharmacists and then churn out interdisciplinary projects. We will be monitoring the status of the projects. Persistent Systems may or may not be a part of it because ultimately the projects should be of relevance to the Indian life sciences sector. We will take initiatives to make this community more vibrant because usually people discuss ideas and many a times those ideas are never taken forward. Meetings between these professionals will be held every quarter and we will also initiate bi-monthly meetings. This apart, we are in the process of setting up a web portal. We plan to have webinars and blogs. In the near future, we are hoping to take many such initiatives in biosciences.

Q Persistent looks at collaborations with universities, what are the key initiatives on this front?

Dr Jere: We extend collaborations with institutions and universities. We have a strong collaboration with Washington University, US. In India, we collaborate with the National Cancer Institute of National Institutes of Health (NIH), for an initiative related to cancer grid called the cancer Biomedical Informatics Grid (caBIG) in collaboration with Washington University. We have been named a caBIG Support Service Provider for them. Other collaborations are with Indiana University, Yale University, Harvard and Broad Institute (MIT).

Apart from universities, we are also working with companies such as Agilent and we have developed more than 20 products for them. We are also working with Life Technologies. Persistent Systems and Indiana University together have come up with research set-up for informatics in life sciences. In India, we have also collaborated with National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune and International Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), New Delhi.

Q What is the role played by Persistent in the caBIG initiative?

Dr Jere: Persistent Systems has been named a cancer Biomedical Informatics Grid (caBIG) Support Service Provider by the National Cancer Institute (NCI). So, all cancer research-related data would be available online which would be available for other researchers. Along with Washington University, we have built multiple tools for this caBIG initiative. CaBIG Support Service Providers are independent entities that are approved by NCI as meeting specific criteria for performance of support services related to caBIG needs. Services rendered by caBIG Support Service Providers to their clients are established under separate business arrangements organized by and between the service provider and its clients. The caBIG program has licensed Persistent as a part of its effort to provide support for greater involvement and adoption by cancer centers, hospitals and researchers nationwide. Persistent is licensed as a caBIG Support Service Provider licensed in all categories of support.

Q What are the focus areas for Persistent as part of its collaboration with NIV, Pune?

Dr Jere: We have built an entire data management system for swine flu at NIV, Pune. We deployed the system a year back. Currently they are using the system and are planning to take it to other places. The software, VirusLIMS, is a secure web-based information management system that is designed to efficiently manage field and laboratory information for clinical and laboratory testing across the institute and related centers. The VirusLIMS software will enable NIV to effectively manage increasing sample in-flow as well as ensure documentation of all phases of laboratory testing and reporting activities, aiding compliance with standards defined by agencies such as Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO). The software further provides the infrastructure for timely sharing of laboratory information with health agencies — which is crucial for rapid and effective response to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as chikungunya, swine flu and avian influenza.

Q Are there any apprehensions among companies on universities being averse to adopting high-end technology tools?

Dr Jere: Initially, I did have apprehensions that we will be facing such challenges, but, when I started interacting with universities, the response was pretty positive. In India, there are a lot of public-private partnership (PPP) initiatives and there has been a wide acceptance to this model. It takes some time to work out realities and now I am keen on working with the industry. I do see the bioinformatics segment in India growing in the next two years.

Q What is the business strategy for the future?

Dr Jere: I would not be able to comment on short-term plans but as far as long-term plans are concerned, I would say that our main focus would be on research in the areas of systems biology and data analysis.

Nayantara Som in Mumbai