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'A confident start makes you fearless'

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Mr Tony Jose, CEO & co-founder of Clevergene Biocorp was in his office working on his iMac, when I went to meet him.Â

"I was working in a start-up genomics services company back then," started Mr Jose as we sat together. I gave up a job offer to pursue PhD at the University of Texas, in order to pursue my entrepreneurial passion, he said. "I began there as a scientist and as well as a commercial business developer. I had multiple roles to play. There was a lot happening in the forefront of genomics. That gave me the confidence and inspired me to push my limits to start Clevergene."

Officially incorporated in June 2013, Clevergene Biocorp is a Genomics KPI (Knowledge Process Insourcing) company offering scientific consulting, genomics training, brand building and business solutions for life sciences industry, which is currently driven by six key people in all.

Its primary services also include capability building, brand identity creation, marketing strategy and campaigns, and BioHiring.

"We are bringing new life in to genomics applications. Genomics medicine and its fields are very futuristic, and we are already working in that direction. Genomic sequencing can revolutionize personalized medicine. We are also cracking the branding and marketing niche for life sciences industry," he said.

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The beginnings

In September 2012, Mr Jose had a burning desire to become an independent genomics consultant. He said, "There are very few professionals who understand genomics. Ideas backed with passion tend to develop quickly."

He later shared his idea with Mr Dhruv Prasher, who is now the chief strategy officer and co-founder of Clevergene Biocorp. "He (Dhruv) was highly passionate in doing things himself. and he is also a good entrepreneur. We didn't need much resources to start with. I had the scientific background and he had a hand in brand building and business development," said Mr Jose.

According to Mr Jose, the company was named 'Clevergene' after realizing the tremendous potential and smart applications of genomics in the area of health, agriculture productivity and medicine.

Clevergene began in Bangalore for varied strategic reasons. Mr Jose said, "Bangalore is known as the start-up capital of India which nestles many biotech companies, and we primarily want to cater to them. Bangalore is also strategically located close to other major cities like Chennai, Pune, and Hyderabad, where most biotech companies are located. So we decided to move

to Bangalore. But we are planning to establish ourselves in the Northern region soon."

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Initial challenges

However, there were many hurdles and challenges these two young entrepreneurs battled initially. "When you are in a new city trying to establish yourselves, you face unexpected challenges. Even registering the company was faced with obstacles. Hence, first, we took a virtual office. The whole process took a little more time than expected," expressed Mr Jose.

Clevergene then started focusing in the life sciences business consulting solutions. "We spoke with companies and identified their target areas, and we set up a business direction. We also provide marketing, mass outreach, digital marketing, social media campaigns and management. So far we have got very good responses. Unfortunately, till today there were no single agency that could understand the life sciences industry," opined Mr Jose.

For start-ups, a well-executed website plays a significant role and boosts a lot more confidence among clients. "You should go with a lot of clarity to the table when you meet your clients. They should not feel that you are trying to do something, but they should know what you exactly want to do," he added.

Mr Jose believes that for a start-up to gain visibility, the digital media and the internet has to be used to the maximum level.

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Though an eighteen-month-old start-up, Clevergene, so far has a staggering 7100+ followers on its official Facebook page.

Funding woes

To Mr Jose, approaching venture capitalists (VC) or agents for funding didn't make sense. "I and Dhruv had first-hand experience in business and we thought the easiest funding source for us were our friends and family. And we also had to empty our pockets completely," said Mr Jose. "Getting venture capitalists funding was going to take more time. Hence we decided to go to VCs only when we need larger funds."

Initially, the company faced major challenges and failures in its pricing of its services. Mr Jose added, "When we pitched our prices to our clients, it bounced off our heads. And as a result we lost two exclusive contracts. Now we have come up with smarter pricing strategy. Secondly, there was skepticism on us in terms of intellectual property rights (IPR) among people involved in scientific projects. We could not address those issues in the beginning."

The economic slowdown never affected us, he said. "We are too small to be affected by it. However, one thing which affected us was the Rupee depreciation. Suddenly, genomic services became expensive and that's where the global financial crisis affected Indian companies," he opined.

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Government's support

As an entrepreneur Mr Jose feels that the government needs to take science and technology very seriously. "India has a vision to become the science and technology superpower by 2020, which is just 6 years away. We do not have many regulatory bodies, especially for genomics technology and clinical trials. The regulatory bodies need to be in place as soon as possible. They should also be proactive and should be able to accept and welcome new innovations," he expressed.

He continued, "Take a look at what is happening in the area of genetic engineering today in our country. Since the regulatory body could not figure out what was happening, they have now banned GM crop trials. The regulatory bodies need to be in place to guide us rather than stopping us."

Mr Jose thinks that there is plenty of funding available from the government. "However, the issue is that the funds are released at certain periods. So scientists have to plan and execute everything in advance and it doesn't offer flexible time to plan and efficiently use the funds. Instead of asking for more funds, it has to be managed well."

However, banks should open up more for start-ups in a proactive way since they do not offer funds for company less than three years old, he added.

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Budding entrepreneurs

To all the fiery budding entrepreneurs, Mr Jose exhorted, "Entrepreneurship is present in the gene of an individual. If you want to express it, you can't be held back from becoming an entrepreneur. It is important to have certain level of confidence and identifying key skills that you have, and think your USP, and that will make you stand out in the crowd. The rest of the things will automatically follow up. Even finances are very secondary."

"If you are hailing from a very normal background, you don't have to give up. You have more freedom to fail especially if you are not from the IITs or prestigious institutions. There is always an expectation and pressure built around you after you graduate from big institutes. If you start with confidence, you don't have to fear the world," he admonished all the wanna-be entrepreneurs in the country.

He encourages young people to take calculated risks knowing the backup plans. He urged, "Have a realistic plan and do not over-kill it. Many companies claim to revolutionize raising a lot of money and end up burning it. After a couple of years, they get stuck. Hence it is important to have a realistic plan."

Clients

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Clevergene's current list of client portfolio include companies in the area of genetic diagnostics, genome Informatics solution providers, genomics technology developers, genomics laboratory service providers, agriculture companies and genomics medicine developers.

As the Indian biotech industry matures, new ventures seem to crop up in abundance. "We see that as an opportunity. When you have several companies with specific niche, then consultants like us can turn them as our clients. We'll also have an advantage since I haven't come across many life sciences or genomic-focused consultants companies in India."

Biohiring

Clevergene is also involved in the process of launching 'Biohiring', which is an online job portal for life science professionals. "We started this initiative from our personal experiences since we witnessed our own classmates' switched fields from biotechnology," he said.

"Biotech students do not know where to find jobs in the conventional job hunting sites. In turn, companies do not know where to fetch the right candidates. We are going to moderate and bridge that gap between the companies and biotech professionals," he exclaims.

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He further stated, "We also conduct 3-4 week training programs from time-to-time on genomic informatics and analytics, since genomic information is a big area and that is where the big data lies. Genomics is a young field, but many people do not have the first-hand experience in it. We want to create that exposure."

Collaborations & PPPs

As a company we are open to collaborations, Mr Jose added. "We are looking for people who are pragmatic, sharing a common mission for inclusive or mutual growth. Having good and trustworthy partners is crucial," he commented.

"We have tried public-private partnerships in the past. But there is an imbalance in the whole system since both parties have different mandates. There needs to be common goals, and both parties have to agree to it. But I don't see that happening. We want to keep the government away because they are too thick to tackle," explained Mr Jose.

However, he feels that when the company grows in its magnitude, public-private partnerships can work well.

Skill development

Mr Jose advocated students to have confidence in themselves. "Students need to apply their knowledge as early as possible. There is no end to knowledge-seeking, but there is a point when you need to stop your formal education and be confident by getting in to action, and you can always learn while you work," he explained.

According to him, the world has become a well-connected space and that knowledge gathering is not a challenge any more. "Acquire the necessary soft skills which could be computer skills, programming skills, and intra-personal skills. These are the essential qualities that future employers may look for," he expressed.

As for the start-ups, he encourages them to identify their USP, focusing on brand building and marketing, beginning from the brand name, brand logo, its color schemes, and all the way down to the website and social media presence.

Going ahead

"Our brand building and business solutions idea stemmed from the observation that life sciences industry at large lack much focus probably because there aren't many agencies that understands their niche offerings and customer expectations," Mr Jose noted

"Today we are here with a lot of confidence. There is much happening in the biotech industry and we take it as a positive sign. In the future, we'll see a lot more action waiting to happen in biotech. Now there are more applications in biotechnology than ever before. We are sure to see a bring future in India. We feel that genomics industry itself can take us places. We have the confidence that we are in the right place, at the right time," concluded Mr Jose with a smile.