



EXCERPTS FROM THE INTERVIEW OF **R. RANGARAJAN,** MANAGING DIRECTOR, HCL INFO SYSTEMS

(Interviewed by V Madhukar and D Sharma)

Mr Rangarajan shared the ups and downs of his 40 year long journey with HCL Infosystems. He has been a witness to the organization's transformation which is now on the path of becoming a lean organization. He was of the view that today technology is changing how services are provided to customers and inflection points are being reached sooner than before. He discarded the fear of reduction in job due to technology because according to him jobs will not be getting reduced; rather they will be getting displaced. Pride in his eyes was evident as he was sharing the role of HCL Infosystems in the execution of various nation building projects like Aadhaar.

You have been associated with HCL since 1978 and have held various senior positions while serving it. Now, you have recently been appointed as the Managing Director of HCL Info systems Ltd. How have the challenges the company is trying to solve through technology changed and how do you describe the growth of HCL?

It has been a privilege to be part of the HCL family for 40 years. It has been a lifetime and over the years I have thoroughly enjoyed my association with HCL. I have been part of various businesses in the group and have gained immense experience being part of different teams including ones that worked on scaling of businesses. One such example is the opportunity to head Global Operations for BPO Services and be part of the transformation story of moving a traditional BPO services to a next gen one. It was a success story and we were able to provide holistic next generation business and technical services to marquee Fortune 500 customers across the globe.

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The experience and learning from such associations has been immense and enriching as it involves amalgamating different pieces to come up with the right winning formula. It's not only about mobilizing resources to create a success story but also to be a leader who can motivate a team to win, especially in times when things become or look difficult.

Today technology is changing how we provide services to our customers and partners. Inflection points are being reached sooner than before. It's exciting to visualize what will be the next inflection point for the human race — what would be the next product as exciting as the smart phone or the advent of the internet. For us it is also pertinent to understand what would be the next inflection point in enterprise technology. To deliver on the best technology solutions for our customers it is important that we ourselves as an IT organization leverage technology in our operations and processes.

HCL Infosystems is on a journey of its transformation. We are now focused on becoming a lean organization and focusing on areas that will drive us towards profitable growth in the future. The key focus of HCL Infosystems today is our distribution business encompassing both

Consumer and Enterprise IT products. Technology is playing an important role as an enabler in the conduct of our business and we are imbibing technology in our various functions and processes. For example OCEAN (Online Customer Engagement Application Network) that is a partner portal in our Consumer Distribution business where the entire customer or partner journey has been automated. Similarly for our Enterprise Distribution we have built a portal called as Premium Partner Portal or P3 for our partners. Internal processes have also been automated which has enabled better and faster decision-making.

Digital transformation, Automation and Machine learning along with Artificial Intelligence are the buzzwords today. All the major technological as well as non-technological companies are talking about them. Microsoft, IBM, Google etc are very active in these fields. How do you see HCL differentiating itself in this world to set apart a value proposition that is unique?

Our understanding of the technology requirements of the customer both in B2C and B2B spaces has been derived from working in this space since the last 40 years and we are leveraging this expertise to provide the best of technology experience and enablement to our customers. Today technology is changing at a very rapid pace but it is also important to understand and define the best and relevant technology suitable for a particular organization. Technology implementation and up gradation also have to be in sync with the requirements, capability and future growth of the organization.

Our partnerships with global and leading brands have enabled us to be at the forefront of providing best in class products and solutions to our customers. In terms of technology projects, HCL Infosystems over the last four decades has been involved in the execution of various nation building projects. The company has built unparalleled technology competencies in the successful delivery of such projects, including those in Defence, Telecom, Public Distribution and Power sectors. We are also the managed service provider for the world's largest identity management project — Aadhaar — where the 100-crore enrolment milestone has been crossed.

Today we are leveraging this expertise of delivering complex nation building projects which are truly world class. We are leveraging these robust system integration capabilities to offer complex solutions to our enterprise customers. Again in our Singapore business we are concentrating on a range of IT infrastructure services and associated applications. In this region we are already working on prestigious government projects and simultaneously building the private sector business. During FY 18 and now in FY 19 we have made investments in creating a new command center in Singapore to gear up for significant growth. We have built great trust, relationships and equity in Singapore and will continue to keep a strong focus on building this business.

There is a general apprehension that with the advent of latest technology like AI, lot of the jobs may get eliminated and new jobs may come up. What do you think about the future of work nature?

Artificial Intelligence is meant to improve decision cycle and transfer (from humans) more accurate decision making. As concepts like Machine Learning are manifesting in work places, computers are developing the ability to learn for themselves. Computers are being coded to think like humans and by giving them access to the internet and data, computers are mimicking human decision making at a much faster speed and at the same time are also being more accurate. In business, Artificial Intelligence is the vehicle to achieve more innovation and efficiency. By analyzing big data Artificial Intelligence has been able to make or offer real time business decisions within seconds. By analyzing consumer behavior Artificial Intelligence is enabling decision making in businesses in terms of product modifications or creations. Take the example of marketing, AI has been able to simulate various go to market scenarios, market forecasting or even enabling targeted advertising or content consumption. So essentially Artificial Intelligence will enable humans in their jobs to make better decisions and thereby become more effective. Another aspect here is the

advent of Robotics which could impact repetitive jobs but I believe complex ones will not be impacted by technology. Robotics or robots will ensure that repetitive tasks will be done quicker, safer and will be more reliable. Some repetitive tasks can also be hazardous or difficult to do for a human, but robots can do such tasks in a more efficient manner and also at the same time avoid the dangerous element for humans. So essentially robots can make the work environment safer for human employees. This will also free the time of human workers to involve themselves in work that requires creative thinking, innovation, human interactions or even empathy. Let me give you an example of a sales person who would typically spend a good amount of his time in identifying potential customers, creating collaterals and

sending emails rather than actually conversing with his defined audience and building a relationship with his prospect. Technology will free the salespersons' time to engage more with his potential customers then in identifying his prospects and even sending communication at desired intervals.

Indians basically are known to do what they are told to do. In such a context how do you encourage creative thinking at HCL organization and where do the great ideas come from in your organization?

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HCL believes in grooming its people to become leaders of tomorrow. Hence we have an open and entrepreneurial environment. HCL has been an entrepreneurial incubator for a large number of leaders of the industry and people policies and systems

are designed to encourage a culture of ownership. Various enablers have been developed to create this culture of innovation such as a Leadership development school - iLead, Innovative Portal, Innovation wall of fame, Awards etc. In essence HCL provides for an environment where any employee with an executable idea is given a platform to take it forward. There have been many success stories such as the innovative thinking on a Home PC led to the creation of a business division around the HCL Home PC Beanstalk;

What is the biggest leadership challenge that you have faced till now and how have you dealt with it? Also, share what was the learning out of it?

Growing a business presents its own set of challenges and there have been many instances in my career where I had the opportunity to grow businesses. But from my experience I can say that creating a lean organization or business is more challenging. Growth in that sense is relatively easy!

Growth is unidirectional while creating a Lean organization means the inter play of many elements and as a leader one has to get a hold on multiple levers. We need to have systems in a lean organization which will enable efficiency, decrease costs and at the same time increase quality of operations and ultimately customer service.

Apart from bringing in the right set of systems, processes and tools, change management I believe is the biggest challenge. We have to align the right people to drive the changed processes and systems. We have also to balance how much we can learn by doing and how much we need to bring in training elements. Mobilizing resources and allocation to drive initiatives is another critical element and provides quite a challenge.

Another challenge is to ensure that this endeavour does not become an one time activity or take the shape of a time bound project. The challenge here as a leader is to ensure that the organization imbibe the changes as a continuous process. It should become the new culture of the organization and it is a critical task that the leader has to focus on to bring it alive. Getting participation of all people is of utmost importance of creating a lean organization. This is quite a challenge and as a leader one has to drive the change and ensure that all are on board on the journey. It should be made clear that it is a must do. It is not an uncommon occurrence to face resistance from various levels of the organization and a leader must be prepared to face such obstacles.

In the long run, another challenge of a lean organization is keeping it lean and still be able to maintain reasonable growth and profitability and remain competitive. In today's context, given market dynamics, businesses need to be lean to be able to stay competitive and at the same time keep growing profitably.

What traits or qualities do you think made it possible for you to grow to the current level in an organization like HCL?

From the very beginning of my career I have developed a habit of learning from others. This has become like a second nature to me. As a leader you have to face many difficult and tricky situations. I have learnt to tackle such situations to a great extent by learning from others — how they react to situations and solve them. Of course it is not enough to observe and learn from others. It is equally important and maybe more so to put in the hard work to ensure that what you have observed is put to practice and internalized. Keeping an open mind has been important to me to learn from others too.

The learning also includes, if I may say so is how not to react or act in certain situations! I have also learnt and observed how teams interact in an organization. I had also made it a point to watch and learn from the signals of change within the organization. Filtering is equally important, when learning from others filter in information that is relevant and filter out information that is not suitable. The learning terms of reference are dynamic, more so in a business environment that is constantly changing. In that sense it is also important to validate what you have learnt from other sources of information or knowledge and keep a flexible template.

As a person also I am quite simple and approachable and this trait I believe has helped me to connect with people. This has also enabled a lot of conversations with my colleagues and team to assimilate various viewpoints and reach better informed decisions. As a leader you need to keep the channels of communication open, employees should feel comfortable to approach you and raise any pertinent issue. Being simple I have always looked for simple responses or constructs to various business issues or problems. A leader should be able to cut through the complexities and offer a simple solution that everyone in the team can understand and follow to execute. Along with being approachable one should also be a good listener.

What message would you like to give to the young professionals who have recently started their professional life?

Young professionals who are starting on their respective careers would do well to get out of

their comfort zones. The first stages of one's career is the right time to gain as much varied knowledge as possible, try out new things and also in the process learn about oneself. Moving out of your comfort zone also throws light on your strengths and weaknesses. The learning will be immense and it is the right stepping stone to a successful and rewarding career. It is also the time of your career where you have time, energy and enthusiasm to try out new things that you are not comfortable with. There is also gratification for you when you step into an uncomfortable zone — the feeling that you will get once you succeed in an area where you thought you would not have done well will be great and a highly fulfilling emotion. And it will also do wonders to your self confidence.

Another thing that I would recommend and that I had done during the initial part of my career is to work in multiple locations. One should do this at least for 2 to 3 years till the time you get into a

senior position. This will enable you to know how to work in a different culture. Accordingly you also develop cross cultural communication skills. You will become more independent and resourceful when you work in different environments. To be successful in a career it is also important to be able to establish relationships with people. And working in different locations creates the experience of establishing relationships with people with different cultural backgrounds. This experience will hold you in good stead throughout your career. Working in different cities also makes you step out of your comfort zone and develop new experiences.

Working in a different city or geography will also enable you to build your own set or network of contacts. As you move forward in your career these contacts if nurtured well will be invaluable.