

Taking computer education to the masses

by Sunil Rajguru May 17, 2022 0 comments



Edited excerpts from an exhaustive video interview with Rajendra S Pawar, Chairman & Co-founder, NIIT & Founder, NIIT University.

The state of IT education in 1981.

“At that time, it was non-existent. But the manufacturing industry was already anticipating a problem of talent shortage. This was the number one concern: How will the industry grow? NIIT was born out of that threat. It was a problem and we saw that as an opportunity. At that time there were a handful of people coming out of the IITs, but they were not the ones writing programs. There was nothing significant to build talent for the sector.

Basic courseware for a brand new era

The first two courses that NIIT announced in 1981 were one, an entry-level BASIC. It was a 4-week program, 5 days a week and 2 hours a day. We had a long-term program: Entry level COBOL, for 12 weeks. The early thrust was on languages. COBOL was at that time state of the art. We also taught FORTRAN to engineers and scientists.

The continuous evolution of training

Very soon we realized that programming is one part of it. We need to do an analysis. You need to define a problem. Companies wanted to build a strategy. We spent a lot of time doing user education for corporates and ran a program for them called: How to buy a computer. As people came to study, they articulated what more they wanted. We were extremely responsive. We covered the whole gamut of information system management at one level down to entry-level programming. It was languages, structured system analysis, and design, structured methodology, database, database design... all of the “nuts and bolts” issues in the 1980s that were important.

We were trying to track developments in all the places where there was a thought leader. There were a few campuses that were doing path-breaking work and we interacted with them. Edward Yourdon was the father of software engineering. We made an arrangement with his company to teach structured methodology and TCS was a very big participant. We tried to expand to cover all constituencies, but quite clearly the largest need was for people who could write programs.

NIIT: First of its kind franchise in education

We created the idea of a franchise for education which had never been done before. We found like-minded

entrepreneurs in cities and motivated them to go back to their towns and set up an NIIT center. If you walked into any NIIT center at its peak (there were thousands) it would give you the same look and feel. Far Eastern Economic Review talked of it as the McDonald's of education.

The 1990s: Y2K & the perfect storm

The 1990s was a golden decade. For the IT sector, there were a couple of things happening at the same time. India's Liberalization had happened. We got the STP policy. India needed foreign exchange. We got a lot of push. On the world stage, the Y2K opportunity was becoming large and the West knew that if they didn't fix their problem by the Year 2000 they would have a catastrophe. They were willing to spend a tonne of money. The Internet had arrived. It was a perfect storm. The 1990s was an era where Y2K added fuel to what was already a high growth area.

After the bubble burst, post-Y2K, a few years later we started growing again and went into new technologies. Governments were beginning to invest. The PC was in the home. Everyone was getting on to the Internet. There was growth and a huge amount of tailwind that took us into the future.

The evolution still continues...

By this time, we were in the face of every consumer in India. We were 90% B2C and had some amount of leadership training. But over a period of time as our international business grew, we found a solid demand coming from corporations. Today that is 80% of our business. That's for the Fortune 100 companies, in all sectors: healthcare, airlines, engineering, oil, etc. For these companies, we do something called Managed Training Services. It's like a learning process being outsourced.

Future of online education: Who'll get the blend right?

Education is a very engaged and involved process. Every learner learns in a unique way. Trying to put everything into a process has its downsides. Human intervention is a must. What happened during Covid, everybody did online learning but now you are seeing the underbelly. Online learning has a very important role to play, but a very specific role. A proper hybrid blended model is the solution. So, the one thing is who gets the blend right? That will make the difference between making an impact on people's lives or just giving them a piece of paper."

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