

BW EDUCATION

Technology Will Be A Subservient Tool In Education: Rajendra Singh Pawar, Chairman And Co-Founder, NIIT Group And Founder, NIIT University

BW Businessworld caught up with him to get an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down, especially for the education sector.

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Rajendra Singh Pawar, Chairman and Co-founder, NIIT Group and Founder NIIT University was a member of the National Task Force on Information Technology and Software Development. The group includes NIIT Limited, which is a global leader in skills and talent development. The Padma Bhushan awardee served as the chairman of NASSCOM and on the boards of IIT, IIMs and ISB. BW Businessworld caught up with him to get an understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down, especially for the education sector. Excerpts:

What have been your learnings as an entrepreneur for the past four decades and how are they relevant today, in the COVID -19 times?

The starting point is curiosity, to search out for unsolved problems. So, it's about identifying unmet needs. Among the unmet needs, you look at the one your heart truly beats for. These are the essential conditions. Despite great miseries being caused by COVID, the silver lining is that these are fantastic times to be curious. Many new unmet needs are emerging right now and the real question is: which one of them does your heart truly beat for? The next step is to work out a detailed implementation plan. These things take time so entrepreneurs should not be in a hurry to outdo themselves because that's where the biggest mistakes happen. Be fast, be quick, be rapid but don't be in a hurry to outstep yourself.

What has kept you busy for the last 120 days, which has been very unusual for most of us? What are the new things that you have been doing?

While we have huge problems caused by COVID-19, I think it's also throwing up once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. The word "unprecedented" is so relevant and a vast range of options to try out new things are opening up. We can never create a controlled experiment at such a scale where people are forced to work from home and study remotely.

In the field of education, there are new opportunities for technology and a huge set of challenges for pedagogy. I see it as a terrific opportunity and an exciting time.

I usually read a lot and now I am reading even more. The pre-COVID era had a commuting time that is now saved and I am investing a lot of that into my gardening. That extra time is going fully into much closer interaction with nature. These few months have opened my eyes to two things – one, that nature has healed itself at an unbelievable pace while people are confined to their homes and second, that very small time and resource investment into gardening of fruits and vegetables can give extraordinary returns!

How do you spot the opportunities that COVID-19 has highlighted?

I view the 21st century as the Century of the Mind. If any country can claim to have a deep understanding of the unknown spaces in the human mind, there should be no doubt that it is India, given the longevity of the civilization and the wealth of thought on this subject.

The purpose of Education is to help people understand the power of the human mind and recognize that technology will play an important role as a subservient tool. During COVID times we have seen the power of technology to connect human minds across the globe. Therein lies a monumental opportunity.

While some skills that were relevant before COVID-19 will still stay relevant, a new set of skills will be needed to thrive in the future.

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What were your learnings from setting up NIIT University?

While NIIT University started operations in 2009, we had the luxury to create and nurture the idea for more than a decade. When NIIT Limited became 10 years old in 1991, we had the good fortune to get two exceptional minds as full-time advisors — Prof CR Mitra, who had just retired from BITS Pilani and Prof Jimmy Isaac, who had retired from IIT Bombay. While Prof Mitra educated us on innovations in education, Prof Isaac gave us clarity on Information Society as a concept. Prof Isaac was the first one to point out the emerging integration between education and skills. He said that till then, education and skills were seen as two separate compartments. The skill was for factory workers and farmers, and education was for the privileged. He mentioned that IT is the first field where there is a continuum between the two as demonstrated by Bill Gates ‘the programmer’ becoming Bill Gates ‘the entrepreneur’.

We saw the new opportunity in 1991 when we were reworking the NIIT Limited strategy. NIIT as a for-profit company was involved in making people employable and creating talent for the IT sector, taking them from college to a job. This we continue to do. The organisation is estimated to have impacted more than 36 million learners, over the last 38 years with operations in more than 30 countries. So, we have had the good fortune to try out new things on a global scale.

On the other hand, the not-for-profit NIIT University (NU) is focussed on creating new knowledge and technologies while shaping the future of the new generation of school leavers through in-depth, long-term, rigorous degree programs in technology and management. Extensive experimentation and innovation is at play in NU.

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