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First-mover advantage ensured our leadership in IT training space: Rajendra S. Pawar, NIIT

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The Dataquest Lifetime Achievement Award 2019 was recently awarded to Padma Bhushan Awardee 2011, Rajendra S. Pawar, Chairman, NIIT Ltd and Founder, NIIT University.

His pioneering vision has been an inspiration for the entire ICT industry in India, and has given back so much to our country and the society at large. His achievements and initiatives will always be a guiding force for the ICT industry. In an interview, Rajendra S. Pawar, Chairman, NIIT Ltd, and Founder, NIIT University, shares his journey. Excerpts:

DQ: From 1981 onwards, until now, it has been a splendid journey for NIIT. Could you share with us its high points?

Rajendra S. Pawar: NIIT was a brainchild of the early 1980s, a time when the computer industry was just beginning to make its presence felt in India. The fledgling sector held promise, but was faced with a severe paucity of trained manpower—over 200,000 people in fact—that were crucial to its growth and success. Seeing this need and the latent business opportunity it contained, we conceived of and laid the foundation of NIIT in December, 1981.

It was this pioneering step and first-mover advantage that ensured our leadership in the IT training space. It was fuelled further by consistent and repeated innovation in the areas of curriculum development, learning methodologies, technology-centric delivery, quality, product mix, and geographic expansion, which have sustained our lead over the last four decades.

Today, having trained over 35 million people worldwide, and operated in 40 countries, we have evolved into a global skills and talent development organization. This claim is supported by our push to diversify beyond IT training, where we entered into partnerships with domain experts in fast growing verticals.

Software and services is the second important pillar of our market presence. Interestingly, the genesis of our software business also lay in the arrival of computers in India. Besides trained manpower for the emerging IT industry and for companies looking to efficiently utilize their IT investments, organizations across the country also showcased a need for planning and actively harnessing high tech for business benefit.

NIIT's software 'consultancy' practice took wing at that time, catering to corporates like Indian Oil, and the Oil and Natural Gas Corp. (ONGC), among others, and helping them to computerize their operations.

NIIT's consulting practice evolved into a software services business which began to scale, finally achieving a size that required it to be hived off into an independent venture. In 2004, NIIT Technologies was born and continued to build mind and market share, adding marquee customers to its fold, especially in Europe and North America. The business was part of the NIIT Group until 2019.

The third important foray for us was in the field of higher education where we set up a not-for-profit venture, NIIT University (NU). A premier institution of higher learning and research, NU seeks to create original thinkers who will lead the knowledge society of the future. Sharing its DNA with its sponsor NIIT, the University has borrowed several winning concepts that have become synonymous with the NIIT brand, as well as the Group's rich expertise and global know-how.

Not only is NU, like NIIT, delivering distinctive education through the pioneering use of technology, it has also made industry-linkage a cornerstone of its offerings. NIIT's strong industry connect has also shaped the academic ethos of NU. The University's other defining characteristics such as seamlessness, research-driven culture and Green-orientation have also brought it industry spotlight.

DQ: How was it, back in the 1980s and 1990s, when PCs were gaining popularity?

Rajendra S. Pawar: Back in the 1980s, computers were getting made in India and technology investments were a talking point for organizations. It was a very exciting time for the country. Yet, talent, rather than the lack of it, was an issue. For us, 'Bringing people and computers together, successfully' was the challenge and also became our Mission Statement. Clearly, the time was ripe for a computer education company with an industry-endorsed curriculum that would add vital skills to the resumes of graduate engineers and non-engineers, and bring them to where the jobs were. We, with our well-defined focus, fitted right in.

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As PCs began proliferating in homes, yet another segment opened up for NIIT and Indian society. Taking ordinary people including housewives, children, the elderly, and yes, even India's elected leaders across the Digital Divide became another mandate for us. To mark NIIT's 20th anniversary and help build computer and technological skills among people of various ages and segments, we launched World Computer Literacy Day on December 2nd. For a few years, on that date, we trained thousands of people for free.

DQ: Did people, back then, have any inkling about the scale the IT industry would achieve?

Rajendra S. Pawar: While clearly aspirations and enthusiasm ran high across the industry, I am certain no one imagined how the Indian IT dream would take shape. At NIIT, while we comprehended the problem and offered a solution, we simply could not have anticipated how manpower would become India's edge in the global markets, how even a taxi driver in New York would assume you were a software professional if you mentioned your links to the country!

India's success was huge and heady. Having missed the bus for the Industrial revolution, we actually had a chance to lead in the IT age—a period, I think of as the Century of the Mind!

When the foreign exchange crisis loomed large in 1991 (with reserves dipping to USD 5.8 billion), the IT industry responded well to the situation, stepping up its exports. FE reserves crossed USD 100 billion in 2004. The IT sector has been consistently increasing its contribution to India's GDP, raising it from close to zero in 1991 to 9.4 percent in FY 2019-20. I don't think many people anticipated this scenario or the phenomenal success.

DQ: NIIT is credited with building the IT training industry. What role has innovation played in this story?

Rajendra S. Pawar: NIIT has played a key role in the creation and growth of the IT training industry in India and in large part this has been due to two key factors. One, our mindset — which saw us unleash a wave of entrepreneurship in India including the path-breaking franchising business model that was introduced in 1986, but was later embraced by many.

In the 1980s, for instance, it was CD ROMs and multimedia technology in education. We began the 1990s with a big market first—the breakthrough Computerdromes—which gave young people unlimited access to what was a coveted resource in those days—computers!

Our glass-fronted facility in Connaught Place in Lutyens Delhi, like those in many metros, was a giant hall with over a 100 machines. The Computerdromes became a huge draw for students craving computer time.

We had something for experienced professionals and managers as well, and these were our Automated Learning Centers. Keep in mind that in those days there was no Internet, little computer access, meagre digital content and hardly any modern technology. The Centers, which offered users advanced interactive video equipment, laser disks, libraries of video content and computers, created a wow effect and became a haven for knowledge seekers.

NIIT's Bhavishya Jyoti Scholarship initiative for meritorious and socially challenged students was announced in 1991 and its reverberations were felt as far away as Nigeria where it was a runaway success. Our GNIIT arrived in 1992, and the industry-endorsed program for career seekers remained our flagship for decades.

Then, we had Hole-in-the-Wall, an experiment in unsupervised learning at the grass root level, which earned global acclaim and several patents. Promoted by NIIT venture HiWEL, jointly with the World Bank, it became India's gift to the world and a symbol of the nation's stature, when the Prime Minister at that time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee presented Hole-in-the-Wall kiosks to Cambodia. The Oscar winning movie, Slumdog Millionaire, based on a book authored by diplomat Vikas Swarup, incidentally, was also inspired by HiWEL!

The 1990s were also about the futuristic nGuru solutions for schools. Netvarsity, the world's first University on the 'Net' was launched in 1996, and followed close on the heels of the Internet, which became available in India in 1995!

In the 10 years after that, NIIT went on a diversification spree, entering training for segments such as banking, business process management, corporates and overseas markets through a slew of partnerships with other global leaders in these domains.

NIIT, leading the training sector, also innovated during the dot com era, supporting start-ups with manpower that was equipped with the next generation of skill sets. Web developers, Java programmers, app developers, communications specialists who could implement online payments, and a host of other people with new job profiles, emerged from the training industry's fountainhead.

In the last decade, as we have moved into the realm of digital transformation (DT), NIIT has enabled professionals and organizations to 'Go Digital'. Seeing the potential of DT, the IT training industry has launched a range of products

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that will create workforce for the DT age. NIIT, for instance, has launched its digiNxt Series of programs. It has introduced a multi-modal learning platform, Training.com, as well as StackRoute, to create the world's elite full-stack programmers and pool of Digital innovators for the IT industry.

The Covid-19 pandemic is another crisis that has become cause for innovation over the last few months. The virus outbreak, which has resulted in countless lockdowns and Work From Home scenarios the world over, is creating a massive push for Digital and online education in particular. Globally, schools, colleges and universities are moving to the online mode in order to make learning seamless. We too have in place our NIIT Digital platform which has opened up a whole new set of possibilities and avenues of learning for students and professionals.

DQ: How did the idea of diversifying into other sectors come about?

Rajendra S. Pawar: Having sustained leadership in the IT training market through innovation, it was a logical progression for us to explore opportunities in other people-intensive industries. Our experience in overseas markets, through our software business, NIIT Technologies) also made us aware of the needs of customers in these fields. In India too, booming areas such as banking, financial services and insurance (BFSI) and business process management (BPM) were requiring relevantly skilled resources with niche skills. Similarly, the executive training segment was also holding out promise.

The first idea to get off the block was the NIIT Institute of Finance Banking and Insurance (IFBI) which was launched jointly with ICICI Bank in 2006 and was focused on building skilled manpower for the Finance sector. Today IFBI is offering standard as well as customized training solutions and working with 75 Financial Services Practitioners. It has forged partnerships with 20 leading public and private sector banks and financial institutions for talent development, and trained over 2,50,000 professionals for the BFSI industry.

In 2006, another venture, NIIT Imperia, Center for Advanced Learning, also came into being, with strategic tie-ups with India's top B-Schools (including IIM-Ahmedabad, Calcutta and Indore). Addressing working professionals, it began offering Executive Learning Programs in association with these institutions as well as organizations such as KPMG, Google India and the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI).

The use of NIIT's innovative synchronous learning platform proved to be a game changer for Imperia, helping professionals overcome their challenges of mobility and time, and facilitating access to world-class management training. Our brainstorming also resulted in the setting up of the NIIT Institute of Process Excellence Ltd. (NIIT Uniqua) in 2008, a partnership with global BPM giant Genpact. NIIT Uniqua became a one-shop solutions shop for training outsourcing services targeted at the Business Process, Knowledge and Technology Services industry.

DQ: How has NIIT dealt with the training needs of the corporate sector?

Rajendra S. Pawar: Our tryst with corporate learning began as far back as the '90s, when in 1991 we began building digital learning content for IBM in the USA. Having established this foothold in America, we started working with other IT leaders as well. By 2015, we had engaged with 36 of the top 50 IT companies in the US.

Meanwhile, we had already expanded our focus to include non-IT learning content to our portfolio, which entrenched us further in the market. Our Managed Training Services (MTS) followed and NIIT's Corporate Learning Group (CLG) started meeting the training needs of several reputed organizations through its new offering, MTS.

Over the decades, CLG has emerged as our flagship business, offering MTS to Fortune 100 customers in North America, Europe and Canada and enabling them to initiate Digital Transformation on their turfs. As an outsourced training provider, NIIT offers internal training solutions that ensure an alignment of business goals with L&D, better learning outcomes, greater efficiency, cost-effectiveness and increased business impact.

Today, NIIT ranks among the top three pure-play corporate training companies in the world. The CLG business has defied global trends to log in a growth of nine percent in FY20. It has remained a frontrunner, accounting for 78 percent of NIIT's revenues during this period. In FY 20, CLG was conferred with 37 coveted Brandon Hall Group HCM Excellence awards jointly with customers and named a top winner for the year.

DQ: Tell us about the NIIT University. Where does it fit into NIIT's scheme of things?

Rajendra S. Pawar: Set up by NIIT Founders, NIIT University (NU) is a separate, not-for-profit initiative in the social sector. Our vision when setting up this institution of advanced learning was to establish a University of the Future, that would be a role-model of learning, academic research, innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainability.

It was envisaged as an institute that would achieve distinctiveness based on the four core principles that would make learning industry-linked, technology-based, research-driven and seamless. Led by industry thought leaders and

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corporate-practitioners, the multi-disciplinary university focuses on emerging areas of technology and management. It has robust technology infrastructure, well-qualified faculty, teaching and research labs, and an online platform accessible from anywhere. What sets it apart is its pedagogy which is based on inculcating self-directed learning essential for succeeding in the industry. NU's students develop solutions and products that solve real problems faced by the industry very early in the program, in a project-based mode, with industry personnel playing the role of customers.

NU is additionally contributing towards the development of a start-up eco-system in the state of Rajasthan where it is based. Over the years it has been nurturing and incubating businesses such as drone design and manufacturing company AT-Lead, cyber security solutions venture, Czar Securities and agricultural supply chain specialist RAAV Techlabs. These start-ups are shaping up to be stars in their respective domains.

The University has a strong network of over 600 industry partners.

DQ: How is the technology capability of NIIT University becoming a differentiator in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Rajendra S. Pawar: Recognizing that online learning alone is not the most efficient solution during this time, and that a physical learning experience is equally important, NU has embraced a Blended Learning Model. NU has done extensive work in this area over the last decade and is also leveraging the experience gained by sponsoring company NIIT in this field.

The model incorporates innovative pedagogies, technology-based teacher-student engagement, and an end-to-end process of administration that covers admissions, education delivery, assessment and certification, pastoral care, campus activities, governance, industry-linkages, placement and alumni interaction.

While an important part of the model remains in online mode, areas such as lab activities, and industry immersion, are being executed in physical mode. This year, many of the university students were working in companies during their semester committed to internship when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. In line with the practices of the organizations which started Work From Home to maintain business continuity, the students interning in them also adopted this approach. This has also demonstrated the efficacy of the Blended Learning Model implemented by NU.

DQ: Where do you see NIIT University in the next 10 years?

Rajendra S. Pawar: The goal going forward is for NU to achieve distinctiveness at a global level in all the four areas covered by the core principles—industry-linked, technology-based, research-driven and seamless. NU has already been able to establish distinctiveness in at least two of the four areas.

For one, it has a strong industry-linked focus. Not only are industry practitioners mentoring the University's students, but the University has also set aside one full semester for compulsory internship in an organization, a move that underlines its deep industry connect and contributes significantly to the 100 percent placement record of NU.

Interestingly, NU's four core principles resonate strongly with the government of India's recently announced National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The Policy speaks extensively about the need for India's education system to have flexibility, multi-disciplinarity, seamlessness, strong industry linkages, technology-centeredness and a research-orientation. All these characteristics are an inextricable part of the NU fabric.

Owing to this, the University of the Future is well-positioned to fulfil the goal, purpose and aspirations of the NEP.