PUBLISHED SINCE 1997

siliconindia

BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY IN THE U.S. & INDIA JUNE - 2009 SILICONINDIA.COM

argusoft

The Game Changer

Offering services based on a Platform Play

$ 2 US/INR 150

argusoft

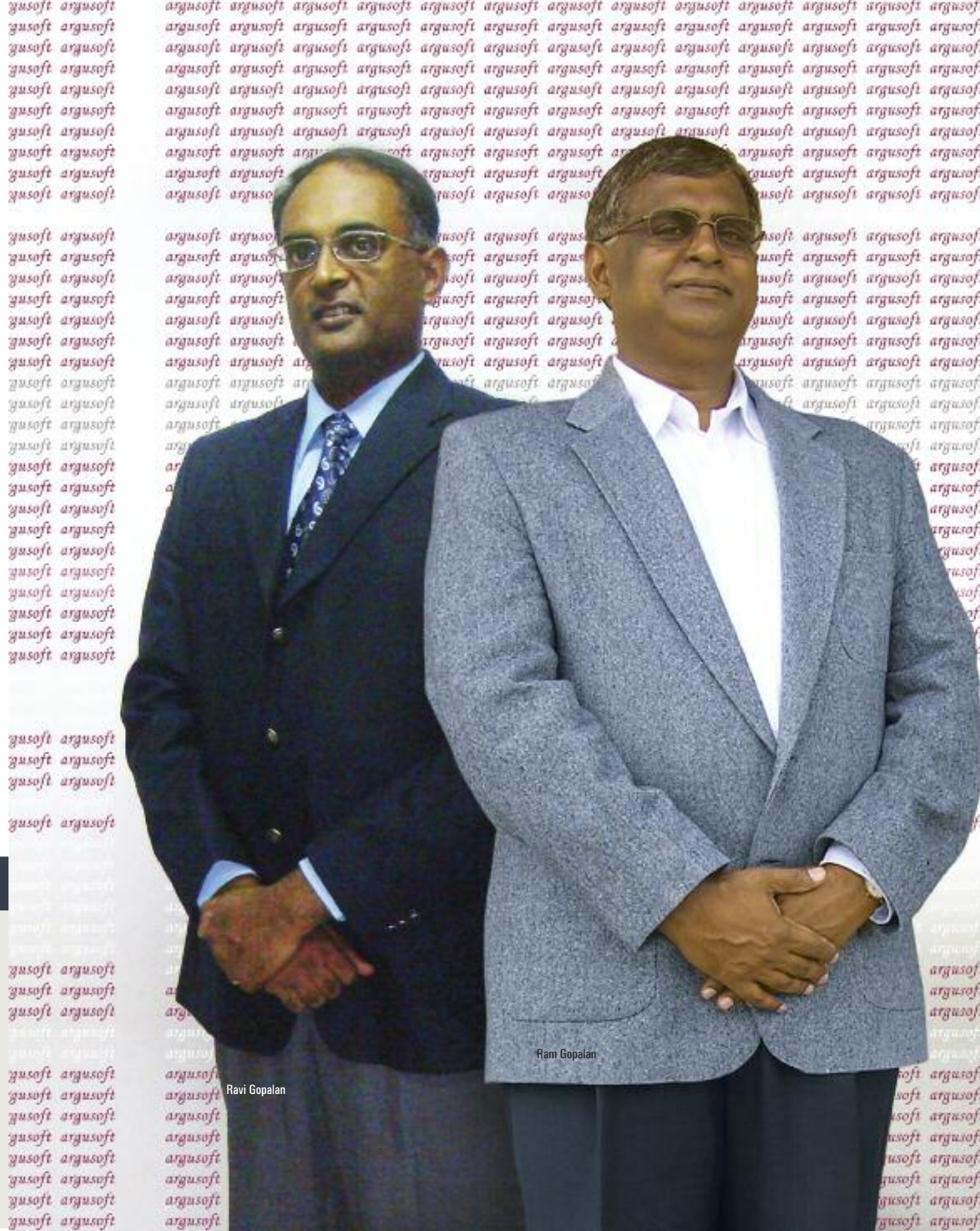
Offering services based on a Platform play

By Aritra Bhattacharya

Ram Gopalan and Ravi Gopalan are brothers in arms with a mission. While they went off in their different ways they were Entrepreneurs at heart. In fact the spirit must run in the family as their father also is undertaking his entrepreneurial effort (webpanditji) post retirement from Govt service (see Silicon India – Post retirement startup Jan 2003). With the turn of the century they came together to work as a tag team in creating Argusoft, with Ravi managing the overall operational aspects based in India, while Ram directs the overall strategy and business development aspects from the US.

To understand the genesis of these true serial entrepreneurs from India, it would be worthwhile to trace their career paths. Ram graduated with an EE degree from IIT Delhi in 1982 and after finishing his post graduation in EE, he started his career at National Semiconductor in the storage semiconductor arena as an engineer. His career travels took him through companies like Adaptec and IBM, moving from engineering to the marketing and business side of things. However it was the entrepreneurial influence of the Silicon Valley that finally prevailed and in 1997 he got together with some of his co-founders to start a venture funded semiconductor company Cognigine which was eventually acquired by a Chinese networking company. Subsequently he started a CDP storage appliance company Agglut which was acquired by a leading backup storage company in the bay area. After 20 years in the valley, Ram was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug and was looking to capitalize on 'globalizing the indo-us' phenomenon while deciding to permanently stay in the US.

Meanwhile after finishing his MS in Computer Science from Florida, Ravi decided to return to India in 1988 and chose to start as an entrepreneur rather than go to work in the US or in India. His first venture was in the area of setting up turnkey computer education systems in high schools which was a



QUICK FACTS

Chairman	*Ram Gopalan*
President/CEO	*Ravi Gopalan*
Head Count	*60*
Offices	*Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India (HQ)*
	Newark, California, USA
Website	*www.argusoft.com*
Investors	*Self funded since founding in 2000*
Services	*Turnkey software development*
	Platform based development

success in India in the 90's. Exhibiting his versatility and entrepreneurial passion, he set up a small scale indigenous petrochemical refining plant (based on technology from IPI) to refine used motor oil and reuse them for farming equipment and other secondary application markets, a valuable proposition in the late 90's, prior to the liberalization of the import policies by the Government of India.

Genesis

With the turn of the century serial entrepreneurs Ram and Ravi decided to capitalize on their experiences and come together as a tag team, to leverage the indo-us business paradigm that was emerging. They started Argusoft back in 2000 as a services company, engaged in providing intensive hands-on training to produce enhanced Peoplesoft professionals from India. In the early days, the company followed an onsite-offshore model, where it worked with an American company Intelliant to provide these resources for placement in projects in the US. Soon thereafter Argusoft migrated to provide more value-add through offshore IT engineering services as that was the emerging paradigm shift at that time. "The onsite-offshore model worked well for us," recalls Ravi. A small team of half a dozen people would be on the client's premises, and a larger team would work from India. The critical parts of a project would be done onsite, and things like coding, testing would be done out of India to provide the cost advantages. "Business was brisk", recalls Ravi, attributing it to the trust that clients had in Argusoft's expertise and delivery of quality on time. Not only were clients ramping up fast, the company itself was growing. Within a few years of its existence, it had around 100 consultants working with it. "We also added a JDE component after that," says Ravi. "Some years ago we realized that it would be difficult to build a successful services company with their limited resources and self funding", says Ram, given the growth of biggies like Infosys, Wipro and TCS.

Ravi Gopalan

A.V. Sethuraman

"We decided to shift focus and take on complete end-to-end turnkey projects," says Ravi, "but then, we had no experience, and no track record." Rather than this being an impediment, it became an asset. To solve that perception they started working on creating their own platforms, as a means to acquire expertise for the Argusoft team and demonstrate domain knowledge to potential clients, while leveraging the IP to provide a fast time to market advantage for their clients.

Overall, Argusoft creates its own platform intellectual properties, as well as provides turnkey consultancy services which encompass business processes through to system architecture design, implementation and final integration. "Our products and services have constantly helped our clients leverage offshore resources to take their business to higher levels of excellence and profitability. Our ability to work as an extension of the client's team is our key contribution," says the company's chairman Ram.

A learning management system and document management system were some of the earliest outcomes. And why not? Around the early 2000s, online education was getting popular in India, and Argusoft tried to leverage the opportunity. Among other things, Argusoft created the platform for an online education portal for IAS candidates, called www. ucrackias.com.

Argusoft's fortunes received a big fillip when ISRO selected its distance learning platform (Presenter@work) for implementing its pilot Virtual Classroom program. As many of you might be aware, the country's premier space agency was providing bandwidth for distance learning classes using its EDUSAT satellite. Argusoft designed a solution leveraging its platform, while keeping in mind ISRO's needs. "The ISRO engagement gave us the confidence. It provided us with something we could go to prospective clients with," recalls Ravi.

"While turnkey software development services provides the cash flow for the company, we invest heavily in R&D", says Ram. The R&D effort in the company is focused on expanding the platform offerings; most recently the team used its capability to build a highly integrated collaboration platform called Communicate@Work leveraging its earlier Presenter@Work platform and upcoming new technologies. Ram describes communicate@work as a platform that "provides professionals with highly integrated real-world functionality for online collaboration using VoIP audio, video, desktop view sharing, enhanced whiteboard, and chat along with a facility to record the entire multi modal session as a single file". It leverages peer-to-peer technology, and is equipped with point of presence capability made popular by instant messengers.

Turnkey SOA Services

The pace at which existing technologies are changing and new technologies are emerging has made the importance of Argusoft services that much more critical. As companies expand, they adopt new software systems; each time they do this, they must integrate the new with the existing. "Given the pressure on every company and the importance of time to market, it becomes very difficult to do the integration as a monolithic platform in-house," says Ram. This is where Argusoft comes in. Powered by expertise in a range of web 2.0 software technologies, it helps clients by getting all the essential specs on to an integrated SOA system solution.

But then, how is the company different from any other services player in the market?

Argusoft creates its own platform intellectual properties, as well as provides turnkey consultancy services, which encompass business processes through to system architecture design, implementation and final integration.

"We are one of the few offshore players in the market that prides itself on accomplishing turnkey development projects," says Vice President of Technology AV Sethuraman, who has been with the company from the very beginning. "We pitch in with the business process design, system requirements capturing, software development, SQA, implementation, integration, documentation and take on projects from beginning to end". "The quality customer service and support is the icing on the cake for our clients".

Argusoft provides development services basing its offerings on Service Oriented Architecture (SOA). Argusoft, lets the customer decide which platform it wants to use, works with them to formulate their business processes, models these on a SOA platform and integrates the disparate systems under a single umbrella, giving the user an end to end seamless, consistent and persistent experience regardless of the systems/applications changing at the back end.

Argusoft counts names like Hewitt India, ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization), IIM-A (Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad), Dabur India Ltd, ITC India Ltd, Mudra Communications Pvt Ltd, Aref Investment Group(Kuwait), and Medic Alert Foundation International (USA), among its clients.

Argusoft has evolved a unique delivery model which ensures a very high level of accuracy/quality in all its deliveries. This happens by ensuring that the functional domain inputs were taken from real experts who have a background in both the industry as well as academia. A case in point has been the development of an enterprise class complete financial SOA package, for Aref Investment Banking Group – one of the largest financial services group in the Middle East. Apart from financial accounting, this system included Asset management and Treasury, Portfolio management and Direct investments. Argusoft has its head quarters and development offices in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India. "Given our proximity to IIM-Ahmedabad, we were able rope in one of the top finance Professor at IIM-A, Shailesh Gandhi to advise us with the domain expertise," says Ravi. Prof Gandhi provided Argusoft's Ahmedabad-based team with financial domain expertise for the business process design. With his help, the team custom-designed the platform, complete with Arabic language and Islamic banking support. Prof Gandhi had the following to say when asked about his experience working in this framework - "I recollect wonderful moments of our association while working on an assignment with Argusoft for AREF, one of the large Investment Groups in Kuwait. It was your well thought-out strategy to invite me as a member of the project team to provide domain expertise. The strategy was also very well executed by your team resulting in successful implementation of an expert SOA system for the organization".

"The combination of industry and academia helps us tremendously," says Ravi. "Argusoft has established a reputation as one of the premier IT companies in the region which provides an excellent learning environment", adds Ravi. "Incidentally, we get close to a thousand applications each year for the dozen internships positions we offer to graduating engineers from the regional engineering colleges, on an annual basis".

Argusoft worked with MedicAlert Foundation International based out of Turlock, California, USA to build their SOA system solution through integration of a number of diverse off-the-shelf SOA components. Argusoft played a tremendous role in working as an extension to MedicAlert's internal team to successfully implement their SOA system solution. Their ability to address end-to-end from business process to finished system delivery with documentation and provide the ability to integrate different technologies was a validation of their capabilities. Martin Kabat, President and CEO of MedicAlert Foundation in California USA says "Argusoft worked with us for more than two years to develop an essential revision of our information technology systems, working end-to-end from the business process to final delivery, and helping us build a more contemporary SOA architecture that will better serve our members".

Telemedicine Initiatives

The company has created many platforms which have been leveraged to obtain service projects. Leveraging its experience in distance learning and online training it has created an integrated collaboration platform (communicate@work) that can be leveraged in many verticals like web conferencing, enterprise collaboration, distance education and more successfully in Telemedicine. The following is a case study from the Tripura Vision Center (tele-opthalmology) pilot undertaken by

IL&FS, with Argusoft providing the technology platform. “It started with a single pilot, but is now on across 41 stations,” says Ravi.

Ranjan Sarkar realized that he had a problem on his hands the day his eyes swelled up; it was accompanied by constant watering and irritation. An inhabitant of Melaghar in the difficult and rather isolated hills in Tripura, he was worried about losing his eyesight. The closest hospital was over eight kilometers away, and there was no road connecting his place to it. Worse, hardly any good ophthalmologists were on the hospital’s rolls, and whoever were on rolls would seldom visit the hospital, given that Tripura was perceived to be plagued by insurgency, and therefore, violence; doctors would avoid venturing into the interiors as far as possible. His worries, however, were taken care of by the Tripura Vision Centre, in a way, using Argusoft’s C@W platform. Back then—the time was early 2008—IL&FS Education and Technology Services was implementing a telemedicine pilot, in collaboration with the department of health and government of Tripura. The efficacy of the project hinged on Argusoft; IL&FS was using the company’s communicate@work platform to connect the hilly interiors with doctors in Agartala/Kolkata. “Essentially, IL&FS sub-contracted the work to us,” says Ravi Gopalan, one of the founders and CEO of Argusoft.

One might, at this point, be pressed to ask what significance this has with Ranjan Sarkar’s woes. Well, as the script goes, everything. When Sarkar reached the Vision Center kiosk in the village, manned by a localite who had been trained to operate it, he was introduced to the doctor over video; he explained his problem with painstaking detail, every word of which was communicated via the VoIP functionality of c@w. The doctor then asked him to look into the ‘slit lamp’ equipped with a high-intensity camera at the site; the image at the other end enabled the doctor to look into the patient’s eye and hence to diagnose the problem. The doctor then with the help of the in-built white-boarding facility, explained Sarkar’s problem to him diagrammatically. He then wrote out the names of the medicines. A few days later, Sarkar’s problems were gone.

“We pitch in with the business process design, system requirements capturing, software development, SQA, implementation, integration, documentation and take on projects from beginning to end”.

The report from the Tripura Vision Center tele-ophthalmology project states that the pilots catered to a population of 34,32,000 people, spread over 40 blocks in four districts of Tripura. IL&FS project director Prem Anand writes, “The project has tangibly achieved in delivering the core objectives of providing preventive & primary Eye care services at almost the door step’s of the common man. The project required cost effective world class IT solutions such as the Audio/Video conferencing solution. Understanding this requirement Argusoft provided the “communicate@work” video collaboration solution for the project. The solution has significantly contributed to enabling more than 20,000 plus real time consultations between Doctors at the base hospital and patients from across the State of Tripura. Measuring the contribution to the society, Government of India through the Department of Administrative reforms & Public Grievances jointly with Department of Information Technology, Government of India awarded The National awards for e-Governance 2008-09 under the special sectoral category-“Health” to the Tripura Vision Centre Tele-Ophthalmology project. IL&FS Program Director Prem Anand adds, “Of all the collaboration technologies that were evaluated, Argusoft’s C@W came out ahead in terms of stability, bandwidth, and breadth of capabilities, not to mention the ease of use. We have been impressed with the Argusoft team and technology capabilities and plan to continue our relationship for years to come”. The success of the project prompted various government bodies to take notice. “Since the Tripura pilot, the government of West Bengal is using Argusoft’s communicate@work for its own telemedicine pilot titled Sushrut. The Jharkhand government has also started pilots using the platform”, says Ravi. In all of these cases, IL&FS is the implementing agency working with the respective governments, while Argusoft provides the technology infrastructure thru IL&FS.

The communicate@work platform is also finding applications in traditional web conferencing, as an enterprise wide collaboration tool, and a live teaching platform, among other things. The e-learning platform is being piloted by the government of Gujarat across multiple locations, in order to take higher education to colleges in remote locations.

Argusoft has come a long way from its beginnings in 2000 and promises to go places in the years to come, especially in upcoming verticals like telemedicine and healthcare, which have become it key vertical focus going forward. Argusoft plans to continue to evolve in an organic mode but is always open to investors and is exploring possibilities of partnering/merging with other entities, domestic or MNCs, to achieve the end goal faster and on a larger scale.