

Economic Times The Power Of Words

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THEY say that when God closes a door, He opens a window. This certainly seems true for C Mohan Ram, founder of Lattice Bridge Infotech. For Mr Ram, being one of the most successful salesmen in the IT services firm he worked at wasn't enough. The work was routine and he soon got bored. In 2000, he decided to quit and do 'something more exciting'. His boss was interested enough to ask what he found more challenging and exciting. "I said perhaps India's first ASP (Application Service Provider), which gives software as a service-SaaS in today's terms," says Mr Ram. "He asked how much investment was needed. I hadn't worked it out, but told him it would cost about US\$25 million." His boss was interested in the idea. From there on, it was a dream come true for Mr Ram. He began working on his fledgling company, hiring the best people he could find, convincing a CEO to buy the concept. His friends wondered why he didn't start off on his own, but Mr Ram reasons, "I am a typical middle-class worker-averse to taking risks-and business is not my cup of tea."

Fate, however, had other plans for him. In 2001, this door closed, as the promoter pulled out, citing financial difficulties. "I tried many things, from searching for a new investor to a management leverage buyout to employees taking over the assets and running the company," he says. "Finally, when all the options failed, I announced the closure of our new venture to my



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The Power Of Words Bringing Speech Recognition Software To India

brilliant staff, hand-picked by me." The more experienced employees found other jobs, and Mr Ram tried to place as many of them as possible through his contacts in other IT firms. Finally, just a few freshers were left. "I had a handful of very bright youngsters who had specialised in the area close to my heart-Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR)," he says. Mr Ram had two options. "I was in a dilemma: whether to return to my parent company, or continue the journey with the technology I love and the good people I have." He chose the second option and a new window of opportunity opened for him. His friends pitched in, many investing from Rs 1 to Rs 5 lakhs in the company. Within six years, Lattice Bridge Infotech became one of the top ten Centres of Excellence (COE) in speech technology across the globe and were pioneers in the field in India.

The field of speech recognition software isn't an easy one to enter. "Customers have a pre-conceived notion that speech recognition does not work," says Mr Ram. "In speech, even an 80% FARR (First Attempt Recognition Rate) is considered world class, as millions of people speak billions of words in trillions of ways." India's many languages, dialects and variants pose huge challenges for speech recognition in the country. His game plan to overcome these challenges is to work with customers as partners, and work on various commercial models, including ASP. The company already provides services in eleven Indian languages, as well as Arabic. For young entrepreneurs hoping to write their own success story, Mr Ram has some advice. "Work hard, harder, hardest. Follow the principle of profit in everything you invest and spend money carefully."

When it comes to his own company, the way ahead is clear. "Our mission is to 'Bridge the Digital Divide' using speech technology," says Mr Ram. "Our target is to empower the 800 million who cannot use the web for various reasons to carry out 'speech transactions' using their phones." More power to him.

- SUSANNA ATHAIDE