

Cloud is cool

Walking into the office of Ramco Systems in Chennai, the first thing one sees on the walls is a poster, about the company's cloud computing capabilities – then another about the Internet of Things (IoT), then another. "They are to inform everyone, even our own staff, about what we do," explains chief executive officer Virender Aggarwal. "We also participate in some global exhibition or the other almost every week, to get the message across to lots and lots of people."

A 33-year veteran of the information technology (IT) industry who graduated from BITS Pilani with an MMS in management in 1982, Aggarwal, 45, came into Ramco like a breath of fresh air three years ago. "This is a traditional – but not necessarily Tamil – company," he says. He created a culture change: he took the smallest desk available in the building instead of a large cabin to suit his CEO status; and nobody in the company calls anyone 'Sir' any longer.

Some of this is, obviously, thanks to Aggarwal's long stint in Singapore since 1994, when he moved to the island nation as country manager and vice president for NIIT Technologies. In his next job, with HCL Technologies, he continued as president and business head for Japan, Australia, New Zealand, China, Asia Pacific, India, Middle East and Africa; and in Ramco today, he continues to shuttle between Chennai and Singapore. Part of the disregard for a formal hierarchy also goes back to his second job, with A.F. Ferguson & Co, where he became the youngest senior consultant in the professional accountants company at age 26.

"I made some essential changes in the sales team, and we are getting very good results," he says. "We have a very smart team of graduates from the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad, and many who have worked in Oracle and SAP, in Malaysia and Dubai – all people who understand ERP and enterprise." One of the 'essential changes' Aggarwal introduced is that



Virender Aggarwal

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, RAMCO SYSTEMS

Date of birth: 20 July 1960 **Education:** Birla Institute of Technology and Science: MMS, management 1982 **Career:** Wipro Technologies: customer support engineer 1982; A.F. Ferguson & Co: consultant 1985, senior consultant 1986; SRF Finance (now GE Capital TFS Ltd): information technology manager 1989, CIO 1990; NIIT Technologies 1992, country manager & VP 1994; Satyam Computer Services: VP, South East Asia & Australia 1999, senior vice president and director, head of APAC, MEIA 2003; HCL Technologies: president & business head for Japan, Australia, New Zealand, China, Asia Pacific, India, Middle East and Africa 2009; Ramco Systems: CEO 2012

his people, especially those in customer-facing roles, should “look smarter than the competition” as they interact with large customers and CEOs with large budgets. When they go for meetings, they must all be armed with laptops, cell phones, presentations and visiting cards.

Wearable devices, currently wrist-watches, are capable of starting a conversation. “We have to introduce a novelty element into everything we do to get noticed as being ahead of the curve,” Aggarwal explains.

Even in its presentation for direct recruitment on campuses, Aggarwal makes sure that the company concentrates on putting across the message: “Do you want to be a single brick in a huge wall, or create buildings?” Says Aggarwal: “We want our people to believe in TGIM, thank God it’s Monday, so that they are eager to come to work at the beginning of the week.” As the company’s official Twitter handle says: “We are RAMCOOL – the Gen-Y of Ramco. We are ready to explore the unexplored.”

“Lots of fun things are happening!” adds P.R.V. Raja, founder and vice-chairman, Ramco group. “New spaces are opening up, people are looking for more efficient, less complex solutions – so we have very good traction, especially in markets like HCM (human capital management, which includes payrolls), aviation, ERP on cloud and enterprise asset management. These are all important breakthroughs that are giving us the visibility which we were lacking though our products were always very good.”

The customers too are realising that Ramco, the David, will be with them throughout their journey unlike the Goliaths in the business. MROs (maintenance and repair organisations) for aircraft, for instance, are big business for Ramco – but only about 1 per cent of a Goliath’s. “We were born in an aeroplane, we really know aviation!” Aggarwal grins. It is no wonder that international operators like Emirates, Malaysia Airlines, Falcon Aviation and Cobham Helicopters, besides the home-grown GoAir, are clients of Ramco Aviation software.

Why did he decide to join a comparatively small company like Ramco, with a turnover of only \$60 million (about ₹365 crore) – and just over 1,600 employees? “After 30 years with all the big boys in IT, I wanted to do something different – I had made enough money for my needs,” he explains. “Cloud and mobility are the coming thing; hawking operating systems is selling potatoes! Only innovation – that where it’s all at, figuring out how to increase the width of the pyramid. Mobility is a must in today’s world, even a desktop is not necessary!”

Besides, Aggarwal says, it is difficult to get a product offering known globally – not a single Indian product fits that bill. “We want to shout about ours from the rooftops!” he adds. He has also started spending on Google AdWords, to ensure that

engineering and process production – as well as trading and distribution and also real estate and other services.

Ramco has found the adoption of ERP on cloud gaining good traction, while the enterprise mobile application market has also been growing with increasing use of cloud services on mobile telephones and other devices. Both of these, Aggarwal is confident, will continue to grow thanks to the growing accessibility coming with the IoT. Cloud computing, he points out, ensures optimisation of an organisation’s hardware needs and cuts power costs – all at zero capital expenditure. Ergo, there is no technology obsolescence and the resultant costly upgrade cost.

But not every company is a convert to the cloud yet: some prefer to keep their core ERP in-house, while others

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Ramco comes up at least on the first page of any search. .

Ramco has over 150,000 users from 1,000-plus customer organisations, including names like Dabur and Mother Dairy and Indian, as well as global conglomerates like Singapore’s cranes and heavy machinery supplier Tat Hong, the Dutch chemicals and oil logistics provider Vopak, UAE-headquartered resorts operator Kerzner International and US beer, wines and spirits major MHW.

Aggarwal believes in the philosophy of focussing on a few products, “with more chances to win”. Ramco’s human resources product, for instance, has more than 50 multinational corporations using it, while a number of big industrial houses like Escorts and Punj have also moved to it. Kerzner, for instance, uses it for everything to do with its million-plus employees every month, while companies like WNS use the Ramco platform to provide service to their own clients. Clients range from manufacturing – specifically automobile,

are amenable to moving a large volume of applications like HCM, procurement, travel and expenses – and some even put their entire ERP on cloud. Increasingly, clients want an ERP solution with a lower total cost of ownership (TCO) – and what Aggarwal describes as Ramco ERP’s ‘uber-cool’ user interface, accessibility on mobile devices, social and context-aware, together with the cost advantages, make it a preferred option.

Cloud-based HR software, however, is being adopted increasingly – especially by larger companies hiring more and more young talent. These youngsters require more mobility, integration with social platforms for resume parsing, dashboards, powerful analytics, and simple-to-use interfaces, he points out.

And what are Aggarwal’s passions? “MUSIC,” he says. “Mobility, user interface, social, in memory, context aware!” That’s what sums up his professional philosophy.

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