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'Start-up services should meet customers' needs'

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Mr Sam Santhosh, the founder of MedGenome has been an entrepreneur, with over 20 years' of experience in the software industry. Currently, he is also the CEO and chairman of SciGenom Labs. SciGenom is a genomics company, also based in Cochin and founded by Mr Santhosh, which explores and exploits the advances in genomic technologies to bring new services and products to the lifesciences industry.

Prior to this, Mr Santhosh was the CEO and MD of California Software Limited (Calsoft) from 1992-2012.
"The completion of the first draft of the Human Genome and the explosive growth of sequencing technologies attracted him to start SciGenom and MedGenome," says Dr V L Ramprasad, COO and principal scientist, MedGenome Labs.

The services
MedGenome provides molecular genetic diagnostics using Sanger Sequencing and Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) technologies for personalized healthcare.
"The major services offered by SciGenom are Next Generation Sequencing and software tools around it. The human genetic testing (diagnostic) services have been incubated as a separate entity, which is MedGenome," adds Dr Ramprasad.
"Molecular diagnostic tests can help determine which variations in the patient's genes should be targeted for the right treatment option, especially in cancer," explains Dr Ramprasad.
He goes on, saying, "The tests will aid clinicians in screening to help predict the risk of developing a specific disease. We also develop software tools that help clinicians demystify genomic data so that they can take appropriate clinical decisions. Apart from the genetic tests that are targeted at the one gene and one disease level, we can do whole exome sequencing and whole genome sequencing. This can sequence hundreds of genes and MedGenome's expertise is in picking the needle in a haystack."
The company aims to start molecular tests that will do away with invasive methods like tissue biopsies in cancer patients and amniocentesis in pregnant women soon.
"The main challenge was in getting the medical market to understand the value of genetic tests. Secondly, developing low-cost tests and a strong bioinformatics team was the next challenge. The current high customs duty on raw materials still remains a challenge," voiced Dr Ramprasad.

Funding and setbacks

Initially, Mr Sam Santhosh was the sole investor while establishing the company.

"Now MedGenome has raised $5 million through Emerge Ventures, a venture capital company based in Singapore," he adds.

Currently, the company caters to academic translational research centers, tertiary hospitals, specialty clinics, oncologists and pharma companies.

"Being incubated at SciGenom," he says, "we did not have to face serious issues like other start-ups. The main challenge was getting the right people with the requisite skills."

For young entrepreneurs who want to set foot in the start-up circle, Dr Ramprasad advises, "Any start-up needs to ensure that its services and products meet customers' needs by providing real value. Then, you need to ensure that the company has sufficient funding and a well-qualified management team."

Expansion strategy

Talking about MedGenome's expansion plans, Dr Ramprasad adds, "We are buoyed by the positive response that we are getting from the industry and market for our service offerings. We are allocating additional resources to scale up the operations. We are starting a state-of-the-art lab in Bangalore which will soon become the hub of MedGenome operations."

MedGenome also plans to start satellite labs across the country to expand its services. "The bioinformatics tools and services that we are developing are going to be the key for our success," he said.

The workforce

The company now has 8 experienced PhD scientists who run day-to-day operations with separate teams. "We also have exclusive scientists who develop new affordable tests, and two medical doctors who help with clinical affairs," said Dr Ramaprasad.

He further states, "Our small but experienced research team, based in the US works on developing niche tools and tests for the Indian market. The most important is the strong bioinformatics and software development team, who efficiently convert the ATCG data that results in meaningful conclusions."

Dr Ramprasad also credits his marketing team for bringing in the much needed revenue.

"Our overall staff strength currently is 40. And this is expected to grow to about 60 this year," he mentioned.

The collaborations

Dr Ramprasad feels that the government should ensure that the right ecosystem and infrastructure are available to start-ups. "Which include incubator facilities, low cost funding, and tax incentives and so on," he said.

When asked about the company's collaborations, Dr Ramprasad said, "We are collaborating with key hospitals and translational research centers in India like Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai, Madras Diabetes Research Foundation in Chennai, and Narayana Nethralaya in Bangalore to name a few."

The company plans to make use of different schemes promoted by the Government through DBT.

The future

According to Dr Ramprasad, the company is focused on developing a low-cost yet highly accurate genetic test for average Indian patients.

"We are optimistic about reaching this goal in the next one year," he expresses delightfully.

Currently, the company is establishing its state-of-the-art genetic testing laboratory in Bangalore, which is a sequencing-based, non-invasive, prenatal testing lab, being built for the first time in the country.

He continues, "We are also developing a path-breaking somatic mutation software that helps clinicians guide treatment modalities."

"In the next two years, we aim to be one of the best genetic testing services company in this part of the world," concludes Dr Ramprasad.