

NEW ACTS

TECH THAT

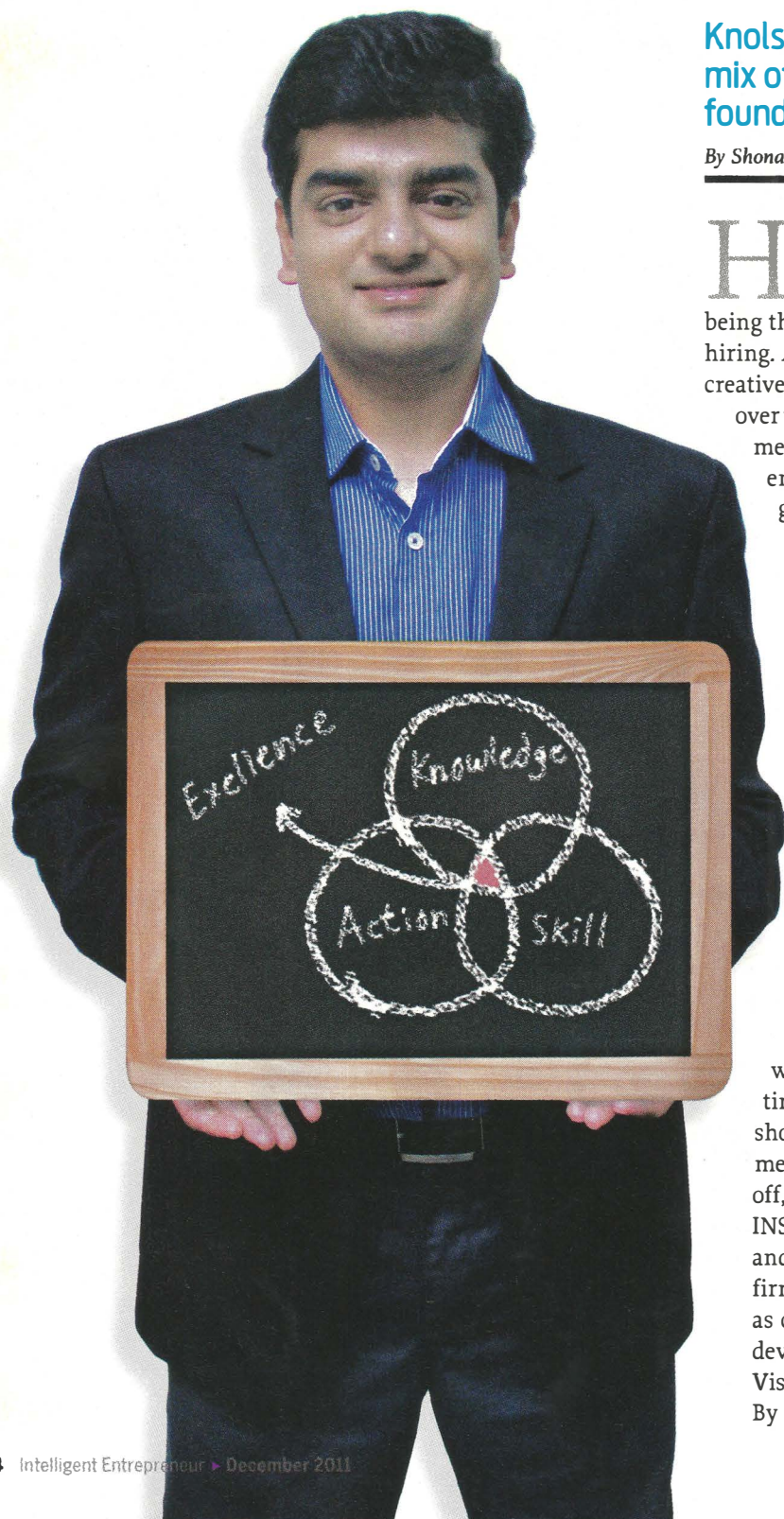
Knolskape's simulated products are a unique mix of theater and technology, thanks to its founder **Rajiv Jayaraman**.

By Shonali Advani

His chosen path wasn't very unique: A computer science graduate from BITS Pilani, Masters from a university in Alabama and then a plum job at Oracle in 2001, despite being the last recruit due to the dotcom bust that put a freeze on hiring. All this changed when Rajiv Jayaraman got drawn to the creative arts, theater and filmmaking, which got him on stage over weekends. This was the stepping stone to what his life was meant to be. "At Oracle, I did analytical work and my weekends were spent on crazy creative stuff; so I thought of integrating the two," says Jayaraman, Founder, Knolskape.

It was still a thought and so he pursued an MBA from INSEAD in the meantime. The urge to start something on his own was constant, and so Jayaraman transferred from its campus in France to Singapore as it seemed a friendlier place to start a venture. "I liked the idea of autonomy, freedom of getting things done and the feeling of being alive," he recalls. "I started thinking along the lines of digital media." His university had adopted simulations to teach organizational behavior and this form of learning impressed Jayaraman. Almost like an epiphany, he knew where he was headed, skipped sitting for placements and instead spent that time in the library working on his venture. "Simulations were a good integration of technology and theatre, it was story telling, albeit with a virtual story line," he points out.

Knolskape was incorporated in July 2008 in Singapore, incubated in the INSEAD campus sans seed money, but with a rented place to work. "Though 2008 was not the best time to start a company I told myself if the idea is good, it should do well," he says. "INSEAD gave me the right environment and I had access to professors who I could bounce ideas off," he adds. The first year was spent developing products for INSEAD covering each management domain, bootstrapping and working with mainly interns. By the end of year one, the firm moved to its own office space and had other B-schools as clients. "I use a customized software tool that Knolskape developed and they did a great job on it," says Balagopal Vissa, Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship at INSEAD. By 2009, Jayaraman incorporated his firm in India too with



one employee in Chennai and for two years they worked between countries. However, it was soon apparent that this style of working was going to be difficult and the entrepreneur decided to centralize the firm's base in Bengaluru in January 2011.

"After moving we've had lot of successes here," states Jayaraman. Additionally, India was an attractive market because of the rapid transformation from book learning to applied learning. According to the entrepreneur, demographics show that over 50 percent of India is less than 30 years. "Also 5 lakh MBAs graduate from India each year and 15-20 lakh managers and students are trained a year without simulations," he claims. Knolskape offers end-to-end products largely for IT firms, not just those catering to a few functional areas, but simulations relevant to skills sets, like consulting that has been its key differentiator in comparison to other players in the segment. "All our products are online, so there are no maintenance hassles for clients," he adds.

Broadly, the startup's simulations can be categorized into two types. First, number crunching ones covering areas like pricing decisions, market research data and the like and then experiential simulations which places participants in a virtual environment. These events can be strategic or operational in nature and participants have to take decisions accordingly. The storyline is dynamic and evolves based on actions a person takes. "All our simulations are event-driven and you can change them according to specific training and assessment needs," mentions Jayaraman. Plus, its simulations have been developed based on real world data, meaning those tracked from companies and industries where data is readily available. "We continuously update data so it's fresh and evolving," he says. Knolskape offers products off the shelf and is in the process of customizing some as corporate entities are looking for simulations rooted in India. "Most simulations that exist were made in the '70s and '80s with roots in western economy," he highlights.

At corporate organizations, simulations are used for training programs while at B-schools they are replacing case studies. "I come up with design elements and story while our designers transform it into game, where learning is embedded," states Jayaraman. Currently lecture-based learning at B-schools is one-dimensional whereas simulation based teaching provides for plenty of learning, given that it is interactive. "Students feel connected unlike with lectures where the 'what if' possibilities are missing," he points. The opportunity at the corporate level has been no less for Jayaraman,

especially with software as a service catching up, simulations are an innovation. "There's a transformation happening, where they want to see the return on training programs," he says. The challenge lies in building awareness on the benefits of using interactive training methods like simulations. The tech entrepreneur has overcome this only by demonstrating the numerous advantages of Knolskape's products, through direct sales calls with potential clients. "Biggest challenge has been that people treated it as a game, feeling it doesn't fit in a corporate environment, but once I gave a free demonstration they began to see value," quips Jayaraman.

MeritTrac, India-based skills assessment and testing services company for the past 10 years, recently partnered with Knolskape as they were looking for innovative companies to create simulation-based assessments. "We firmly believe that simulations and gaming is likely to be a serious new way of assessing people," says Rajeev Menon, GM, Innovations and New Product Development, MeritTrac. "What is needed for assessments is to provide more intuitive and multi dimensional data for selected candidates so that they can fit into a profile more accurately," adds Menon.

Knolskape now goes to the market together with them as partners to bring efficient, realistic performance-based assessments that can work in India. "The platform Knolskape provides is quite dynamic but we are yet to see it being tested on large volume concurrent testing as also incorporating more amounts of human-based interactions within the platform," points Menon.

Jayaraman's already got a sense of his company's future growth and is beginning to look at Knolskape as a platform where people can develop simulations with its framework and tools, also a means to grow the simulation market. "We want to be the Facebook of the simulation world," he says. Simply

put, Knolskape seeks to consolidate its products and place them in a broader umbrella, where a client signs on and has a series of simulations to choose from. This would also naturally require the startup to diversify its portfolio to different verticals.

Presently, he's keen on catering to the hospitality sector, known for its high churn rate. Jayaraman's team is in the process of understanding the course material at such institutes to develop a simulation for hotel chains. Other expansion plans include foraying into the academic computing market, which includes creation of digital assets for universities, plus package all products into corporate training seminars, which means entering the services side. ■

SIMULATED WORLD

Launch date:

1981

Initial investment:

S\$1 (In Singapore, half-day paper work)

Revenue 2010-'11:

Rs.2.5 crore

Revenue target 2011-'12:

Rs.5 crore

B-school clients/partnerships:

Kellog, S.P.Jain Dubai & Mumbai, INSEAD, Singapore Polytechnic, IIFT Delhi

No. of corporate clients:

5

No. of employees:

15

Price charged per person:

Rs.500-Rs.2,500, when used in corporate training