

AUTO BUILD

Aurigo is amongst the few that have developed software that automates and connects all processes involved in the creation of infrastructure projects

Sujit John | TNN

It's difficult to keep up with Balaji Sreenivasan when he talks. He talks fast. And there's so much he wants to do, so much he wants to convey, that you often have to make him pause and repeat himself.

In his career too, he's running. We don't get the feeling that anything has made him pause much. Within three years of his starting Aurigo Software Technologies in 2003, he had created successful software products for the infrastructure and real estate business, and Aurigo had been featured in the Red Herring 100 list and been named by Microsoft amongst the most innovative companies.

Now, he is trying to rapidly add business consulting, systems integration and managed services expertise. "We want to be a mini-IBM for the infrastructure sector," he says.

The son of K Sreenivasan, former DGP & IGP of Karnataka, Balaji Sreenivasan did engineering from NIT, Trichy, and then a Masters in computer science from the University of Florida, Gainesville. He briefly worked for an IT design firm in Florida and then, in 2002, he felt the urge to create software products. He happened to run into Deepak Pulipati, who had worked in Shell Australia, and together started work on a mobile middleware platform, a workflow and collaboration engine that would allow people and applications to remotely access a central data server.

Virgin territory

One of their customers was a start-up called Xpio, which was trying to automate construction industry processes. Xpio suggested that its construction automation software be built on top of Sreenivasan and Pulipati's platform. The latter duo found that appealing for two reasons. One, construction looked like a good segment to be in. The banking and finance vertical was overcrowded. And what was perhaps the only other industry that could match the banking and finance vertical in size, the construction industry, had hardly any players. There was Autodesk, which controlled design. But outside that, in the larger construction space, there was nobody of significance.

The second reason was that a mobile platform appeared ideally suited to the construction industry, given that about 70% of the workforce in that industry works at the construction site, away from the head office.

So Sreenivasan and Pulipati bought out Xpio and thus was born Aurigo, with the main development centre in Bangalore. The idea was to automate everything from design to the ribbon-cutting. The construction industry then, and even today, is largely managed with inch tapes, calculators, clipboards and spreadsheets. The staff at the construction site notes all details on paper clipboards, which frequently leads to erroneous data, illegible data entry, and often does not give the true status of projects. The process inevitably means lack of realtime visibility. Sreenivasan says this is the major reason why there are so much cost over-runs and delays in construction work.

Over the years, Aurigo created solutions to automate and connect the processes of project cost estimation, electronic bidding (tendering), contract management, facilities management, asset management, real estate operations and field inspections. For instance, when a certain amount of work is completed, you are immediately alerted that payment is due.

A laptop or special rugged hand held devices can be used to record data at the site, which becomes immediately visible to all concerned. The solution provides for a GPS so that you know where exactly the entry was made. It has connectors to Microsoft and SAP platforms, so that customers who already run these solutions can easily integrate Aurigo products with them. It even enables real-time collaboration between the job site, the headquarters and the purchase department.

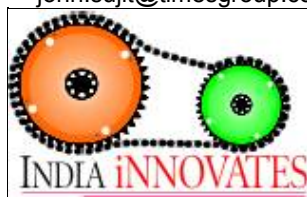
Attracting investors

The early funding for their venture came from their families. But in 2004 and 2005, they received \$10 million of funding from three investors: Sridhar Manthani and Sunil Nanda, both of who had cofounded Thinkit Technologies, an entity that was acquired by Intel in 2000; and Ravi Gulati, who had founded Stony-Brook Software that was acquired by Ascend Communications in 1996. All of them joined Aurigo's board as investor directors. Gulati plays a very active role in the company, but Pulipati is now only an investor, having joined his family's real estate and construction business.

Today, Aurigo has over 40 customers, mostly in the US and India. The Oregon (US) department of transportation is using it in a bridge construction project. In India, the customers include Nagarjuna Construction Company, SNC Power Corp, RDS Projects and WoodKraft. "We have been profitable since last year," says Sreenivasan.

But he admits that convincing potential customers about the need for IT in construction is a challenge. "Even L&T and ACC don't automate much," he says. But as India undertakes more and bigger infrastructure projects, he thinks automation software would become inevitable. "Many contractors today are doing projects of a size they have never undertaken before. And without IT, their calculations could go completely awry," says Sreenivasan.

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Aurigo's builders: Balaji Sreenivasan, founder & CEO, Kevin Koenig (sitting), VP, operations — North America, and Navin Goel, VP, engineering