

Creative Balance

A Deliberate Approach to IT, and to Life

In 1999, legendary entrepreneur Dhirubhai Ambani announced plans to transform information and communications technology in India.

“Make the tools of information and communication available to people at an affordable cost,” he said, “and

By Mark L.S. Mullins

they will overcome the handicaps of illiteracy and lack of mobility.” Three years later, Reliance Infocomm began construction of India’s first all-digital, IP-enabled network, with 65,000 kilometers of fiber optic cable at its backbone.

Today, Reliance Communications (RCOM) is India’s largest private-sector information and communications company, with more than 71 million customers and services ranging from mobile phones (GSM and CDMA) to television, from enterprise IT services to home broadband. Cutting-edge technology has given RCOM a competitive edge, and the firm continued this leadership when it named Dr. Sumit Chowdhury as its new CIO in 2006.

RCOM’s customer base trends toward India’s tech-savvy young adult population, and Chowdhury fit that demographic well. “The company showed a lot of confidence in giving a 35 year old the opportunity to be the CIO of one of the largest telecom companies

in India,” he recalls. “I hope they wanted a fresh perspective. I bring in a lot of energy, and I think like the next generation of consumers—and the employ-

ees of RCOM, where the average age is 28.”

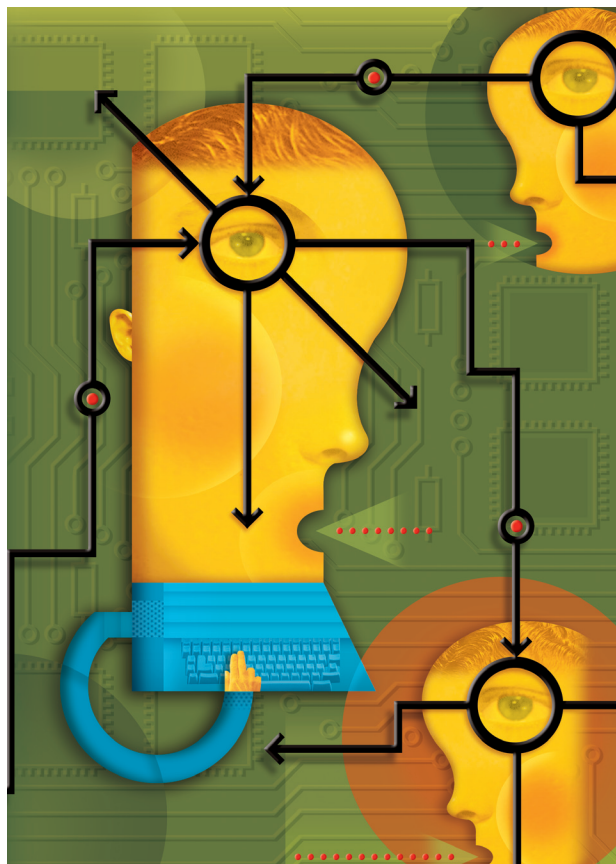
A rapid career path

Chowdhury’s background seems perfectly tailored for a leadership role at an innovative communications firm. Having earned an engineering degree with an emphasis on telecommunications, he studied several U.S. firms as a part of a Ph.D. program. “I went out and spent some time in some of the telcos,” he remembers, “understanding their problems and looking at their corporate planning.”

After completing his studies, Chowdhury joined San Francisco Consulting Group, which was later acquired by KPMG. “We were a group of telecom

consulting professionals,” he explains, “and I joined because the focus of my Ph.D. was so pertinent to the industry. I worked across four continents in my first three years of working there.

“After three years I landed in Australia,” he continues, “and I became a partner (MD) two years later.” The consulting arm of KPMG spun off to become BearingPoint at about this time, and Chowdhury advanced across several roles to finally become the interim



country leader of BearingPoint Australia, while it fought governance issues with the previous CEO. “The leadership role gave me exposure to sectors I had not been involved with before, such as financial services and government, and also the opportunity to manage a professional services company,” Chowdhury recalls. This experience has helped in managing more than 2,500 resources in Chowdhury’s current IT team.

A balanced life

While his educational and work background made him the ideal CIO of a major communications company, Chowdhury’s extracurricular interests helped to make him the perfect fit for an innovative firm like RCOM. He’s an avid musician and has participated in and led several musical groups over the years. “I’m schooled in Indian music and play the keyboard and the accordion,” he notes.

“I also do abstract figurative painting,” he continues. “I have a goal to have my own personal exhibition in three to four years’ time. I can do about five or six largish paintings a year.” Chowdhury’s participation in the arts connects him in another way with the younger generation of Indian consumers, many of whom are themselves involved in creative avocations.

These pursuits, along with a regular meditation practice and running in marathons, bring a balance to Chowdhury’s life that in many ways has enabled his success. “I learned as a young man that the meaning of my name, Sumit, is ‘well balanced’. This knowledge has had a great influence on my life.”

Maintaining availability for diverse customers

This balance is important, as Chowdhury’s CIO role actually encompasses two business units: telecommunications and IT services. “I am the CIO on one side,”



Dr. Sumit D. Chowdhury, CIO,
Reliance Communications

he explains, “and I have outsourced everything to my other side in IT services.” The group also provides IT and data center services for a number of large firms and for other Reliance business units.

The IT services role makes Chowdhury’s job more complex than the typical CIO’s. “Not only do I have to keep our systems highly available for our consumers,” he notes, “but I also have Service Level Agreements with each of our enterprise IT services customers. Ninety percent of our revenue comes from a number of business-critical processes that must be available 24 hours a day.”

One key system for RCOM is eRecharge, which enables consumers on prepaid phone plans to add minutes to their account online. A few years ago, the application was running on a single enterprise-level server—representing a single point of failure. To mitigate this risk, the IT team chose a Symantec high avail-

▶ Reliance Communications: A Digital Revolution in India

Reliance Industries, founded in 1962 by Dhirubhai Ambani, grew to become India’s largest private sector enterprise in the 1990s. Originally involved in the import and export of textiles, the company diversified into petroleum products, apparel, financial services, and other businesses. Prior to Ambani’s death in 2001, the conglomerate expanded into the communications industry.

Founded: 1999 as Reliance Infocomm

Chairman: Anil D. Ambani, son of Dhirubhai Ambani

Services: Digital voice, data, and video services for consumers and enterprises

Customer Base: More than 71 million
FY08 Revenue: Rs 182 billion (\$3.5 billion USD)

IT Services Team: 2,500

Website: www.rcom.co.in

ability solution to deploy eRecharge to an one-to-one, active-active cluster on two Sun servers.

Minimizing downtime

The result was an increase to 99.999 percent availability for that system, and this gave the IT

▶ Well-tailored Schooling

Education is a critical component of Sumit Chowdhury's background, and each course of study has added a new dimension to his broad experience. It began in childhood. "For primary through high school, I attended Loyola School in Jamshedpur," he recalls. "It is a Jesuit school, a unique school with an open learning environment. Multitasking and all-around development was part of our daily routine; for example, I participated in six clubs simultaneously. This experience helps me enormously at work today, with a hundred projects running at any time."

As an undergraduate, Chowdhury attended the Indian Institute of Technology campus in Kanpur. "It happens to be one of the best engineering schools in the country and ranked highly in the world," he notes. "My studies focused on engineering disciplines, but I also organized festivals, music shows, and other events, which helped me grow as a leader—someone who can bring a group of people together with an idea, gather funds for it, and deliver a project or an event on the given day."

Chowdhury later moved to the United States and earned a M.S. in electronics and communications engineering and a Ph.D. in management and information systems at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "There, the thing that helped me most was learning to structure an unstructured problem," he asserts. "Every day in my work, I have to take a business problem and distill it down to an execution plan. There are mostly no right or wrong answers—in life or in management. We have to look at data, come up with a few theories, then look at the data again and see what theories are holding up better in real life. The Ph.D. program helped greatly with that."

Finally, Chowdhury received training and a diploma at the Australian Institute of Company Directors. "I have done the board certification program for being on boards of companies," he explains. "What it has taught me is how the board thinks, how to deal with executive management, and how to convey technical and operational problems in terms that are understandable to a board of directors. That helps me to meet the expectations of executives to whom I report."

While pursuing his academic degrees, Chowdhury also managed to complete eight years of music studies (with a certification to teach) and six years of art, which has helped him to achieve the balance necessary to successfully navigate a rapidly growing and changing career.

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—Dr. Sumit D. Chowdhury, CIO, Reliance Communications

team the confidence to expand the solution to other business-critical systems for RCOM and its enterprise customers. "We've now standardized on Symantec for storage management and high availability across our enterprise," Chowdhury notes. "We appreciate the scalability of the solutions and the ability to work with different hardware and operating systems."

RCOM's Symantec storage management infrastructure simplified two recent initiatives: a GSM launch for five million mobile subscribers, and the launch of a direct-to-home television service. "The Symantec solutions simplified data migration and helped us to optimize the use of storage for these bandwidth-intensive services while minimizing downtime," Chowdhury notes.

Protecting terabytes of data

RCOM has also protected its data with Veritas NetBackup for several years. "With the addition of so many video-related services, our data volume is growing even faster than at most other companies," Chowdhury explains. "We now back up 200 terabytes per week."

"Of course, reliability is the main reason we selected NetBackup," Chowdhury says. "Another benefit is the ease of administration and the single console for all of our diverse systems."

Compatibility of vision

For Chowdhury, RCOM's corporate culture is a good fit. "Since I joined the company and have seen how certain things have been put together," he observes, "I have come to better understand and appreciate Dhirubhai Ambani's vision—what he thought in terms of ideas, in terms of thinking big, of taking chances, of leadership, of helping people out. Never take no for an answer. Go out and figure out a solution. Be very resourceful and cost conscious. These are things that are applicable to anyone's life, but they certainly help me know that I'm not going to be opposed just because I'm trying to be resourceful."

"I get a lot of support from the organization, to tell you the truth. Because of the way I operate and the way the organization accepts that type of leadership, we get along very well." ■

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▶ “Reliance” on Symantec Solutions

- > Veritas NetBackup
- > Veritas Storage Foundation
- > Veritas Storage Foundation for Oracle RAC
- > Veritas Cluster Server
- > Symantec Endpoint Protection
- > Symantec Consulting Services