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'Start-ups services should meet customers' needs'

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The humble beginnings
SciGenom is a Genomics company, also based in Cochin, which explores and exploits the advances in Genomic technologies to bring new services and products for life science industry.

Mr Sam Santhosh, the founder of SciGenom and MedGenome has been an entrepreneur, with over 20 years' experience in the software industry. Currently he is also the CEO and chairman of SciGenom Labs.

Prior to this, Mr Sam was the CEO and MD of California Software Limited (Calsoft) between 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 & 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 has 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 further goes on saying, "The tests will also aid clinicians in screening to predict the risk of developing a specific disease. We also develop software tools that help clinicians demystify the genomic data so that they take clinical decisions. Apart from the Genetic tests that are targeted at one gene and one disease, we can do Whole Exome sequencing and Whole Genome sequencing, that can sequence hundreds of genes and MedGenome's expertise is in picking the needle in a haystack."

The company also soon aims to start exciting molecular tests that will do away with invasive methods like tissue biopsies in cancer patients and amniocentesis in pregnant women.

The challenges
"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 high customs duty on the raw materials currently still remains a challenge," voiced Dr Ramprasad.

The funding and setbacks
Initially, Mr Sam Santhosh was the sole investor while establishing the company.

"Now MedGenome has raised USD $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 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-ups circle, Dr Ramprasad advises, "Any start-up needs to ensure that its services and products meet customers' needs genuinely 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 extremely positive response that we are getting from the industry and market for our service offerings. We are putting additional resources to scale up the operations. Starting a state-of-the-art lab in Bangalore which will soon become the hub of MedGenome operations."

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

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 in clinical affairs," says Dr Ramaprasad.

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

Dr Ramprasad also credits his marketing team who bring the much needed revenue for the company.

"Now our overall staff strength currently is 40. And this is expected to grow to about 60 this year," he mentions.

The collaborations

Dr Ramprasad feels that the government should ensure the right ecosystem and infrastructure is available for start-ups. "Which includes incubator facilities, low cost funding, and tax incentives and so on," he comments.

When asked about the company's collaborations, Dr Ramprasad opines, "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 targeting to develop a low-cost yet highly accurate genetic test for average Indian patients.

"We are optimistic to reach 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 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.