Social entrepreneurship through digitally networked communities – a case study of Iridium Interactive

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Abstract: The case study traces the entrepreneurial journey of Mr. Sriram Bharatam, founder of Iridium Interactive. The case study maps the initiatives undertaken by Mr. Bharatnam starting from CAUSE AN EFFECT, a social initiative to TIBU – a comprehensive healthcare program management solution conceptualised and designed by iridium to fight the menace of TB in Kenya. This entrepreneurial journey highlights the core essence of approaching social issues by leveraging the power of technology and digital innovation which is the centre-stage of Iridium’s strategy. The case was written based on primary data – basically, personal interviews with the Mr. Manish Kanojia, chief creative officer (CCO) of the company, and secondary data available at company website and other online sources. The case is basically aimed at post-graduate management students. The aim is to highlight the concept of social entrepreneurship, importance of web accessibility and establish the inter-linkages between ICT and healthcare services.

Keywords: e-learning; ICT for healthcare solutions; innovation; social entrepreneurship; TIBU.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Concept of social entrepreneurship

Across the world a large proportion of population does not have access to even the basic amenities, products or services. In terms of their sheer numbers, this segment cannot be ignored for economic reasons as well as from a holistic development perspective. Increasingly innovative and sustainable approaches are being applied by entrepreneurs keeping in mind the overall benefit to the society with an added emphasis on the marginalised and poor. Collectively, all these initiatives established a phenomenon that can be defined as social entrepreneurship (Seelos and Mair, 2005). Some researchers suggested that it is the business activity for the operation of non-profit organisations (Reis and Clohesy, 1999) but other researchers suggested that it can be a profit activity to support other non-profit activities (Wallace, 1999; Cook et al., 2001). In profit seeking businesses, Thompson (2002) clarified that social entrepreneurship has some commitment to doing good. In a nutshell, social entrepreneurship can also be defined as “a process that includes: the identification of a specific social problem and a specific solution (or set of solutions) to address it; the evaluation of the social impact, the business model and the sustainability of the venture; and the creation of a social mission-oriented for-profit or a business-oriented nonprofit entity that pursues the double (or triple) bottom line” [Robinson, (2006), p.95]. Moreover, Alvord et al. (2004) suggested, “Social entrepreneurship creates innovative solutions to immediate social problems and mobilizes the ideas, capacities, resources, and social arrangements required for sustainable social transformations”.

1.2 Journey of Mr. Sriram Bharatam toward social entrepreneur

According to Bornstein (2004) “Social entrepreneurs are people with new ideas to address major problems, are relentless in the pursuit of their visions, people who simply will not take “no” for an answer, who will not give up until they have spread their ideas as far as they possibly can”. In this way, Mr. Sriram Bharatam is truly a social entrepreneur as he came up with an innovative idea of creating an online community to collect the money towards the cause of affected victims of a natural calamity and established it in the form of a non-profit organisation. Mr. Sriram Bharatam was an alumnus of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA with a bachelor’s degree in Engineering along with Masters in Business Administration. He grew very fast in the corporate world and has won the ‘Intrapreneur’ (out of the 2,500 youngsters) of the year award and many other recognition awards for all his initiatives. He was working with Hewlett Packard and was instrumental in setting up the SAP practice for them. That is when the Odisha cyclone happened and changed his entire life (Somasekhar, 2012).
2 Background of the initiative

The Cyclone which was also called as Cyclone 05B came on October 25, 1999 due to which 15,000 people were died and there were heavy damages in its path of destruction (Wikipedia, n.d.). He left his brilliant career for the establishment of a non-profit organisation in order to aid the victims of this natural calamity. Because he was a passionate believer of the power of internet, so he used this power to collect the adequate funds for the victims. He started an initiative ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ to provide relief to the victims. Within a span of just few days, the initiative received the support from 18 corporates. ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ then launched a website, every time any person who visited the website and clicked on the link ‘save a life’, Rs.9 were credited (50 paise was received from every company and the total companies were 18) along with the person’s donated amount to a relief fund. By the fifth day of the launch of the website, a group of kids from Austin, Texas, e-mailed ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ team asking them where they could send the $100 that they had raised for the relief fund. This e-mail from children was posted on the website creating a viral effect. Soon the entire initiative gathered momentum, and in less than six weeks in existence, it had a community of 18 million people across the globe supporting the cause by raising Rs.7.5 Crores. “Over days, cheques in gunny bags were sent to the then Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister’s office towards helping the affected in Odisha,” said, Mr. Sriram (Somasekhar, 2012).

3 Other activities of the initiative

‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ team also participated in help and support activities for those affected in India during the tragedy of 2004 tsunami. Founders of ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ foundation put together a team and produced some alternate livelihood capacity building modules to train the fisher men and women who lost their temporary livelihood and were clueless about what to do. ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ has trained over 20,000 women in these skill sets and help create local linkages for them to sell those. Nasscom foundation reached out to Mr. Sriram and an MOU was signed between Nasscom foundation and ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ foundation where by Nasscom wanted to use the capacity building modules that were produced by ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ by its 150+ NGO partners across India. All these efforts brought Mr. Sriram towards a global appreciation in the form of esteemed ‘Kauffman Community Award’ in the field of social entrepreneurship, which is the highest recognition in the world for social entrepreneurship. Mr. Sriram was the youngest and the first non-American to receive the same in the year 2004 (Iridium Interactive, 2011).

3.1 Present activities of CAUSE AN EFFECT foundation

Presently, ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ is a non-government organisation dedicating its activities on sustainable livelihoods of the people. It offers consultancy to various non-profit organisations and also the CSR divisions of different companies. It has many partners including Nasscom Foundation, UNICEF, Founding Member of iCongo, United Animal Way, UNODC, WASSAN; Dept. of Agriculture in the Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, etc.

Currently, ‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ undertakes initiatives in three broad areas:
1 ICT 4 disable: Training on ICT-based modules, rural knowledge centres, educating the poor children in computer education without any cost.

2 Disability: Certificate issue support for disable people, providing medical aid and employment opportunities.

3 Sustainable livelihoods: Workshops, training sessions, farmer-scientist interactions through ICT-based livelihood training modules (Social Responsibility, n.d.).

3.2 Nurturing the initiative into enterp rise consulting and web accessibility firm

‘CAUSE AN EFFECT’ initiative was an important turning point which fostered Mr. Sriram as a social entrepreneur. Mr. Sriram’s faith in the power of World Wide Web prompted him to take a leap of faith and started first full-cycle interactive agency of India, i.e., Iridium Interactive in 2000 and started offering enterprise consulting, interactive marketing, e-learning and web accessibility services. This company started from a modest cybercafé in the name of ‘Cyber Spice’ in Hyderabad. In fact, it partnered with the owner of the café to occupy space and hired three cubicles; to be used by Iridium Interactive as office cubicles. ITC became their first client followed by Escorts and Maruti and many more names got added to the portfolio in subsequent years of starting the operations (Somasekhar, 2012).

Over the years Iridium has built world class interactive and innovative digital solutions with exclusive frameworks in healthcare/pharmacy, higher education, digital media and entertainment, retail and non-profit sectors. On the basis of established practice in the different areas of digital strategy, building of new media solutions, creative development and digital marketing solutions for Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0, Iridium with its 150+ employees has serviced over 500+ clients across 4 continents since its inception (Iridium Interactive, 2013) and it facilitated significant online business growth for its different clients across nine verticals. Iridium’s distinction lies in providing an exceptional integrated approach of digital strategy, creative excellence, technological support and digital marketing solutions.

Now, Iridium is among the top 100 IT Innovators in India and its core strength lies in the application of principles of innovation for internet and mobile communication medium, thus it is creating ‘disruptive’ strategic value for the businesses (Iridium Interactive, 2010). Iridium Interactive has offices in Hyderabad, Noida, Los Angeles, Hamburg and Nairobi.

4 Accessibility as the key strategy in the steps ahead

In spite of making in-roads across the global markets through diverse ICT enabled consulting services to more than 500+ clients and 10,000+ SME customers across India and Africa (Iridium Interactive, 2013); the core essence of approaching social issues by leveraging the power of technology remains the centre-stage of Iridium’s strategy. There are various innovative strategies for which credit goes to Iridium. Among which process of making websites ‘user-friendly’ and ‘accessible’ is one of them. The case in point is the work done for Delhi-based Escorts Hospital. Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre (EHIRC) in New Delhi is the leading heart and research institution of India. Being
a torch-bearer and pioneer in its field, the hospital wanted to increase responsiveness and interaction between doctors, patients and visitors. Escorts realised that online medium provided ideal platform for this initiative. As a first step, Escorts envisioned a transaction-based web front which could integrate its existing hospital management system as well as the new proposed web initiatives. This website would able to provide basic information along with creating a new knowledge base of heart related problems and diseases accessible to all visitors.

Based on this brief, Iridium conceptualised and executed a simple yet efficient web presence for Escort’s that took its operational and tedious procedures online. Iridium and escorts successfully created an architecture that assimilated online appointments, bookings, payments, information on procedures, services, facilities, patient tracking information, e-greetings and animation modules (Iridium Interactive, 2013). These services on the website has made the hospital management system more transparent, efficient and cost effective and increased the customer satisfaction by making it much more accessible even to a general patient, caregiver and other visitors who do not have much medical knowledge.

The term ‘Accessibility’ refers to develop the websites in such a way that these websites can be navigated easily by differently-abled users. In this regard, company has even hired visually challenged software developers as they can understand the problems better. “Its high time companies look beyond employing differently-abled people merely as telephone operators. Some of the people trained by us in mainstream work are now well placed in larger companies and the NASSCOM inclusion team, where there is more scope to grow”, said, Mr. Sriram. In this way, Iridium has designed and developed Punarbhava.in, India’s National disability Portal to help the visually challenged people to access all the information.

5 Social networking to social awareness

Yet another marque initiative by Iridium in the domain of public health sector has received wide acclaim by all the stakeholders. The team conceived a platform which not only happened to be a mere social networking site for fun but it has been designed as a tool that truly created social awareness in the public health sector. In this regard, www.publichealthglobal.org was designed and developed by Iridium. This platform has been created in order to generate new learning methods and also to initiate a multilevel dialogue between academics, researchers and public health practitioners which would gradually build the strong partnerships across the globe. Through this network, various schools of public health, stakeholders and the community of health practitioners can share their experiences and curriculum. They can also transfer best practices, caution each other against repetition of failed models, exchange learning resources and, if possible, strengthen public health capacity through inter-institutional faculty exchange and joint research. This website was intended to be a common platform for debate and analyse the difficulties faced by public health, development of common as well as corresponding sensibilities, exchange of diverse ideas and researches in various areas of health, and accomplishing the needs of these countries for the development of a common plan of action in order to address the challenges in public health.
6 Developing India’s first interactive portal for differently-abled

In their quest of expanding the rich experiences of worldwide web even to the differently-abled population, Iridium partnered with Media Lab Asia (which is a unit of the Indian Department of Information Technology) along with Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) (a federal body dealing with rehabilitation of the disabled) and they all jointly developed a portal ‘Punarbhava.in’ specifically intended for differently-abled people.

The first phase of the portal was started in March 2008 by the then Hon’ble Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, Smt. Meira Kumar and the then Hon’ble Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology, Dr. Shakeel Ahmed (Iridium Interactive, 2008). The aim of this platform was to create and run a complete internet portal, which accumulates specialised information and services for all stakeholders in the welfare of differently-abled population. This internet portal contained vital information database and daily updated news by different media channels for the development of the disability and rehabilitation sector in India. There would be a collection of resources like films documentaries, list of publications and institutions available for users to download the resources of information in textual e-books, audio and multimedia mode. The portal was not only meant for the schools where computer-based printing system was available but it was designed in such a way that language script or Braille script can be printed locally. Visitors on this portal would access the complete database of NGOs working for disable people in India and would contact with the sponsors in order to finance the projects for the welfare of disable people.

The visitors can go through all government orders, laws, circulars related to disability and disability certificate form and they can also download it, if needed. Moreover, a dedicated section would be available for information on professional consultants and students who are being trained as specialists to deal with disability related problems and issues. When the portal was launched there were 30,000 such professionals in the country and around 5,000 persons were getting registered themselves for fresh training every year (Iridium Interactive, 2008).

7 The Kenyan safari

Mr. Sriram’s zeal to explore new opportunities took him to Kenya in 2010. In Kenya, 80% of day-to-day financial transactions are done through Vodafone’s Safaricom M-Pesa. Moreover, 70% citizens of the total 40 million people are connected through M-Pesa used for money transactions from the phone (Somasekhar, 2012).

Due to that high penetration of internet and mobile services in Kenya, Mr. Sriram found the opportunity to offer pragmatic solutions to small and medium enterprises in Kenya. This led to the birth of ‘Kuza Biashara’ website in 2011, which in Swahili means ‘grow your businesses’. The focus of the initiative was capacity building for these small and medium enterprises in Kenya. It benefited about 25,000 small business owners. According to Mr. Sriram, “These people don’t know what they don’t know”, for example, they even do not know how to recruit employees, how take bank loans or prepare a balance sheet. In this regard, Mr. Sriram said that they had made more than 300 short videos to educate small businesses which offered them a range of suggestions and solutions at every step of their growth in the business (Somasekhar, 2012).
This initiative won the prestigious Kenya Vision 2030 Innovation Award for Iridium Interactive in the year 2011. Kuza has been spun off as an independent business and a Social Enterprise and Kuza is working towards empowering a million micro and small entrepreneurs by 2018.

Figure 1  Snap shot of Kuza Bashara website (see online version for colours)

Source: Kevin (2012)

8 Taming the menace of TB in Kenya using ICT

Kenya stands at 15th position in the list of 22 countries which are highly affected with TB disease in the world. It has been estimated that more than 1.8 million people die every year across the world due to tuberculosis (TB) itself. It is the second greatest killer in the world next to HIV/AIDS (Iridium Interactive, 2012). And in Kenya, more than 150,000 people are affected by TB every year and it is one of among the main causes of mortality in the country.

Ministry of Health Kenya was facing a problem to record and maintain the data of TB’ patients. Weak program management in running the most National TB programs was a key issue across the globe and Kenya was not different in this problem. Data of the TB patients in Kenya was usually collected manually and it took around 90–120 days to reach the national office of the Ministry of Health. The compilation, updation and timely monitoring of the line of treatment of the TB patients was a challenging task marked by inaccurate and duplication of data; considering that most of TB patients are daily wagers who move from one place to another. As TB is a highly infectious disease that requires timely supply of drug and constant monitoring on drug administration. Both these things are critical in containing TB patients to a more severe Multi-Drug Resistant TB. Thus, quick retrieval and reporting patients’ accurate health records and historical information becomes critical data-point for minimising the rate of TB.

TB patients were also needed to be reimbursed for going to the health facility for taking medicines in the presence of ministry staff, Since TB patients were mostly daily wage workers who would lost the daily wages otherwise. Seamless integration of the TB Health Information System along with the National Health Information System was also required to analyse and process information. It was then needed to prepare consolidated reports at the National level, Province level, District level and Facility level. In order to
prepare these consolidated reports, it was required to empower the District Level officers and Facility level officers to manage their respective administrative areas using mobility devices with real-time data.

Under these ground realities, Ministry of Health Kenya initiated a revolutionary plan in order to improve the management of its TB program through innovative web-based solution integrated with mobile technology and this was the first of its kind which was to be implemented in Africa.

9 Action plan

Ministry of Health Kenya with the financial support from USAID came out with a Comprehensive Health Solution, TIBU, in collaboration with Safaricom and its Innovation partner’s Iridium Interactive and Tangazoletu in Kenya. In the native language ‘Swahili’ of Kenya, TIBU means ‘to treat’. TIBU was then launched in Kenya in November 2012 (TIBU, n.d.). This initiative had been undertaken to address challenges in data management and it also ensured tracking and monitoring of all the data related to TB patients throughout Kenya.

TIBU program was based on a two way approach which enabled the TB program to access the data easily by administration at all the levels for appropriate decision making. It also improved the recording and reporting of real time data from the lowest level to the central unit along with feedback.

Iridium Interactive put together a comprehensive solution framework comprising of health information system, monitoring and evaluation, patient treatment, laboratory management system, logistics information management system, control and command centre, helpdesk solution, real-time device tracking and monitoring solution, Capacity building videos, interactive reports and geo-spatial reporting.

Figure 2  TIBU interface in a form of comprehensive dashboard (see online version for colours)

Source: Snapshot of TIBU web application provided by Iridium Interactive
Figure 3  Patient registration interface on TIBU (see online version for colours)

Source:  Snapshot of TIBU web application provided by Iridium Interactive

Figure 4  Health worker supervision interface on TIBU (see online version for colours)

Source:  Snapshot of TIBU web application provided by Iridium Interactive
Figure 5  Real time reports interface for TIBU (see online version for colours)

Source: Snapshot of TIBU web application provided by Iridium Interactive

TIBU as a solution seamlessly integrated the ministerial facilities and administrative offices with National Health Information System (DHIS/2) providing real time data on patients, treatment and outcome, drug availability, lab inventory and real time payments done to the patients using mobile payment platform, M-PESA. TIBU is a hybrid solution designed to work with Android tablets and Cloud-based infrastructure. Hence, it can work even in the remote locations in the absence of electricity and mobile signals.

10  Success of the initiative

With a very strong reporting and geo-spatial reporting capabilities TIBU empowered the ministerial staff to monitor and take corrective actions in real time mode. In less than one year of its national launching in Kenya, TIBU touched 75% of the TB patients, hence data of these patients inputted into the system from Tabs across the country. It reimbursed over US$ 1,000,000 and 146,000 mobile payment transactions done with TB patients who came in for treatments. Samsung Galaxy Tab2 10.1 was used to not only access electronic health records but also to do the Capacity building trainings for the ministry staff on how to operate TIBU and for their Skill enhancements.

After implementation of this program, Facility level data became available for Monitoring and Evaluation in real time mode as against 90–120 days. District level officers were empowered to manage their operations using Galaxy Tab. It provided seamless integration with National Health information system (DHIS/2), the only program available globally with this possibility. Geo-spatial reporting showcased TB regions, instances of TB and HIV cases, etc. Reliable data became available for Monitoring TB eradication progress in country.

The introduction of TIBU program helped in controlling the TB disease and provided better care to patients through improving data management of patients, laboratories and
commodities, creating sustainability in the TB program. It has targeted zero TB deaths by the year 2030 (TIBU, n.d.). Mr. Siram, said, “The best part about the TIBU solution is that it simplifies the delivery of health care services for patients and health workers alike and provides a cost-effective platform to reach every person requiring treatment across the country”.

TIBU was also featured in the Global Tuberculosis report 2013 by WHO. Refer to Figure 6.

11 Conclusions

This is a very unique corporate case where in the founder started off as a Social Entrepreneur (through CAUSE AN EFFECT initiative) and within that he found the purpose of his life and built an IT company which offers innovative digital and IT solutions to solve the problems. Looking over a horizon of 13 years, it is evident that what drives this enterprise is social impact and the pattern seems to be repeating. Kuza is a testament that the founder is working towards a sustainable social impacting innovative idea which would transform the lives of the people at the base of the pyramid leveraging digital and IT platforms and technologies. The strategy seems to be very clear to run three enterprises in parallel and leverage each other’s strengths towards solving the problems of the people at the bottom of the pyramid in the developing countries of Asia and Africa.
12 Academic implications of the case study

The case study is basically aimed at post-graduate management students. It can also be used in the entrepreneurship and small business management, IT and health management courses. Students can understand the concept of social entrepreneurship, ICT services, web accessibility and ICT application in healthcare. The case discussion could be start with the question ‘Why has Iridium Interactive been successful?’ And could asking students to try to identify the various sub-systems within the case and how each one of them contributes to the overall working of the company. In order to gauge the analytical and comprehension skill of the students, this exercise should ideally be done without constraining them with any established framework from the text books. This would greatly help the mentors in encouraging the students to comprehend a subjective business situation with their current level of understanding and at the same time it would also pave the way for learning new concepts. After collating the student’s view and discussion, mentors would start putting the various sub-systems identified by the students in explaining the concept of social entrepreneurship, ICT, web accessibility, ICT in healthcare and social initiatives.

References


