Dr Martin Cooper

Dr Martin Cooper, a former general manager for the systems division at Motorola, is considered the inventor of the first portable handset and the first person to make a call on a portable cell phone in April 1973. The first call he made was to his rival, Joel Engel, Bell Labs head of research. AT&T's research arm, Bell Laboratories, introduced the idea of cellular communications in 1947. But Motorola and Bell Labs in the sixties and early seventies were in a race to incorporate the technology into portable devices. Cooper, now 70, wanted people to be able to carry their phones with them anywhere. While he was a project manager at Motorola in 1973, Cooper set up a base station in New York with the first working prototype of a cellular telephone, the Motorola Dyna-Tac.

TECHFOCUS

Towards success in software

IHTISHAM KABIR

THREE months ago, I returned to Bangladesh after living abroad for 30 years. I spent 22 years in the software industry in Silicon Valley where I held individual and managerial roles at startups and midsized companies as well as a 15-year stint at Sun Microsystems. Since September 2005, I have worked in the software industry in Bangladesh.

I have followed software in Bangladesh since the 1990s. In 1997, I surveyed local software companies for a company in the US that wanted to outsource work here, and on subsequent visits I have keenly observed changes in the industry. Those involved with IT in Bangladesh should be proud of the positive changes they have made. For example, in 1997, there were only a handful of competent programmers; now there are hundreds.

Back then very few could write Java (in fact, I gave the first talk on Java in Bangladesh through a 1996 lecture at BUET.) Now, there are numerous Java programmers in the nation. Proof of the pudding lies in substantially complex software that have been written in Bangladesh and are in everyday use throughout the country and many parts of the world.

Despite these positive changes, why is our software industry not as successful as expected? What are some hurdles? How can they be removed?

Here are the hurdles that I see:
a) lack of a clear vision and purpose;
b) lack of understanding of software business;
c) lack of software entrepreneurship;
d) quality of education and
e) lack of appropriate infrastructure.

a) Lack of a clear vision: The goals of Bangladesh's software business have never been clear to me. "Success in Software" can mean many different things. Eg,
- Do we want to become an outsourcing powerhouse like India?
- Does Bangladesh want to become more efficient and productive as a nation by using software?
- Do we want to build software products which are bought and used by many people all over the world?
- Does Bangladesh want to become an R&D hub of multinationals (leading to, eg, Oracle Bangladesh Development Center)?
- Going further, do we want to invent new technologies that eventually change the world?
- Or do we want to become world-experts on one area of software (eg, like Eastern Europeans have expertise in software tools?)

These are very different goals which require different approaches and tactics.

b) Lack of understanding of the software business: Locally, there are some visionary and persistent entrepreneurs driving the software industry. Still, I am appalled at the number of people who jumped into the "IT business", believing that hiring some programmers and setting up an office with some computers will somehow make them successful and profitable. As many of them have found out, software business is a tricky and rapidly changing business.

The entrepreneur needs to have a well-thought-out business plan and a clear value proposition. If the business plan does not add up, the business should not be embarked upon.

c) Lack of software entrepreneurship: Often, great software is written by small teams which get an idea and then execute it using seed funding from investors. However, due to cultural and economic reasons we seem not to encourage this type of behavior. Taking a novel idea and making a product and business out of it is extremely difficult here.

d) Quality of education: Ultimately this can be our biggest obstacle. It hurts on two fronts: English and independent thinking.

Poor quality of English in our primary education progressively becomes a big burden as the student makes their way up the grades. In my job here at Dhaka, I have read the resumes of hundreds of applicants who applied for programmer positions. Egregious mistakes in English grammar and spelling are quite common. Spoken English also suffers.

Since English is the Lingua Franca of the software industry, limited command over it hurts the software professional in two ways: in their ability to communicate, and in their confidence when dealing with foreign counterparts. Thus, lack of English undermines whatever technical capabilities they possess.

An insidious result of our education system is that it dampens the creativity and initiative in the student. Software is an intellectual endeavor, and being able to "think outside the box" is a vital necessity (as opposed to, say, garments, where the person must rigorously follow the rules.) But our education system, with its emphasis on memorization and learning by rote, serves to stifle the independent thinking abilities that all humans are born with.

(To be sure, many educators — specially at university level are working hard to change this, and their efforts should be recognized.)

For example, consider the BitTorrent protocol, which is today responsible for up to a third of all Internet traffic at any given instant. It was written by 25-year-old Bram Cohen on a laptop in his San Francisco apartment over several months. Are there some Bangladeshi kids as smart and capable as Cohen? I absolutely believe there are! Then what stops them from writing the next Big Thing?

d) Lack of infrastructure: More and more software development takes place using the Internet as the seeding bed. Developers use the Internet to research, find tools and libraries, deposit, customer-test and deploy their software. All of this requires rapidly navigating and downloading material from the Web. It is awfully hard to feel inspired when we have to wait long periods for browsers to load web pages, and even longer for downloads to take place.

How can these hurdles be removed?

A) We need to decide what we want to accomplish in software as a nation.

b) We need to clarify the business model that will enable us to reach these goals, learn how to play the software game with our partners customers and vendors, and institute best practices in our industry.

c) We need to find creative ways to promote and sustain software entrepreneurship specially among those under 30. The good news here is that a) I have encountered many Bangladeshi engineers who are extremely bright and need that one spark to do very creative things and b) the cost of developing a new software product has fallen dramatically since 2000 (1/10th) due to open source products and Web maturity.

d) We need to attack the shortcomings in our education system by teaching better English and including more material that encourages independent thinking and risk-taking.

e) We need that Submarine connection yesterday. We need to make more networked computers available, particularly to those who hold the promise of making reakthroughs.

The government can play a critical role in all these steps, eg, by creating a favorable financing environment, by incentivizing locally produced software, by subsidizing R&D in software, by improving the education system, etc.

But ultimately it will be the creativity of Bangladeshi software engineers and the business drive of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs which will lead to a thriving software industry in Bangladesh.

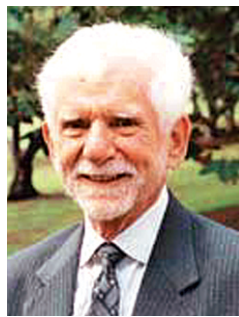*The author is the CTO of DataSoft Systems Bangladesh Ltd.*

PHOTOTECH

BIBLIO ROLL

Keio University post graduate student Kaori Ochiai displays the prototype model of an electronic bookshelf "Biblio Roll", composed of three LCD displays in a transparent handy tube, enabling the user to choose a book's label on its spine from the top LCD and display its contents on the two bottom LCD's, at the university's advanced technology forum in Tokyo on November 23. Ochia believes her prototype will play its part in the ease and enjoyment of reading books.

PHOTO: AFP

TECHNEWS

it's happening now   somewhere in...dhaka

norwegian jazz festival

the core, a norwegian jazz band is scheduled to perfom at two concerts on the 25th and 26th of this month at local venues in dhaka. read more

music & concerts
interview with lrb
norwegian jazz festival

stage & film
real life drama
star cineplex new arrival

galleries & art
exhibition of mustafa kamal
national photography award

sms feed
<hasan> vov, fantastic!!
<hasin> whats going on here?
<emran>? it will really be a fantastic event

blog feed
> my favorite event
> metallica!!
> guns n roses back again

somewhereindhaka.net

City's latest online entertainment guide

SYED TASHFIN CHOWDHURY

"ARE there any good concerts in the city today?" asked Shawkat to his friends. All five of them looked at each other, hoping to get a response. But apparently, nobody had heard of anything.

The six friends were meeting up right after completing their semester finals that week. They wanted to hang out and have a good time together.

But as none could come up with anything fruitful, they spent time at a local shopping mall, had lunch at a food shop there and then returned to their respective homes.

Early the next morning, Shawkat was disappointed to find out from a newspaper that two of his favourite bands performed at a venue in Gulshan the previous day, the very time they were loitering around in the mall.

Incidents like these are a common phenomena and the city still lacks a proper entertainment guide through which citizens can learn and make decisions about visiting ongoing fairs, expos, concerts, stage shows and other events.

www.somewhereindhaka.net promises to be just such a real-time web site, which will be an overall entertainment guide for city dwellers.

The site will provide an event calendar, forums and reviews of events, which will be categorised in six different sections.

The site, to be launched this week, will have articles under different categories like Music and Concerts, Stage and Films, Festivals and Expositions, Galleries and Art, Food and Spices and Books and Courses.

"The site will be very simple and user friendly. Browsers can click into each of these sections and find out about ongoing events," said Arild Klokkerhaug, head of opportunities, Somewhere In, a Norwegian-Bangladeshi joint venture software firm, which was initiated seven months back.

He explained that, sharing experiences and building togetherness for each event are the focus of the site. Members can tell others if they feel like going to the events, whether they have been there or even invite friends to join them, through the site.

He explained that through the site, browsers can learn more about each event through reviews written and posted on the site by others who have been to that particular event earlier. Pictures and images of the concerned event can also be uploaded into the site.

He also added that as the site develops later, users will be able to subscribe to SMS alerts or browse through user friendly WAP portals through which they can be connected to the site anywhere, anytime.

"Through the alerts, subscribers will be notified about the next few events where their favourite artist or band is scheduled to perform, at a monthly or weekly basis. The optional sms alerts will have a tiny charge. But this aims to help users toward making better decisions," he informed Star Tech.

"Such a site has a greater chance of success, if we, the site authority, keep our hands off the content and enable the users to create and report the news and events by themselves. We just need to focus on creating popular tools and ensure its smooth operation," he pointed out.

"Within a few weeks after its launch, we will enable users with free services through which they will enter, edit and manage the contents of the site, themselves," he said.

"We will enable services through which venue authorities, media organisations and concerned individuals can post their upcoming events into the site, once they register as members," he added.

Klokkerhaug further informed that these services provided through the site will be free of charge.

In their venture to create colourful moments for the growing web market in Bangladesh, the firm also promises to release a free Blog service in the near future.

"This is just a free tool through which browsers can write and publish their thoughts. Good and popular sites, which attracts massive attention, have proved to be effective marketing channels and our site may just become something like that in the near future, when and if it gains popularity," he explained.

Somewhere In, which claims to be recruiting the Best talents of Bangladesh, has been successfully providing offshore solutions to a number of promising business organisations of the nation, since its initiation.

Arild Klokkerhaug, one of the founders of the firm, is a Norwegian who has lived in Dhaka for over a decade. Through his experience on e-Governance and MIS projects and working with reputed companies like GrameenPhone, he has learned to look for what the market would love to be given. He hopes to fully utilise this knowledge in his own software firm.

The Music and Concert page of somewhereindhaka.net

TECHNEWS

Documenta Cheque Management System released

STARTECH DESK

DOCUMENTA Ltd, a member of BRAC family that is involved in software development and digital archiving services, has recently released a new software named "Bank Cheque Management System", says a press release. The software was formally introduced on October 22 through its implementation in the central office of one of the largest super chains shop, Aarong.

Documenta Cheque Management System may be used by any organisation, irrespective of their sizes. It has various unique features, which include the capabilities of printing on the cheques and generating various types of reports. The software can be used to track why, when and how much money was issued through these cheques. It also has various types of setup and customisation options, which should make the system most applicable in the context of an organisation. The system, at the moment, is being used by BRAC, Aarong and BRAC University. The software, along with Point of Sales (POS), E-Nikash (Accounting Package), Human Resource (HRMS), Inventory (IMS), Library (LMS), Micro Finance Management Systems & Digital Archiving Solutions, will be displayed at Documenta's stall (Booth D 37) in upcoming SoftExpo 2005.