

“The way to harness the power of innovation in technology is to attract fresh engineering talent and provide the opportunities to innovate and grow”

“In business settings, it’s good to have at least one person in the room who is completely nonchalant when everyone is on edge.” This is the success mantra followed by Suresh Babu, CEO of Caliber Interconnect Solutions Pvt Ltd. This adage has helped him overcome all possible hindrances that he encountered through his journey in the dynamic Indian electronics industry. In an interaction with the Baishakhi Dutta of Electronics Bazaar, he shares his entrepreneurial journey and redefines the meaning of success when it comes to real life.

Some lesser known facts about myself:

Year of birth: 1968

Favourite music: Ilayaraja’s melodies

Favourite food: Middle eastern cuisine

Favourite film: Mudhal Mariyadhai (Tamil)

Favourite book: Good to Great by Jim Collins

Favourite actor: Shahrukh Khan

Favourite actress: Savithri

Favourite singer: Mohammed Rafi

Childhood

I was born in a village called Padalore in Tamilnadu. After spending my formative years there, I grew up in Ooty as our family had shifted base. I have very fond memories of my childhood spent in the most idyllic settings, indulging in the luxuries of boyhood—playing games, having fun with friends and of course, occasionally cramming for the inevitable exams.

When I look back and reflect on my childhood, I find that the common factor that drove me as a child and later when I became an entrepreneur is *curiosity about the world around me.*

Suresh Babu, CEO of
Caliber Interconnect
Solutions Pvt Ltd.



Education

I did my entire schooling in the government-run corporation schools, learning all the subjects in my mother tongue - Tamil. I took a special interest to learn English and also managed to become conversant in Hindi, Malayalam and Kannada, as I happened to have friends from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

I had a natural inclination towards algebra, trigonometry and calculus as a student and that interest really helped at a later stage in developing graphical application software. A dire family situation forced me to join the workforce early after my diploma at GPT (Government Polytechnic), Ooty. Later I found an alternative way to further my education - completing a degree in engineering and an MS from BITS - even as I built my career.

Never content with academic learning alone, I have always tried to learn from the real world by reading books on a variety of topics, reasoning things out and applying what I learn in practice. At school, I focused on acquiring education beyond the prescribed syllabus and the obsession to score marks, by toiling in the agriculture fields and tinkering in the electromechanical workshops. Even when I was earning a little, I used to invest more than half my income on technical books and magazines. All these experiences had given me the confidence to deal with the world practically.

Having come up from the lower strata of society, I believe in the power of education and hard work in changing lives. Education certainly changed my life for the better and I am committed to making educational opportunities available to all, especially to rural children.

My family

My father, a martinet, worked in a tea plantation and my mother, a homemaker, was the matriarch of our large family with a meager income. We are five children and as a middle child, I got used to

the push and pull of sibling demands. I believe it helped me in developing a balanced temperament—neither yielding too much under pressure, nor wielding too much control over others. From my childhood days, I was involved in the family's affairs and that taught me a lot about managing money, handling people and dealing with their emotions too. This ability to get along with people helped me in attracting a lot of friends from different walks of life and also in becoming a dependable person, worthy of others' trust.

At a personal level, I lead a simple, contented life, which frees me up to pursue my other passions such as music and sports. I am married to Dr Suja, a research scientist, who supports me in all my endeavors. She is an awesome mother to my daughter Anagha. I travel a lot on business—typi-

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cally, almost half the year. I have missed out on a lot of vacations and special family occasions. Yet, my wife and daughter have never complained about my absence. Nonetheless, I love to be at home to spend quality time with my family, playing the piano and enjoying our favourite music together.

My journey till now

I did my final year college project at TIFR (Tata Institute of Fundamental Research) and this was ranked the best in the entire state. That got me an opportunity to work briefly at IIT - Chennai where I got some experience on CAD tools. Later, I worked as a design engineer for a few electromechanical companies, gaining valuable experience in manual and CAD designing. Wanting to share

my expertise with others, I worked as a part-time CAD trainer helping many civil, mechanical, electrical and piping engineers to become adept at designing and also offered consultation services for many design firms.

Further, I worked in the Gulf for engineering consultancy firms like DuPont de Nemours, WS Atkins and Mott Macdonald in petrochemical and water desalination projects. While working on a critical project, I realised that the existing capabilities of the CAD tools were inadequate in accomplishing my assigned tasks in the given time-frame. To ease my work pressure, I experimented with different ways of developing software that could customise CAD tools to do my bidding.

I was excited with the possibilities of my programming skills, which were anchored by solid mathematical understanding, and it enabled me to develop custom CAD tools for different engineering industries. That software expertise came in handy when we started PCB design offerings at Caliber. I couldn't have scripted either my success or that of Caliber Interconnect without the contributions of the company's co-founder, Ms. Prathibha, a versatile engineer from the Government College of Technology, Coimbatore.

With the domain knowledge of my co-founder coupled with my programming prowess, we developed IP, which is a path breaking process innovation in the PCB design cycle that greatly reduced the design cost and delivery time. On the strength of our IP, we attracted customers in hordes from all over the world. As an EOE (equal opportunity employer) company, Caliber now offers products and services in different verticals including embedded designs, power electronics solutions, IC test engineering, electrical simulations, etc, for more than 100 customers around the globe.

Having started with a small group of three people in modest settings, Caliber has now become a major service provider in the

semiconductor industry. In hindsight, I have come to realise that being an engineer is more than having a mere qualification with a specialisation in electronics or mechanical engineering; rather, it requires a methodical thought process, which leads to the discovery of the most effective solutions for real world problems.

My major contribution to the industry

In choosing to set up a high tech company in Coimbatore, a Tier 2 city, going against the conventional wisdom of many and having become an integral part of the semiconductor supply chain, Caliber has contributed in placing Coimbatore among the global hot spots of technology.

By offering high quality design solutions in a cost effective manner, with a quick turnaround time, we have added immense value to our customers who are looking for an edge in the ever competitive technology industry. Also, at Caliber, we believe in democratising growth opportunities for all, especially for the talented youngsters from the rural areas. We have recruited hundreds of such candidates over the years and they have now become the best in the industry in what they do—a huge asset for our company and the industry we serve.

We also understand that being at the right place at the right time is very critical for a growing company. With a strong base in Coimbatore, we have established our development centre in Bengaluru to attract the best talent and also to leverage the existing electronics ecosystem. We have ventured out of India to set up our overseas offices in USA and Japan to cater to burgeoning market demands. At present, almost 70 per cent of the semiconductor chips used in the digital world are tested by the PCBs developed by our engineers. That means that if you are reading this article on a gadget, there is a high chance that the ICs powering your device might have been tested on the test kit designed by Caliber!

The turning points in my life

Winning the confidence of our first customer, which helped us to survive the testing times of the initial days and attracting one of the best customers, which enabled us to grow rapidly in the global market, are the significant turning points of my business life.

My maiden foray into the world of entrepreneurship had so many ups and downs. I weathered all it with the support of my business partners and my close friends. We withstood the startup pangs hoping for a breakthrough. We developed our design IPs and conceived a business model of servicing semiconductor companies through our IP. We were waiting for a breakthrough, which indeed came in the form of an email from a customer from France. And that's how the journey began for us.



I prefer to be calm even in the face of any crisis



Another significant development was when a prominent Japanese company known for its religious adherence to quality chose Caliber over others to provide design solutions for its commercial products. We were able to deliver our designs, meeting the quality standards of the customer. Now, we have built enduring partnerships with several customers from Japan. Though we started out as a PCB design company, Caliber has diversified into different verticals to add even more value to our customers in all possible ways.

Caliber is on the cusp of tremendous growth, increasing in its size and scope. Pivoting that growth towards positively impacting customers, employees and society, is the turning point that I am looking forward to, at present.

Knowledge gained

Going out on a limb to start my business has busted so many of my assumptions about what it means to live a successful life. The definition of success that is propped up in schools, which is based on IQ and marks, is in no way an indicator of success in the real world. Being emotionally balanced, one can navigate the challenges of life much better. Particularly in business settings, it is good to have at least one person in the room who is completely nonchalant, when everyone else is on edge. I prefer to be calm even in the face of any crisis.

Management style

At Caliber, we have a very participative management style, where everyone has a say in what we do as a company. We avoid bureaucracy and protocols as much as possible. We trust and respect each other. Of course, when it comes to our values and morality being challenged, we follow a no-tolerance policy. At the same time, everything else can be disputed, debated and discussed right till the moment of making a decision. Then everybody puts their shoulders to the wheel to produce results for our customers.

I believe there is no place for hierarchies, both in society and in business. Except for the functional hierarchy, we have a very strong culture of equity, treating everyone at par. As a reliable employer, we have been fostering an enduring long term relationship with our employees, by being consistent and transparent in all our commitments and also by offering a healthy work environment for them to succeed fairly and squarely in their sphere of work.

Continuous learning is the key to grow in our industry. We provide unlimited growth opportunities for everyone in the organisation. We encourage our managers and engineers to constantly learn by participating in international events and attending courses in reputed institutions such as IIM-B, etc.

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Advertising is salesmanship mass produced. No one would bother to use advertising if he could talk to all his prospects face-to-face. But he can't.



-Morris Hite



My idol

I always say my mother is the best manager I know, better than the MBAs from the Ivy League colleges. Running a large household with scant resources requires a resourcefulness beyond measure—a key skill that managers need, to do more with less. And, of course, you also need the audacity to believe in the impossible, even when reality is telling you otherwise. All I can say is that I achieved what I did because of my mother.

My ideal

I believe in treating people fairly and in the axiom, 'Trust begets trust.' When we trust in people's inherent goodness, they often live up to it—if not with everyone else, at least with us. I also fervently believe the means we choose is as important as the end we seek to achieve.

How I spend my leisure time

I like keeping myself fit, both physically and mentally. I play shuttle and football and do yoga to stay in good shape. As an avid reader, books are my best travel companions and I read all genres—fiction, technology, management and finance. The knowledge gleaned from my reading has expanded my mental horizon and helped in making the right decisions most of the time.

Qualities that attract me to people

I admire people with grit and determination, which I believe, more than anything else, shapes the arc of one's life. I am fascinated with people and their stories, in general, but any story of an underdog making it despite the insurmountable odds will grab my attention. No wonder, I always root for the Davids - the underdogs of the world.

One thing that I would like to change

I have come to accept my essential self. For sure, there are many things I want to change.

Sometimes, my passion for technological experimentation over rules the cost considerations of a businessman, resulting in misplaced priorities. Though that urge to experiment is what has brought me this far, I would like to balance that with doing what is good for the company in the long run.

We have grown organically into a 300+ strong engineering company without receiving any external funding. We have reinvested all our earnings for the growth of the organisation. As our business model has made us self reliant from the very beginning, I have always been conservative and reluctant to accept the overtures of many VCs and investors with the plans to scale up. I would like to be more open to exploring the possibilities for growth.

Five years down the line

I would like Caliber to become a leading player in the high technology innovation space, providing state-of-art technology solutions to the pressing problems of our world.

The way to harness the power of innovation in technology is to attract fresh engineering talent and provide them opportunities to innovate and grow. We are in the process of setting up our High Technology Skill Development Center, at Coimbatore, which will become fully operational in the first quarter of next year. It would help the young engineers to bridge the skills-gap effectively, while transitioning from academia to the industry.

We are keen to encourage innovation through our Technology Incubation Center - which is about to be established in our headquarters, in the near future. This will focus on MEMS, Wireless sensors and medical bio-chips to nurture the next generation of entrepreneurs and technologists, who will ultimately take the torch of entrepreneurship from our generation and keep it burning for generations to come. **EB**