The Small, Silent Army

Small product companies in Pune are proving that small is indeed beautiful rolling out smart products that might well overtake the biggies one day

PUNE, INDIA: The IT superhighway at Pune is witnessing a new breed of roadsterssome smart tiny toddlers whisking silently with some interesting products on the roll. Who knows, they might overtake someone big soon.

They are not denizens of giant IT parks, but strewn across the city in small bivouacs. They are not coming out with big IPOs but energetically working on new-generation products. They are not housing armies of code-jockeys, but lean, mean teams burning the midnight oil. There is nothing common between them. But they still have the same DNA. They are small, silent, and at it.

A Closer Look

Who can otherwise imagine that the open source counterpart to Symbian might come out of one of these small companies in Pune, Celunite, that is focusing on the mobile technology platform.

Abhi Gholap
president and CEO
Optra Systems

Dhananjay V Datar
MD
Impact Systems

Bhushan Vishwanath
director
Mindfarm Novatech

Anand Veerkar
president
Triple Point Asia

These guys (and there are 250 in this team) are gearing up to rub shoulders with the Symbians and Microsofts of the world in Mobile operating systems. Only 10 percent of the staggering cell phone market is being served by high-end operating system platforms that are churned out by Nokia (Symbian) and Microsoft, while a special slice of this industry is dominated by BlackBerry. A bulk of the remaining pie is still at the mercy of mid-range technologies. To top that, there are problems on saturation cum complexity on the hardware side, better display requisites and scalability imperatives. That should be enough reason for someone to think of an open platform that can leverage all the innovations on the desktop space besides enabling scripting a multitude of applications for the middle and lower range of mobile phones. And, that's exactly what Celunite did.

"We saw the goldmine of possibilities with open standards in cell phones and wondered why hasn't the potential of another Linux been unleashed at the scale possible in the mobile industry," explains Mahesh Veerina, CEO of Celunite.

"We are a Mobile OS and Platform supplier like Symbian and Microsoft Windows Mobile 5.0. Symbian and Microsoft primarily address the high-end phone, which is less than 10 percent of the market. Our platform is targeted for what is called feature phone segment, ie, mid-tier market, which is the largest portion of the market. We would be going after all the major OEMs and ODMs," he says.

"This venture is touted to be based on a disruptive technology. While the likes of Motorola, Panasonic et al have already incubated a Linux group, the standards are still undergoing the definition stage. The base of the platform will be open that would create a new operating system for a mobile handset. Its a tricky challenge and would need a lot of innovation, specially on the aspects of security and Web 2.0 interface," adds Veerina. The OS is built into the handset at the time of manufacturing. The core modules on middleware are already part of its IP bag and an ambitious patent portfolio would serve as the icing on the cake.

The company, now a part of LIMO (Linux and Mobile Foundation), has got $100 mn in investments from a private equity firm last year, and is on track to bringing the product out in the market in the first quarter next year. As Patanjali Somayaji, director of engineering, discloses, more will be shared toward February. "You will hear more on this toward the 3GSM conference."

Another such small prodigy is Impact Systems, a company that is leveraging the Swiss Digital Pen technology in some on-the-ground areas customized for India. Starting with the Mumbai Police, then exploring it with the traffic police and the judiciary, the company is now trying out applications in the healthcare space, arming doctors, and researchers with the magic pen. Dhananjay V Datar, MD, Impact Systems is working steadily and passionately toward the next pit-stop of healthcare applications.

"The application can be taken ahead in healthcare departments. Health surveyors in remote villages for instance can transfer data on a disease fast and smooth to central authorities, thereby enabling effective measures for epidemics. Similarly, research professionals and doctors can use the pen technology to their advantage."

Explaining the Mumbai police project, Datar says, "Immediate knowledge of crime and criminals, actionable co-ordination across various police stations, data on frequency and type of crimes, crime-affected crimes, AOO (Area of Operation) that will come handy in faster identification, resolution, and anticipatory measures for crimes are some key output areas."

There's more to this small, but strong genre than mobiles and pens. Take medical equipment and pharmaceuticals for instance. Optra Systems, an imaging software development company, again in Pune, has undertaken work with biotech companies in areas of proteomics, toxicology resistance, and drug discovery companies working on new proteins. The former would entail analysis and efficiency improvement for data gathered through imaging scanners that are deployed in biotech areas like proteomics, toxicology resistance, and efficacy studies. These areas have high-throughput scenarios and high-content screenings, thereby lending to the need of software tools for analysis and cost-cum-time savings. "We are also working with some drug discovery companies for projects on identification of new proteins to combat diseases like cancer," says president and CEO Abhi Gholap.

Another interesting tiny thunder might be in the normally bland area of commodity trading, where an ERP could be quite a fresh wave of change. Triple Point Technology that sells cross-industry software solutions for supply, trading, marketing, and movement of commodities, has been developing a product in partnership with SAP.

"We have co-developed this offering with SAP and will also jointly market it," shares Anand Veerkar, president, Triple Point Asia. "This fills the white space in SAP for trading and commodities and front-end planning. Scheduling part has come from SAPs side while the front-office side is from TPT."

Another bio start-up in Pune challenged the laser market for permanent hair removal with a unique plant-derived chemical solution emanating from a research work on protein synthesis inhibitors. Mrinmayee Bhushan, microbiologist and director hit upon a solution that can use plant-derived chemical for permanent follicle destruction, if applied according to the cyclical nature of hair-growth while her husband Bhushan Vishwanath, director, Mindfarm Novatech took it forward. Pockets of interest in Canada and Europe have shown favorable response. And the duo has confidently moved to the next API (Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient) that varies in the degree of potency. "The results are indeed compelling," says Mrinmayee. The couple received good response at the World Ayurvedic Forum too.

The list of these small wonders from Pune is not endless, but there's more brewing than what can be accommodated in this piece. Some of these ambitions may fizzle out, some may come out ablaze with a star product, some may challenge the big daddies with their fresh hits, while some may be doomed to stumbling blocks of failure.

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